

The Ethics of Futurity: Messianism and Intersubjectivity¹

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Abstract

The primary intent of this paper is to begin the task of thinking through the temporality of futurity that shapes the intersubjective relation. The discussion of futurity is strictly connected to the idea of the messianic and the way it constructs the ethical modalities of subjectivity in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. I offer a brief synopsis of the philosophical heritage of the messianic in the thought of Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin to prepare a conceptual ground for framing the question of messianic time within a phenomenological context. In seeking to locate a point of orientation for a temporalization of futurity I inevitably emphasize the role of the Husserlian theory of time consciousness and its influences on the Levinasian view of the messianic future. Adhering to Levinas's line of thinking, I examine the transformations of subjectivity that result when it is disturbed by the always to come appeal of the future other. The essential concern of this paper is to gauge the ethical impacts initiated by messianic time, i.e. how the messianic time of promise and forgiveness shapes the ethical becoming of subjectivity.

Keywords: messianic, intersubjectivity, Levinas, temporality, the other, future, ethical becoming.

Introduction

The theme of messianic temporality has never been a central focus of Levinasian ethics. However, the idea of messianism is present behind the scenes in almost all of Levinas's writings. Levinasian scholars generally neglect Levinas's writings on messianic time - the question of temporality seen through the messianic and especially messianic futurity² has not received enough attention.³ Thus, my contribution will be to analyse how in *Totality and Infinity*, *Time and the Other*, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, and *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas explores futurity, as given in our intersubjective encounters, as a messianic and prophetic instant regulating the meaning of our relations with others. He tends to describe the messianic as a disruption, which participates in the formation of the ethical relation to the other, and in this paper I will build on Levinas's discussion of futurity by emphasizing the role that the messianic instant plays in tracing the ethical becoming of subjectivity, i.e. how responsibility is formed by futurity.

Now, before laying out my main arguments I want to clarify the context in which the idea of the messianic appears and the consequences it has for ethics.

In a broad context messianism is understood as the promise of a new age of peace to come in the future as well as promises of anew era. It was formulated as a Biblical prophecy in the "Book of Isaiah": "They shall beat their swords into plow shares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift sword against nation and they will no longer study warfare. ...The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

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²I use the term 'futurity' to refer to specific aspects of the future, specifically ethical forms of the future that arise in the experiences of subjectivity. Futurity highlights the various connections between subjectivity and the temporal modes of the future through which subjectivity inevitably moves.

³However, one of the important works on the temporality of futurity to be mentioned here is *Futurity in Phenomenology: Promise and Method in Husserl, Levinas, and Derrida (Perspective in Continental Philosophy)*, by Neil DeRoo (Fordham University Press, New York, 2013).

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 2:4, 11:6-9) The messianic still signifies a feeling of suffering and hope for salvation: we all aspire and hope for a day when justice will be done, when the day of the Last Judgement arrives, and a time of peace and equality will rule forever. These roots of messianic time are also found in the Midrash comments: "Six eons for going in and coming out, for war and peace. The seventh eon is entirely Shabbat and rest for life everlasting."⁴ In both fragments messianism⁵ is presented as the symbolical horizon of the rightful future towards which humanity aspires. This horizon has an ethical and religious meaning that in forms our understanding of development, the temporality of history, our lived time and our intersubjective relations. However, in this paper my goal is to develop the role of the messianic in ethics without accentuating its theological meaning. I believe that contrary to the explicitly religious connotation of the notion of the eschatological, the term messianic might be beneficial for the current discussion precisely because of its flexible and not dogmatic use.⁶

There are many questions to ask when approaching messianism. What is the place of messianism in the philosophy of history and in narrative history? Can we speak about messianism without always referring to a theological context? How does messianism influence the intersubjective relation and the formation of subjectivity? Do we always read messianism as an object of hope or as an ethical task to be accomplished? Finally, the important issue for the discussion in this paper: what is the relation between time and messianism?

To put it most succinctly, the term messianic, being widely used in philosophy, theology and ethics, has become completely modern in its character - the question it comprises marks an entry into the modernity of history. To some extent all modernity might be read as messianic. Gerard Bensussan notices that historical “messianism” has turned into a vulgarized teleology, where various images of utopia define the fatality of our development (Bensussan, 2001, p. 15-21). During modernity religious experience is moved into the sphere of secularized politics and history. Messianism is serving to define (or accomplish) the ethical idea of the state and the rationality of the development of the world. This secularisation of messianism, and Jewish messianism in particular, has functioned as a kind of generative matrix for the itineraries of the great philosophers of our time, and defined the ideology of progress.⁷

Traditionally messianism is associated with a linear and teleological account of history viewed as a totality or as a sum of all human experiences and actions that have a developmental meaning. The idea of messianism involves a waiting for the ideal and perfect incarnation of the Logos and of the Good in the history of humanity. The prophetic content, expectation of the good and fair to come, reveals messianism to be the essence and the main theme of narrative history. Obviously the philosophy of history does not only reflect upon the meaning of the past but, also facing towards the future, attempts to describe the content of messianic futurity. This aspiring towards the rightful future brings into our discussion the role of responsibility and the moral duties we are to realize in our intersubjective relations. However, the projection of an ethical formation of history, as an image of a fair and peaceful futurity, is often abstract and based on general views of how humanity should live. Going back to the Jewish theological context of messianism, I want to accentuate that the messianic image signifies a certain order of temporality which includes a structure of waiting: nothing could interfere, change or even escape this waiting for the future, since waiting is the very essence of futurity and the endurance of its imprevisibility. I am attempting here to draw out the event of extreme exteriority that confronts historical consciousness. The idea of redemption, shimmering on the horizon of historical development, breaks through our line of existence as an internal interrogation.

One of the important reflections on the meaning of messianism in the context of the philosophy of history is an article “Being Beyond: Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas” by Theodore de Boer (De Boer, 1997).

⁴Also in: Zohar (1:117a) and Zohar Vayera 119a; Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer, Gerald Friedlander, Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1981, p. 141.

⁵Messianism might be interpreted as a notion close to eschatology. In a Christian context eschatology depicts the end of history, which is followed by the time of the Messiah. In this paper I use the notion of messianism, primarily to describe the essence of the ethical and religious understanding of the future as always to come.

⁶Here I follow upon Levinas’s explication of the messianic in *Totality and Infinity*, p. 22.

⁷Shaped first in the Jewish and Christian traditions messianic ideas influenced the works of St. Augustine, G.W.F. Hegel, H. de Saint-Simon, A. Comte, and K. Marx.

Discussing the problematic relations between messianism, history and the good in terms of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, de Boer views developmental and narrative history, which is heading towards the proper and rightful future, as “the ontological pluralism” that grounds intersubjective relations on the basis of universal responsibility and goodness rooted in eschatological revelation. Such an understanding of messianism results in a very general and abstract description of the ethical relation with the other. Moreover, it eventually tends to reduce the uniqueness of subjectivity, its experience and encounter with the other, into the sphere of the sameness or totality of thinking, neglecting the uniqueness of ethical experience provoked by the messianic idea: “When the Other is reduced to the Same, Messianic peace turns into the peace of empire, ... that is, a peace resulting from the death or subjection of the other” (De Boer, 1997, p. 33-34). The constant struggle between peace, war and the good, which is inherent in Western thought, interprets the messianic as the coordination and accommodation of acts that determine the social structures of our society and carry us towards a peaceful future.

Messianic time is seen as an appeal to forge an ethical, socially justified future, as a hope and an ideal to be realized. This utopian image has inspired a number of critiques. One important work that should be mentioned is “In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment” (Weimar and Now: German Cultural Criticism) by Anson Rabinbach (Rabinbach, 2001). According to Rabinbach the hope for a better world, placed into the always to come future, depicts a catastrophic, sometimes pessimistic and apocalyptic vision. This particular view should be rejected in favour of an ethical inquiry into the present. As Benjamin puts it: “for every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter” (Benjamin, 1968, 265, p. 266). Such a view would allow us to rethink our lives, hold them to account, take responsibility for any mistakes we made in the past, and face the mistakes we may be making in the present.

Both critiques address a teleological sense of messianism that is in contrast to the genetic understanding of time, which, in its turn, is not objective and not structural. Genetic temporality⁸ approaches and analyses futurity as something obscure and ungraspable, not projected from the present, and not disclosed for our observation. We are not able to envisage it as a horizon of our activities. It is closed for our gaze, or, it is better to say, referring to Moses, we feel it by our back (Bensussan, 2001, p. 43). The messianic future is shaped by its radical invisibility and by an imprevisibility that questions the present. Therefore the task is to explore how the meaning of the messianic is generated in the experiences of subjectivity.

Thus, in this paper I claim that the content of the messianic idea brings with it a new understanding of the present, and a new intersubjective temporality that aims at the dramatic transformation of subjectivity. First, I argue that messianic time necessarily involves rethinking the ethical becoming of subjectivity. Second, I suggest that the structure of responsibility for the other is revised since the messianic idea is shaped by such notions as waiting, promise and forgiveness. According to Levinas messianism is interpreted as an instant that affects the temporal flow of consciousness. Therefore, adhering to Levinas’s line of reflection my goal is to show that the messianic instant might also work as a rupture at the level of intentional consciousness, as well as a disruption of subjectivity in which particular levels of ethical becoming are disclosed: susceptibility, vulnerability and inverted sensibility.

To defend these claims I will undertake the following steps. First, I will sketch the general context of the messianic and its role in ethics. Second, following Levinas, I want to show how messianic temporality emerges from time consciousness and what results it brings for subjectivity. Finally, I will discuss how forgiveness and promise become the inherent content of the messianic, as well as the various transformations subjectivity undergoes when faced with the messianic instant. I will also address the problem of personal responsibility by discussing the validity of forgiveness and promise as initiated by the futurity of the appeal of the other.

The Messianic Future and the Messianic Past: On the Way to the Present Revised

Hermann Cohen’s work proved fruitful in disclosing the meaning of messianic temporality and the role it plays in the formation of subjectivity. Cohen’s main concern was to build up the content of messianic time as an ethically justified futurity. The socially fair and equal for everybody future constitutes theological idea of the new coming

⁸Referring to genetic time I draw extensively on the construction of the meaning of time in the experiences of subjectivity. Genetic time is a further development of the genetic phenomenology developed by Husserl in the L-Manuscripts and in Hua XI, a work in which the genetic phenomenological approach is predominant. See also Dan Zahavi “Time and Consciousness in the Bernau Manuscripts.” *Husserl Studies* 20 (2004), p. 106 and Robert Sokolowski, *The Formation of Husserl’s Concept of Constitution*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964.

era allowing us to formulate and accentuate an individualized experience of the subject which is account able to others within a social horizon.

The crucial moment in Cohen's understanding of messianic time is the present moment, and the ethical task to be accomplished within the present moment, where redemption is conceived as an act carried out in the interests of justice. By giving meaning to the present, messianic futurity does not emphasize the inescapability of fate and destiny or our feelings of guilt; rather it provides us with a view of time deprived of moral norms conceived as the threat of eternal condemnation after our death or the end of our historical development. In Cohen's description of messianism, including his significant work *Religion of Reason: Out of the Source of Judaism*, there emerges a distinct view of the present that is crucial to ethics: the present is not born from the nostalgia for a better past, nor is history leading us towards the "correct" future. All these interpretations of messianic temporality would narrow the ethical sense of the present. Cohen helps us to see that the ethical search within history should be opened to the future and not generated from the past. History becomes an ethical intersubjective task. Therefore our involvement in the present moment of history is active in shaping the future through a messianic understanding of time; it is the active justification of our intentions. Cohen states: "Everything in the myth remains history in the sense of the past; never and nowhere does history appear as the idea of the future of mankind under the guidance of God" (Cohen, 1995, p. 250). Messianic time here both regulates the unfolding of history in the present moment and is a revelation of God, which must be realized in the present.

According to Cohen, the future revealed under God as the messianic task consists in the realization of the ethical life in the present moment on the basis of justice. Ethical futurity is brought in to the living present in the form of God's revelation. In this theological description of messianism the history of humanity is resting always upon an unrealized past that is extended into the present. Basically denying the developmental empirical understanding of history (as *Weltgeschichte*), Cohen places a strong emphasis on the ethical meaning of the messianic understanding of history. Thus, the past events of history do not imply a messianic meaning of the present, i.e., fair, good and justified relations: "Humankind did not live in any past and did not come alive in the present; only the future can bring about its bright and beautiful form. This form is an idea, but not a shadowy image of the beyond" (Cohen, 1995, p. 250). I suggest that Cohen's reading of ethical futurity rejects the concept of history seen as a progress on towards a better humanity. However, the ethical account of the historical past becomes meaningful only if one recognises instances of injustice as actions of accusations: "Every injustice in world history is an accusation against humankind" (Cohen, 1995, p. 268).

Levinas reads history in a similar spirit at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*. An interpretation of history as progressing for the sake of itself and its own development is, for Levinas, an act of interiorization projecting an impossible perspective on the ethical relation. The history created by historiographers - would be nothing but a history of totalization that would be a denial of the diversity of ethical temporality and of the ethical relation: "The time of universal history remains as the ontological ground in which particular existences are lost, are computed, and in which at least their essences are recapitulated" (Levinas, 2004, p. 55). Here temporality, precisely messianic time, is not considered as an ethical event breaking through the representation of rightfulness as for-itself (as the developmental move towards justice). Rather, the task is to cast forward our perspective on living history through the ethical act. As Cohen puts it "Time becomes future and only future. Past and present submerge in this time of the future" (Cohen, 1995, p. 249). Here Cohen sees a need for a certain sensible openness towards futurity. This directedness necessarily neglects the past since the past always conceptualizes the present by bringing guilt, sorrow and shame. However, what I see as important in Cohen's reflections is this: if the past still leaves its traces in the present then messianic futurity would manifest as a threat. In this case intersubjective relations would be regulated by the fear of eschatological punishment, which would undermine our openness towards the messianic idea.

In my reading of Cohen's idea of messianic temporality I accentuate, first of all, his attempt to enlarge the ethical sense of the present, which is not constructed upon the empirical historical past. However, he neatly reveals messianic futurity as bringing justice into the present only insofar as it helps him to see history as messianic history that is guided by God's revelation. Indeed messianism keeps us connected with the past and hence gives a weight to the present and to the future. What comes in the future is urgently important because it will soon be the present, that is, will be my own lived present.

Despite a very profound and detailed interpretation of messianic futurity Cohen did not succeed in formulating how it acts on the level of “lived experiences”: the question what is an ethical act in the intersubjective relation remains unresolved.

Walter Benjamin proposes another view on messianism, which is equally divorced from a teleological account of history and, as I read him, accentuates the genetic role of messianic time. This messianic time has an episodic and fragmental character; it functions as a break comparable to the event of an ethical inquiry. For Benjamin messianic temporality involves an ethical impulse that arises when we are faced with unsettled injustices of the past. Because these faults of the past demand redemption in the present the secularized version of history as an always-progressive one will be, according to Benjamin, contrasted with the idea of history as discontinuity. This discontinuity is precisely messianic temporality, a kind of elapsing time when the traces of the past are colliding with the awareness of the present. The experience of these breaks forces us to advocate for the past by reinterpreting the present: “The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 349). Messianic temporality arises from an intersubjective relation between generations, i.e. the claim coming from the past as an event breaks the progressive developmental character of history. Incomplete and unrealized desires and aspirations call for justification in the present. Here we see the idea of messianic time as a discontinuity. In other words, we are present for the sake of the past; always looking back in order to have a grip on the present moment. Thus, by introducing messianic temporality Benjamin manages to elaborate on the ethical validity of the present – “time of now”- by inquiring into the intergenerational ethical relation.

Both Cohen and Benjamin conceive messianic temporality as outside of the political real, overcoming the traditional theological and teleological reading of the messianic idea. They both then turn to the ethical issue initiated by the messianic, enlarging and inquiring into the meaning of the present. The major contribution of both Cohen and Benjamin is their attempt to see the messianic as a form of generational temporality that constructs a variable meaning for the present. In both cases the messianic becomes a constant inquiry into the present moment.

However, my primary intention is to explore messianic temporality as a primary factor within the intersubjective relation with a focus on the ethical transformation of subjectivity. For this reason, in the next part I will move to a discussion of the messianic within the phenomenological context of time consciousness. The detailed analysis of the messianic instant has to show how messianic temporality fails to be fully constituted by the subject, which in its turn forces us to reconsider the ethical act the ethical act carried out in the present moment.

The Futurity of Messianic Temporality and Intersubjectivity

Messianism discussed in the context of history and theology has never brought into question the concrete and intimate “lived” experience of subjectivity. In this sense Levinas’s discussions of history, ethics and the messianic idea highlight the transformations of responsible subjectivity at the level of lived experience, and disclose the meaning of the temporal explication of the messianic within the intersubjective relation. I assume that the phenomenological structure of messianic time reveals waiting and promise as *modi* of futurity that determine the ethical becoming of subjectivity. Moreover, I am suggesting that messianic futurity is not constituted by the subject and by its horizon of the present, but is fully initiated by responsibility born from the presence of the future other. To explain this thesis in more detail I start first with Levinas’s short discussion of messianism and history in *Totality and Infinity*.⁹ Then I explore how the phenomenological method helps to reveal futurity as an intersubjective relation where subjectivity is shaped as inverted sensibility. And finally I try to demonstrate that waiting, forgiveness and promise, as not-constituted by subjectivity, are the content of the future belonging to the other that is not reduced to the present of the ego.

As I approach the meaning of messianism in Levinas’ ethics many questions arise which might be difficult to definitively answer. One question concerns Levinas’s use of the terms messianic, eschatology and prophetic. I should clarify that in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas addresses the term eschatology in the context of history and it has a theological application.

⁹The messianic idea, and its temporal aspect of instant and of break, becomes important in *Difficult Freedom* and in *Nine Talmudic Readings*.

Eschatology is used as a counter point to history by disturbing its philosophical conceptualized meaning: “Eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history, and not being beyond the past and the present” (Levinas, 2004, p. 22). In the same paragraph Levinas uses the term prophetic eschatology, where I see a strictly religious connotation, since prophetism here reveals knowledge of the future. However, Levinas is not entirely happy with the religious context and he extensively insists on the ethical meaning: “The eschatology, as the “beyond” of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility” (Levinas, 2004, p. 23). Though one might claim that eschatology and messianism are used in the same way to accentuate the context of the ethical, I focus on messianic thought as a particular form of ethical temporality. Levinas elaborates on this reading of messianism at the very end of *Totality and Infinity* where he ends a section entitled “The Infinity of Time” with a question: “is this eternity a new structure of time, or an extreme vigilance of the messianic consciousness?” (Levinas, 2004, p. 285). He does not provide an answer to this question; he merely mentions that this theme, i.e. the meaning of messianic temporality, exceeds the conceptual frame of his book.

However, in *Difficult Freedom*, “Messianic texts”, Levinas continues to elaborate on this unfinished thought in *Totality and Infinity*. He claims that, at first, the messianic was viewed as an era of an historical people (Israel’s people) but it also can be read as the allegorical meaning of time, which points to the concrete subject that is called to responsibility: “The Messiah is the just man who suffers, who has taken on the suffering of the other. ... The fact of not evading the burden imposed by the suffering of others defines ipseity itself. All persons are the Messiah” (Levinas, 1990, p. 89). Levinas goes further stating that exactly this messianic time as an event of individualized ethical call breaks through the monologue of history (Levinas, 2004, p. 21-23, p. 241-244). In the essay “Different Styles of Eschatology: Derrida’s Take on Levinas’s Political Messianism” Robert Bernasconi sees messianism as “not doctrine of last things”. Rather, “[e]schatology in Levinas is not a question of the future, but a disturbance or interruption of history” (Bernasconi, 1998, 7ff). Even though Bernasconi’s main interest lies in disclosing the relation between politics and messianism in Levinas and Derrida, he emphasizes that Levinas does see the messianic as a non-theological term, and, in my reading, the important accent here is on the temporalization of the messianic and its outcomes for subjectivity. Thus, to present a short conclusion at this stage: Levinas views history as constantly interrupted by the messianic instant that makes an appeal for responsibility. He determines the content of messianic temporality as the experience of being responsible. Given this focus, another point should be clarified: moving to the question of futurity his objective is to criticize history as ontology as well as to question the way the subject is conceptualized within it. Therefore his primary goal might be formulated as: a recognition of the role of obligation, gift and promise in orienting our lives.

Pursuing this discussion of the ethical role of the messianic Levinas seems to view messianic temporality as a certain praxis, i.e. the always to come futurity of messianic time does not determine the meaningful life solely in terms of eternity. Rather the emphasis is on a relation with the other person sketched as sharing and as a gift of time (Levinas, 2004, p. 232). In an interview with Richard Kearny Levinas emphasizes that the messianic is meaningful only as a “perpetual duty of vigilance and effort that can never slumber, ... the incessant watching of the other” (Kearny, 1986, p. 30).

However, provoked by the emergence of the messianic instant, the openness of subjectivity towards and for the other needs to be grounded by a phenomenological account of messianic temporality. In other words my next step is to show how the phenomenological method constructs messianic temporality within time consciousness.

The content of the messianic stays always hidden on the horizon since its very essence is always to come. The question I raise is: what is this radical insight of the messianic which is not predictable such that, even though it is expected and it befalls the present without being constituted, it still remains as an unknown future? The messianic contains a feature of impossibility for my lived experience that allows it to stay in the future. I am, to a certain extent, always finding my self waiting for something and expecting an event. This event, which is always still to come and which is never present - though it has the power to regulate my lived experience of the present - is death. Here the surprise and unpredictability of the future discloses a horizon where no return to the constituting self is possible. Following Levinas’ account of futurity in *Time and the Other*, the relation to the future is a relation to death, because futurity appears to me from its hidden and unknown side in death, its absolute alterity is for me precisely otherwise than the present of my being.

The radicality of this event is in contrast to the present: I am not able to reduce or transform the radical alterity of the future into concepts in order to construct history, nor am I able to reduce it to the content of my present intentions.

In the article “Philosopher and Death” Levinas makes a curious remark: “I think that the human consists precisely in opening oneself to the death of the other, in being preoccupied with his or her death” (Levinas, 1991, p. 157-158). Two important points should be accentuated here: futurity is an event of mystery but it is also a relation to the other person where subjectivity is ethically oriented towards him/her. Thus, I argue that the instant of messianic temporality is invoked by the event of the death that comes as a cardinal example of vulnerability and the exposedness of subjectivity by which all intersubjective relations are marked. Without this constant focusing on the futurity of the messianic, that is the futurity of death, subjectivity manifests itself as empty and lacking content. In other words, the messianic instant breaks through the present of my experience by compelling me to be “for-beyond-my-death”. In order to emphasize the ethical transformation of subjectivity that is marked by the alterity of death Levinas writes: “The relationship with the Other is the absence of the other; not absence pure and simple, not the absence of nothingness, but absence in a horizon of the future, an absence that is time. This is the horizon where a personal life can be constituted in the heart of the transcendent event, what I called above the “victory over death” (Levinas, 1987, p. 90). In this remarkable passage the threat of the other’s death forces subjectivity to transgress or to move symbolically beyond its own death. Thus, the meaning of the messianic realizes itself as an intersubjective one.

At this stage of the discussion it is necessary to point out that the intersubjective character and relation to the other as essential features of the messianic reveal its structural function: messianic futurity initiates my relation with the other’s call upon me: “The very relation with the other is the relation with the future”(Levinas, 1987,p. 79). However, Levinas adds one important clarification. One must “welcome the event” of the relationship with the other revealed to us in death, but not as “one welcomes a thing or object” (Levinas, 1987,p. 78). The welcoming is not only being hospitable and open but an expectation. Being different from a teleological sense of the future, in which the content of the future is always constructed from the present or from the past, expectation, or “waiting for”, is not anticipated from the past and then projected into the future. This expectation plays a conceptually important role when we approach the messianic within the phenomenology of temporality, and conceive it as ethical, as I am going to disclose in the next paragraph.

In the book *Futurity in Phenomenology*, Neil DeRoo reads the phenomenology of temporality as messianic in an effort to overcome its essentially teleological structure (DeRoo, 2013, p. 131-132). His main claim is that within the Husserlian structure of time consciousness futurity would probably lack a certain fulfilment: futurity as an object is never present, i.e. it is always in the future and cannot be reduced to the present since it would lose its meaning of futurity. Since protention is fulfilled only by being retained - as our expectations might be realized or not - at the very moment of possible fulfilment, the futurity being retained in the present, ceases to be the futural act. In other words, to maintain the irreducibility of futurity, the futural act cannot be fulfilled. There is also a positive side to this impossibility of fulfilment – the futurity showing the always to come horizon has a strong driving power that impregnates every intentional act. Thus, I would suggest that basically all of our acts are initially inspired by this driving force of futurity, which is always shimmering on the horizon.

Despite this inspiring move toward futurity, as DeRoo explicitly notes, this expectant waiting-for also has also a modality of passivity seen as a reverse side (DeRoo, 2013, p. 132). I am waiting for something to come, in other words I am expecting the event without necessarily fulfilling my expectations. Subjectivity discovers itself as passive. Rather than actively moving towards the future, subjectivity stays in a state of waiting for something to come. This explication of futurity helps us to get inside of messianic temporality. We see that the messianic seems to have a double side: both an active as driving force for subjectivity and a passive waiting on the part of subjectivity. The passivity is grasped in the existential modality of being vulnerable and exposed to what is to come. In this state of passivity the act is also not fulfilled since the object of waiting always remains in the future and never in the present.

The passive character of messianic time discloses subjectivity as sensibility and exposure. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas describes the nature of this sensibility as an openness to what is not-I, to the alterity of the future. Being vulnerable might also be caused by a complicated relation between the non-presence of the object of messianic futurity and the presence of the intending futural act.

Here messianic temporality as a relation to the other gains its concrete ethical meaning: “Messianism is no more than th[e] apogee in being, a centralizing, concentration or twisting back on itself of the Self [Moi]... It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is a moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility” (Levinas, 1990, p. 90). I am already driven to the other who is still to come in the future.

Messianic means not “whom I raise up” but “whom I *will* raise up”. To put it into phenomenological terms: the futural act, which is being for the other as responsible subjectivity, seeks in the present a non-present object. The messianic sense of temporality becomes even more dramatic because the futural act occurs in the present, i.e. it comes from the living subjectivity accentuating its extreme vulnerability caused by the object of the futurity. However, the positive impact of this driving force of the messianic is an openness towards the intersubjective dimension that brings subjectivity beyond the alterity of its own death.

In this brief description I have tried to show how messianic time, as a relation to the other and to alterity, bursts the temporal flow of subjectivity. Levinas states: “To renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one’s work is to envisage this triumph in a *time without me*, to aim at this world without me, to aim time beyond the horizon of my time, in an eschatology without hope for oneself, or in a liberation from my time” (Levinas, 1996, p. 50). This breaking through the temporality of subjectivity is set forth to justify a move towards futurity as absolute novelty where subjectivity does not return to itself. In my reading of Levinas, “to aim at this world without me,” means also a certain openness to the possibility of something completely other to come, outside of the intentional flow of constituting consciousness.

It is evident that Levinas is attacking Husserl’s account of the future in time consciousness. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Levinas repeatedly notes that Husserl’s view of futurity has a mostly theoretical character, it tends to reduce everything to the conditions of the subject’s own experience, and reduces everything to what can be reflected and objectified. That is, everything must appear to me within the conditions and horizons that I have established, conditions and horizons of my constitutive consciousness. Rudolf Bernet calls it “the appropriation of the present of things and persons” (Bernet, 2002, p. 82-99). This appropriation of time means that practically all the modalities of temporality are thought within the unfolding present of subjectivity. In Husserl’s terms, protention is basically reducing the novelty and making the horizon of futurity predictable. The future, thus conceived, is cognized within the horizon of the present of subjectivity.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Levinas continues, “A subject would then be a power for representation in the quasi-active sense of the word: it would draw up the temporal disparity into the present, into a simultaneousness. At the service of being, it unites the temporal phases into a present by retention and protention” (Levinas, 2006, p. 133). The present, seen as an ultimate source and cause of temporal flows, would conceive the messianic as belonging to the immanent sphere of consciousness. However, I focus on the meaning of the messianic as a distortion and as a break within the temporality of the present for the following reasons. First, following Levinas’s understanding of temporality as ethical, the messianic is a certain form of futurity revealed as a relation to the other and initiated by being-for-the-other. Second, borrowing from the Judaic religious context, the messianic carries with it a sense of the Messiah, since responsibility is not just an abstract term but is applied to the concrete lived experience of subjectivity. In other words, becoming a Messiah, responsible subjectivity is necessarily overcoming the alterity of my death by being called for individualized responsibility in the future.

I emphasize that, disrupting the duration of the present, the messianic sense of time is never completed: the act aimed at futurity is not fulfilled, nor is it constituted by the present of subjectivity. Rather, messianic temporality transforms responsibility into the gesture of a gift, i.e. the gift of time elucidating the ethical meaning of promise and forgiveness. The next chapter, therefore, will explore how subjectivity encounters the temporal unfolding of promise and forgiveness.

The Messianic as a Gift of Time: Forgiveness and Promise

Levinas conveys his theory of temporality and his view of futurity within the context of Husserl’s reflection upon time consciousness (Husserl, 1991). However, the significant difference and tension between the Levinasian and Husserlian accounts of the future define the function of the messianic in the intersubjective relation. In the Husserlian framework the future is viewed as an act of fulfilled expectation.

The surrounding world, and the planned and constructed horizon of my activities and experiences, as well as my intersubjective relations with others, acquire meaning only if the expectation projected into futurity is fulfilled. For Husserl the empty intuition of protention provides the future with its general framework of sense (Husserl, 2001, p. 22). Expectation regulates the framework of our present experiences and aspirations and helps to provide meaning to perceived phenomena in such a way that their senses are to be fulfilled in the present. As Husserl points out: "in the normal case of perception, all fulfilment processes as the fulfilment of expectation" (Husserl, 2001, p. 26).

The horizon of futurity articulates and determines the inner content of any act of perception. The Husserlian theory of time consciousness introduces an experience of fulfilment that holds together the unity of our experience as it unfolds through varieties of sense. Without this activity the constituted world, lived experience and the intersubjective relation would be lost.

Levinas' account of time takes a radically different shape when he links futurity with the messianic. In *La mort et le temps*, Levinas defines time and the horizon of futurity as "attente sans visée d'attendu" (Levinas, 1991, p. 32). The awaiting is directed "at" without having the aim or the content of expectation. The relation to the future comes as absolute surprise and unexpectedness. It has the character of a surprise for subjectivity since consciousness is not able to bring it to the unity of experience within the present moment. For these reasons it is also not constituted by fulfilled expectation.

Futurity and the messianic are not born by/within subjectivity. In *Time and the Other* Levinas confines the future within the intersubjective relation: "Relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all the same accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship" (Levinas, 1987, p. 79). This confident and concrete view underlies the future as influencing the present because temporality bears an intersubjective character. Though Levinas does not explicitly link the future to the messianic in this particular passage, I read the future as messianic because the future is explored only from the stand point of the face-to-face relation with the other. The other who, in this context, is always to come and who appeals to subjectivity from the future evokes the ethical sense of the present for subjectivity. This becomes clear in Levinas's work *Difficult Freedom*, a text that is strategically important for understanding the role of futurity in ethics. The core of this work is Levinas's presentation of the future, not as an 'achievement' of subjectivity alone, but as an effort towards establishing the intersubjective interaction.

Difficult Freedom is known primarily for Levinas's detailed interpretation of Jewish theological thought. The idea of messianic futurity enters the discussion as, at first, associated with the Jewish theological notion of the Messiah to come, but Levinas also develops the idea of messianic futurity as a 'waiting for'. Levinas writes that "The Messiah comes only to him who waits" (Levinas, 1997, p. 92). The Messiah is seen as a metaphoric image, expressing the presence of responsibility. The impossibility of conceptualizing and foreseeing the future event of the other to come brings us to the very secret of the revelation of responsibility: subjectivity becomes essentially open, sensitive and vulnerable in a state of 'waiting for'. Levinas illustrates it as following: "The exteriority of the future is totally different from spatial exteriority precisely through the fact that the future is absolutely surprising. Anticipation of the future and projection of the future, sanctioned as essential to time by all theories from Bergson to Sartre, are but the present of the future and not the authentic future; the future is what is not grasped, what befalls us and lays hold of us" (Levinas, 1987, p. 76-77). Therefore, responsibility, regulated by the messianic future, would be ungraspable in any form of normative moral action, since in this case the normativity of the act would be given as an acceptable and known present of the subject; the ethical becoming of subjectivity, provoked and questioned by the messianic, would never take place. In a poetic way Levinas explains the state of 'waiting for' as a capacity "to glimpse the dawn, the proximity of light, in the midst of night, before it shines forth" (Levinas, 1997, p. 92). Subjectivity is exposed towards the surprise and the unknown of the future, but in this exposedness messianic time, befalling subjectivity, recasts responsibility in the form of forgiveness and promise.

Why is messianic temporality necessarily bound to forgiveness and promise? One possible answer lies in Levinas' view of subjectivity: the primordial and essential feature of subjectivity is its sensibility. This sensibility appears to be exterior to the subject of conscious life: "the sensibility we are describing ... does not belong to the order of thought but to that of sentiment" (Levinas, 2004, p. 135). The sentiment of the secrecy of the messianic is turned into my directedness to the future embodied as forgiveness and promise.

I get forgiveness and promise not only at the moment of the present but also in the future. This primary disturbance of sensibility, as Levinas explains in *Difficult Freedom*, roots the very subjectivity of the subject in the appeal of the other, which is always to come. Sensibility is conditioned by being directed towards messianic futurity (Levinas, 1997, p. 96). I go further, and state that, this event of never accomplished futurity marks subjectivity as being chosen, and as unable to refuse being responsible, so that the free choice of the future is no longer possible. It is important to note that this sensation of the messianic, always shimmering on the horizon and transformed into the responsibility of futurity, is not constituted by subjectivity. The content of the act of promise and forgiveness, as well as hope, are not necessarily fulfilled. They always stay unknown and non-thematized by subjectivity.

I never know what I am asked but I promise to be-for and to forgive. The cause of this situation is the unpredictable appeal of the other, which regulates the subject's sensibility – it is vulnerable and exposed and open to all wounds (Levinas, 2006, p. 49). This form of suffering, as Levinas explains, has a very special place: “it is not yet moral initiative, but it is through suffering that a *freedom may be aroused*. Man receives suffering, but in this suffering he emerges as a moral freedom” (Levinas, 1997, p. 71). Because the source of ethical becoming lies within the futurity of the appeal of the other, this strange form of inverted sensibility initiates promise and forgiveness. Here I come to an important statement: messianic time, following Levinas's reading of Talmudic texts, engrains the Messiah within subjectivity: “Who is the mourner?” The mourner is the Messiah.”¹⁰

In my reading of messianic time this idea of the Messiah inside subjectivity is formulated as a gesture of promise: “relation with the Other will always be an offering and a gift” (Levinas, 1997, p. 62). However, the promise has to be based on an unfulfilled act in order to preserve the ethical becoming of subjectivity, and to deprive subjectivity of the possibility of returning to the present of its egoity. Thus, I suggest that to escape returning to the self, the promise must be modified into a gift, i.e. a gesture of giving time - “the giving is in some way the original movement of spiritual life” (Levinas, 1997, p. 62). I am giving the time of my future, promising to be responsible and to be responsive, in face of the coming appeal. In this context I tend to see messianic time as an ethical necessity of the future but also something that is always to arrive and to affect subjectivity. Therefore, the future is revealed as essentially not constituted by the subject because the gesture of giving time by its nature is not fulfilled and subjectivity's directedness towards futurity is already injected with the other.

Levinas formulates the essence of messianic temporality as “a natural move from moral activity to a messianic era” (Levinas, 1997, p. 64). The Messianic era is a temporal break, tearing the present of subjectivity, and forcing it to engage in ethical questioning and transformation. Thus, I view the messianic as a praxis of ethical thinking that subjectivity undertakes while promising and receiving forgiveness.

However, the futurity of forgiveness opens up as lightly different horizon for subjectivity. In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Levinas radicalizes his interpretation of forgiveness: “The instrument of forgiveness is in my hands. On the other hand, my neighbour, my brother, man, infinitely less other than the absolutely other, is in a certain way more other than God: to obtain his forgiveness on the Day of Atonement I must first succeed in appeasing him. What if he refuses? ... The other can refuse forgiveness and leave me forever unpardoned” (Levinas, 1990, p. 16). Though the promise is seen as a donation of my time, forgiveness might appear as a loss of futurity. The unknown content of the appeal of the other, addressing me from the future, forces me to ask for forgiveness before I commit mistakes and before I am guilty. The future will always leave open the possibility of being unpardoned. This sensibility of expecting a pardon and, potentially also not being forgiven, displaces subjectivity from its living place, removes it from its locus and from its habitual world. I would stress this even more by stating that the temporalization of the messianic in the modality of forgiveness places the subject outside of itself because, as I interpret, waiting for forgiveness is one of the inner meanings inherent in responsibility.

If my responsibility concerns my capacity/ability to be for the other in the future - to be able to be responsive, welcoming, hospitable - then I am also probably guilty for not being in time or in the necessary disposition for him/her: “Responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question “where?” no longer holds” (Levinas, 2006, p. 10).

¹⁰This idea comes to my mind while reading the following passage: “The Messiah is Myself [Moi]; to be Myself is to be the Messiah. We have just seen that the Messiah is the just man who suffers, who has taken on the suffering of the others. Who finally takes on the suffering of the others, if not the being who says ‘Me’ [Moi]?” in *Difficult Freedom, Essays on Judaism*, p.89.

In waiting for forgiveness, which is a temporalization of the messianic, I am not questioning and am not answering but listening to the other. In this context listening expresses my radical passivity, where I am affected by the messianic instant grasped in the unknown call of the other. Here, to be passive means to reduce yourself to the zero point of the horizon of your present, your established and accepted experiences, and, therefore, to become ready for unconditional responsibility. Thus, the messianic temporalizes also as a possibility of being unpardoned and, unlike the promise, might close down futurity as waiting for. Receiving forgiveness from the other has a different character of temporal disturbance: the present of subjectivity is interrupted, but the conceptual work of this interruption is not progressive, although the moral was never “not yet” (Bensussan, 2001, p. 114) in the same way as forgiveness is never yet. Messianic temporality, manifested as a necessity for forgiveness, gives hope by exposing, displacing and inverting subjectivity, reducing it to ethical questioning in the present.

Let me summarize my overall line of argumentation. In this paper the messianic is discussed as a relation between the temporalization of subjectivity and the other with regard to ethical content. To preserve the secrecy and unpredictability of the messianic instant and its effective ethical work, messianic futurity cannot be fully constituted by the subject. Its surprise, given as the futurity of the appeal of the other, instigates changes in the sensibility of subjectivity: forcing it to be responsible, and to be for future others, without knowing the content of the demand, the messianic inverts sensibility – so that its marked inside by the messianic instant or, in other words, subjectivity already carries the messianic within the self. Thus, the work of messianic temporality is seen in terms of promise and forgiveness; they empty subjectivity in the name of the other. Messianic temporality comes as a disturbance of the present time of subjectivity – as inverted and displaced sensibility - deprived of making choices or carrying out moral actions, but at the same time gaining its future freedom by giving a gift of time in promising and asking for forgiveness. One of the advantages of this view is its ability to see the temporality of futurity as correcting itself in chains of intersubjective experiences and not as an isolated act of fulfilling expectation. Contrary to the interpretation of the messianic as the image of utopia, regulating the present and the past of our history, the view proposed in this paper conceives the messianic as an ethical praxis focused on the becoming of subjectivity projected into the future, but also rethinking the present.

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