Levinas, substitution, and transcendental subjectivity

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Abstract. The task of this paper is to clarify the status and implications of Levinas’s insistence on the necessity of subjectivity to the ethical relation. Focusing in particular on the discussion of substitution in *Otherwise than Being*, it is argued that the description of subjectivity as substitution enables Levinas to articulate the necessity of the subject to the approach of the other in a manner which avoids the transcendental character which such claims to necessity usually embody. This argument proceeds from an initial characterization of substitution within the constellation of themes pursued by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* to a detailed examination of the first four sections of the “Substitution” chapter. The essay concludes by noting the unity of the ethical exceeding of the transcendental character of subjectivity with the project which animates Levinas’s work from its beginnings: the exceeding of the ontological by the ethical.

It would take little argument to persuade a careful reader of Emmanuel Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* that the question of subjectivity plays a considerable role in the book’s thematic development. From the preliminary note to the concluding pages, Levinas insists that central to the attempt to “name the *beyond essence*,” is the question of “. . . catch[ing] sight, in the substantiality of the subject, in the hard core of the ‘unique’ in me, in my unparalleled identity, of a substitution for the other . . .” (AQ/OB.xli–xlii). This concentration on the question of subjectivity may not be surprising to Levinas’s readers, but it may be somewhat puzzling, especially when this emphasis is considered in light of Jacques Derrida’s insistence, in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” on the transcendental character of subjectivity — the extent to which it is only on the basis of a recognition of the foundational character of subjectivity that we can suppose to locate a space, in our discourse, for the other. For, as Derrida writes, following Husserl, “. . . it is impossible to encounter the alter ego . . . impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general)” (VeM 181/VaM 123). Of course, this identification of the other as it appears, as an intentional modification of a constituting consciousness, apparently denies to the other its absolute alterity, thus problematizing Levinas’s attempted subversion of ontology in the name of the ethical.

And yet, already in “Phenomenon and Enigma,” first published in *Esprit* less than a year after “Violence and Metaphysics,” we find Levinas, rather than retreating from the necessity which Derrida insists upon, emphasizing
instead the recognition, already operative in *Totality and Infinity*, that, “... the Enigma concerns ... particularly subjectivity, which alone can retain its insinuation” (EP 212/PE 70). This concern, rather than signaling a certain impossibility of the approach to the other, “... takes on the sense of an assignation alone raising up such a being as subjectivity. Summoned to appear, called to an inalienable responsibility ... subjectivity is the partner of Enigma and of the transcendence that disturbs being” (EP 213/PE 70).

With this notion of subjectivity as the partner of enigma, Levinas recognizes the extent to which the subject, as that within which the imperative of responsibility comes to the fore, is fundamental to the signification of the “other than being.” As will become apparent, the understanding of *this* fundamental status remains rigorously opposed to that suggested by the insistence on subjectivity’s transcendentality. Of course, “Phenomenon and Enigma” is in many ways only an initial articulation of Levinas’s reworking of these themes. However, already in the identification of enigma as the non-phenomenality of the manifestation of the other (EP 209/PE 66), as well as in the understanding of subjectivity as an assignation, the distance of the understanding of subjectivity which is “partner at the transcendence that disturbs being” from that which conditions the appearance of beings can be recognized.

It is not until *Otherwise than Being* that the terms of this difference become fully evident. There, with ‘substitution,’ Levinas articulates a notion of subjectivity which, while recognizing the force of Derrida’s insistence on the necessity of the subject to the approach of the other, exceeds the apparently transcendental character of this necessity in the direction of the ethical. It is the purpose of this present essay to bring into relief the features of Levinas’s attempt, with this notion of substitution, to think beyond the constraints of the transcendental. This purpose is accomplished in two steps. The first serves to orient the discussion of substitution within the constellation of questions Levinas concerns himself with in *Otherwise than Being*. The task of this orientation will be to indicate, in general terms, the elements of Levinas’s continued rethinking of subjectivity in its relation to the transcendental features insisted upon by Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics.” On the basis of this more general view, we will then shift to the development of the “Substitution” chapter itself, focusing in particular on the first four sections. There, with the discussion of recurrence, and its most careful formulation as substitution, Levinas locates a notion of subjectivity equal to the necessities imposed by his analysis. The notion of substitution thus articulated serves to indicate not only Levinas’s response to Derrida, but also the necessity of his continued attention to the question of subjectivity.

The initial task of this essay then falls into two parts. The first is to establish, at least provisionally, the character of Levinas’s response to Derrida’s ques-