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# RESPONSIBILITY AND EVENT. AN EVENT-ONTOLOGICAL OUTLINE*

**Abstract:** The study examines the ontological and moral-philosophical interrelations between event and responsibility. It undertakes to develop an event-ontological approach in which being, event, and process are not sharply distinguished from one another, but rather interpenetrate — *perichoretically* — as mutually enfolded elements. The event is not a rupture in the rigid order of substances, but a process interwoven with the fabric of being, giving rise to the dynamism and metamorphosis of ontological structures. The acts and events that determine the structure and horizon of human existence are of decisive significance; some of these reach us in the form of acts performed by others. The second main thesis of the study is that the person's being is not a static given, but an ontic possibility that becomes actualized in the contingencies of encounter and of taking responsibility. Its medium is the field of influence referred to as the *proximity field,* and its form is the so-called *alternal responsibility* — one that stands neither on the ground of abstract duty (Kant) nor on that of radical otherness (Lévinas), and is grounded not merely in consequences or norms, but in the concrete and addressing presence of the second person, the 'you.' The existence and unfolding of the person fundamentally depend on whether someone assumes responsibility for that person. This active and supportive response opens the dynamic field of sacrifice and reciprocity. The background of the inquiry is provided by a branch of realist phenomenology — referred to here as *noumenology* — which conceives reality not as a construction of consciousness, but as an order that calls for response. Reality exists in itself and unfolds as a multiplicity of challenges that bear an addressing character. According to the conclusion, the event is not a radical rupture but a metamorphosis — an ontological arc or wave that, in certain cases, tends toward the other person. At the same time, the contingency of the event renders visible the weight of our freedom and responsibility: Personal existence is not a necessity but a possibility that reveals itself anew — again and again.

***Keywords:*** *event ontology, responsibility, alternal responsibility, proximity, noumenology*

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*Passacaglia ungherese*
— György Ligeti, 1978

## 1. Event, Existence, and Dynamism: Perichoretic Interweavings

In "On the Genealogy of Morals", Nietzsche writes: "There is no such substrate; there is no 'being' behind the doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything." [1] These lines anticipate several paths of inquiry that have shaped late-modern and contemporary philosophy. Our age — sensitive to change, and to all that is contingent, finite, or new — no longer sees the boundaries between the structures, processes, and events that determine existence as sharply separable. This stands in contrast to what much of the earlier tradition suggested — or, by analogy, what we once regarded as self-evident, namely, the clearly delimited contours of physical objects in sensory perception. The elements are malleable, mutually permeating, and intertwining — their very being is precisely this movement. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that much of the philosophy of the past century arose, in part, from the effort — more or less successful — to gain access to this distinctive dynamism, to make it visible and give it expression. After Hegel, however, this dynamism can hardly be explained within the framework of any universal law, precisely because of the contingency and situatedness of its elements.

The experiences of the past century have confirmed two key insights. (α) Events can decisively shape the lives and histories of communities and individuals. (β) We are profoundly exposed to the contingency of events — contingency that can also affect structures and processes which, at least at first sight, seem to be independent of us. Contemporary interpretations often describe the event as a happening that erupts into human reality with dramatic force and suddenness, fundamentally

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals", in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45. The German original: *"Aber es giebt kein solches Substrat; es giebt kein 'Sein' hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; 'der Thäter' ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet — das Thun ist Alles"*, Friedrich Nietzsche, "Zur Genealogie der Moral", in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 5, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 279. — Nietzsche's critique, by declaring the subject to be a fiction, calls into question the anchoring of action in the subject, thereby dissolving the traditional, substance-ontological boundary between act and event. In the absence of a stable subject, acts assume primacy — no longer accidental properties inhering in another — and take on an event-like character. The present study does not follow this path; yet Nietzsche's thought continues to inspire those who, in seeking the possibilities of a more dynamic ontology, aim to emphasize the event-like and processual nature of being. Here the focus lies primarily on the interrelations between the ontological and the ethical planes, starting from the premise that acts performed by others are experienced as events by those affected by their consequences — events that may, to varying degrees, become integrated into the process of their existence.

overturning it. At the level of thought and of experiential (noetic) awareness, this is not without truth. Yet such a claim reverts to an ontological framework that assumes a sharp dividing line between structures and events, and that avoids the question of how existence, lived experience, and thought are interwoven — of their *perichoresis*. When, however, an event enters the layered fabric of existence, the structure of being transforms into a dynamically forming medium. Within this medium, event and existence are inseparably interwoven. I do not claim to have a clear synoptic view of this process — of its mutual permeations and intertwinings. Nevertheless, from my own field of research — the intersection of moral philosophy and philosophical anthropology — I can offer an illustrative example.

## 2. Alternal Responsibility as the Medium of Personhood

My basic assumption is this: The unfolding of the personal dimension of human existence is part of a gradual process of approach toward the other, made possible by the practice of taking responsibility for another person. Actions, their consequences, and the events and processes of the world fundamentally shape the course of life. Events that reach into a person's physical, mental, and social reality — and set various processes in motion within it — whether they are mere occurrences or the consequences of actions, can sometimes exert a decisive, even destiny-shaping, force. They can set the direction of a life and determine how its possibilities take shape.

Depending on the nature and strength of their involvement, persons, actions, and events together form a *transformative medium*. It is a medium in which — and through which — the dynamics of our human and personal existence either unfold or fall into decline; where the direction and quality of our lives are shaped. This field — beyond what we do, endure, or allow to happen — cannot be separated from the way others act towards us. Woven into this process may be a distinctive form of moral responsibility — one that is neither causal responsibility, nor role-responsibility, nor merely responsibility for the consequences of our actions, whether intended or unintended, foreseeable or unforeseeable.[2] Rather, it is a practice grounded in action

[2] Cf. Max Weber's concept of *Verantwortungsethik* ('ethics of responsibility'). Max Weber, "Politik als Beruf", in *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988), 505–560. Responsibility for the intended consequences of an action is a paradigmatic type of moral responsibility, whether it concerns the retrospective evaluation of an action's consequences ('retrospective responsibility') or the prior assessment of an intended action ('prospective responsibility'). Since Weber's famous distinction — contrasting the ideal-typical logics of responsibility ethics *(Verantwortungsethik)* and ethics of conviction *(Gesinnungsethik)* — modern responsibility theory has assumed an increasingly pronounced, and perhaps excessive, consequentialist character. Hans Jonas's ethical conception stands in this tradition, grounding responsibility in consequences that accord with a realistic vision of the future, above all in the

and presence, attentive to the existential dynamics, the situation, and the sphere of influence of the second person — a field actively sustained and shaped for the sake of the other's unfolding.

I have previously defined this as *alternal responsibility* (*alter,* Latin — noun: 'the other [of two]'; adjective: 'different, other'). Rather than being rooted in abstract duty or impersonal principle, it arises from lived proximity to another person and takes shape in response to the other's unique situation, presence, and needs. Philosophically this concept is most closely tied to the personalist tradition: To Scheler's affective ethics, Buber's philosophy of dialogue, and Wojtyła's philosophy of action grounded in self-giving.

While it shares certain affinities with Lévinas' thought, it maintains a critical distance from his ethics rooted in otherness. Alternal responsibility is a moral responsiveness that arises not from the other's alterity, but from the other's *second-person presence*: From the fact that the other is the one who addresses me, waits for me, or turns toward me within the ethical field — and equally from the fact that I, as first person, may address them, turn toward them, and initiate the encounter. The other is not merely a 'stranger' *(alterity)*, but a 'you' *(alternity)* — in contrast to Lévinas's radicalization of responsibility grounded in strangeness. Responsibility, then, is not only response; it actively shapes the ethical relation through care, responsiveness, and openness toward the other — a form of practical attentiveness grounded in the person's intentional activity directed toward reality. (See *Figure I*)

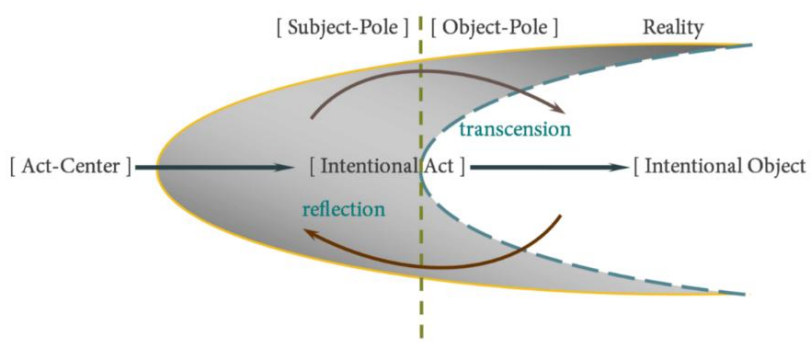



***Figure I.*** *Schema of Reality-Oriented Intentional Field* (after Makai 2014)

anticipation of dangers. Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

A further remark is in order here: The fundamental significance of the living bond and attunement between person and reality — whether in the sphere of existence or of cognition — cannot be overstated when interpreting the person's place and responsibility within unfolding reality. I refer to this approach as *noumenology*: A distinctive branch of realist phenomenology that resists epistemological transcendentalism and conceives the unfolding of reality not as a construction of consciousness but within the horizon of the person's ontological and ethical openness. Reality is not merely a repository of objects to be known — whose existence and value we subordinate to arbitrary interpretive frameworks, conceptual constructions, or technological procedures — but a *response-inviting order*: It exists, it reveals itself, and thereby invites us to respond.[3]

Responsibility should be examined not only in terms of the consequences of actions, but also in terms of its scope and circles — that is, the sphere of persons for whose sustained existence, unfolding, and deepening we assume responsibility in accordance with our actions. These are the persons we care for, toward whom we act benevolently, or toward whom we are under a moral obligation to do good. The closer another person stands — or comes — to us, the greater the responsibility we owe them; and with it, the measure of our inward commitment and readiness to make sacrifices likewise increases.

In fact, everything that exists places certain claims upon us as human beings. We cannot, without contradiction, treat existing things merely according to our own preferences, whims, or unexamined desires. As intelligent and sensitive beings, we are capable of seeing beyond another's outward, perceptible presence: We can perceive, understand, and empathize with the manifold — and often hidden — intimations that emerge from the other person's inner sphere. These intimations — whether visible needs, manifest activities, discernible feelings, communicated thoughts, or narrated stories — help us to draw nearer, in a figurative sense, to the other person. They shed light on their uniqueness, on the mode of existence embodied in personhood, and on the goals and motivations that guide the dynamics of life. We can act responsibly — that is, take actions that, directly or indirectly, nurture the existence of another person in a given situation — only when we are aware

[3] By *noumenology* I mean a realist phenomenological approach that stands in contrast to the twentieth-century *linguistic-hermeneutic turn,* which tends to treat all meaning as a linguistic-cultural construction or to subordinate it to the interpretive-mediating structure of *Dasein*. Such views appear to me as transcendentalist — indeed, Kantian. Noumenology, by contrast, holds that meaning resides in the things themselves *(in se)*, not in what we ascribe to them, and that phenomenology should render this experience directly visible. This is no easy task, since we are bound to language, while symbolic mediation by itself is insufficient. Reality *(semper maior)* must contain within itself a *truth* independent of the human being.

of both the general aspects and measures of being human and the particular aspects and measures of personhood.[4]

## 3. Proximity and Asymmetry

Responsibility for the other, in its very nature, rests on three factors: (α) how close the second person is to us; (β) what kind of relationship arises from this closeness; and (γ) what specific tasks, duties, and obligations follow from this relationship, taking into account the second person's current situation and condition. According to degrees of proximity and distance, three types of alternal responsibility can be distinguished: Proximitic responsibility (*proximitas*, Latin — 'proximity, closeness'), mediative responsibility (*mediator*, Latin — 'mediator, intermediary'), and distalic responsibility (*distantia*, Latin — 'distance, difference').[5]

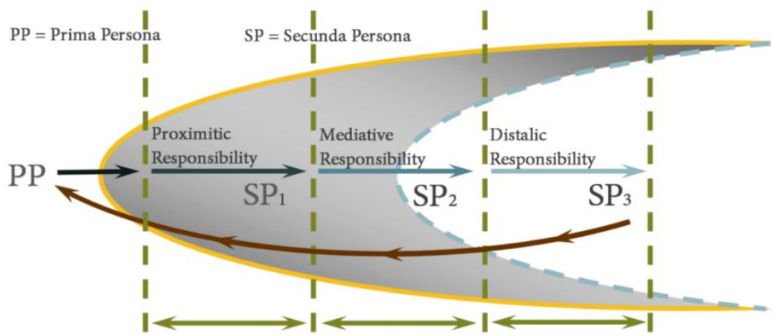



***Figure II.*** *Schema of Types and Circles of Alternal Responsibility in the Person's Field of Action and Influence* (after Makai 2023)

[4] Humans are not reducible to instinctive pursuits. They not only perceive their own good *(bonum)* and that of others, but are also able to take it into account — whether in pursuit of their own goals or for the benefit of others. They are capable of approaching others through reasoned argument, imaginative intuition, emotional attunement, direct dialogue, or sustained coexistence. The ways in which beings relate to one another display an immense richness of forms — especially in human relationships. Self-sacrificing, selfless, and even selfish actions are possible only if we can recognize the goals and measures that complete the dynamics of existence and adopt perspectives other than our own. This is one of the deepest defining characteristics of human existence — and at the same time a prerequisite for the development of a moral point of view. For this reason, we are able to regard another person, living being, or thing for its own sake, to act solely in the interest of the other, or even to subordinate our own interests to the good of the other.

[5] These categories serve analytical purposes and cannot capture the full complexity of transitions within real phenomena. Likewise, the sharpness of these conceptual distinctions does not adequately reflect the stratification and intricacy of reality.

Let us highlight the first type in more detail: The responsibility borne for those close to us — relatives, kin, and friends — is a practical engagement that exceeds the symmetrical logic of mutual reciprocity. It is an attention and care animated by affection, manifesting as a steadfast commitment to the other's existence and flourishing. Through this, the first person's responsibility toward the second becomes irreplaceable, unconditional, and personal — even when the bearer of this responsibility is not the origin of the other's situation or suffering. In other words, it persists even when it does not fit the classical, consequence-based sense of responsibility.

(α) This is a fundamental condition that enables the realization and flourishing of personhood — that is, becoming a person. Without the presence, activity, and dedication of another person — in short, without their assuming responsibility — these processes slow down, stall, or even come to a halt. (β) It is not only a prerequisite for our personhood as existence, but also decisive for the unfolding of our personhood. It functions as one of the most important catalysts for moving toward one another — whether in a partial, one-way, or mutual, two-way relational field. Approaching, revealing, bringing forth the second person, and recognizing responsibility for the second person, are parallel and mutually reinforcing processes.

(γ) Since the proximity field of close human relationships creates the experiential horizon for the genuine revealing and unfolding of the second person, it is within this space that the authentic and concrete conditions for shifting perspective and adopting the other's point of view emerge. Here empathetic understanding, rooted in lived experience, takes shape, and the related skills are learned and practiced.[6] In this way, a shift in perspective born of approaching the other leads to recognizing the other — once distant or unknown — as a second person, and to transposing practical attention into a moral perspective. This process makes possible the comparison and more measured weighing of interests, needs, and goals. It is likely that the first person's personal and unconditional — though not infinite — responsibility toward the second forms the point of departure for all human relationships with moral significance, as well as for every moral framework that seeks to give form and order to the diversity of human relations.

One example is the well-known principle of reciprocity — the so-called *golden rule.* It functions as a proto-mechanism of justice, shaping the dynamics of our relationships, the character of our interactions, and even the sustainability of our social institutions. We can take into account the perspectives, goals, and interests of others in our decisions — and can reasonably expect them to do the same — only if

[6] According to Bauman's thesis, the perceptibility and intensity of elementary, pre-social responsibility toward the second person — arising not from macro-social mechanisms but from direct interpersonal relations — are inversely proportional to the growth of social distance. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford / Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994.), 165–166.

sufficient proximity enables a realistic and mutual apprehension of one another's perspectives, goals, and interests. Without such closeness, we cannot help the other attain the goals they themselves regard as good, nor can we even recognize which of our actions might obstruct their aspirations. There are, undoubtedly, certain goods which, on the basis of general human experience, everyone — or at least most people — seek. In such cases, the interest attached to these goods may be assumed even in the absence of a proximity field.

However, we can only truly respect another person's specific needs and interests — whether we know them precisely or only infer them — if we have experienced the proximity field: That sphere of human closeness in which our own needs and desires have at some point become of paramount importance to someone else. More precisely, if there has been, or still is, a person who has lastingly reoriented the center of attention away from one's own life to ours. Such a reorientation — the turning of the first person's attention toward the second — always contains within itself the genesis of responsibility, much like the moment when we are confronted with the consequences of our own actions for others.

The asymmetrical practical logic of giving and sacrifice and the symmetrical logic of reciprocity undoubtedly reinforce each other: If we cannot rely on one another, we cannot truly give without interest. Yet reciprocity, by itself, cannot ground selflessness or acts of the heart — it can only uphold them. The origin always lies in asymmetrical devotion, in the gratuitous and freely given act that precedes all calculation and expectation. Everything else follows from this beginning. A newborn human being carries the potential to regard another person, living being, or thing as an entity in itself, to act solely for the sake of the other, or to subordinate *one's* own interests to those of the other. This anthropological endowment is of decisive importance both in the order of cognition and in the order of action.

## 4. Unconditionality, Finitude, Transcendence

I agree with Max Scheler that the person retains one's transcendence throughout — and in this respect can never be fully comprehensible, objectifiable, or appropriable to the other.[7] However, if the distance of the stranger is truly infinite — *la distance infinie de l'Étranger*, as Emmanuel Lévinas puts it — and thus unbridgeable, then the other, along with otherness and personhood, becomes incomprehensible and inaccessible.[8] Such a conception of radical otherness ultimately undermines the

[7] Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik: Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 2, ed. Manfred S. Frings (Bern / München: Francke, 1980), 389–390.

[8] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2000) 42, cf. 28.

possibility of closeness and responsibility. For a face to be recognizable as a human face at all, some kind of proximity field is necessary. Of course, a relationship may arise between two persons whose intimacy excludes the approach of a third. Likewise, there may be spheres of life to which no proximity field applies. Yet there is no such thing as absolute isolation that, in every respect, would preclude approach or responsibility. The encounter between persons — and with it, their capacity to affect one another — is a fundamental fact. And this fact necessarily entails at least a certain degree of transparency and accessibility.

It is doubtful whether moral awareness and respect for moral imperatives alone provide sufficient motivation for a person to do what they judge *right* in the face of competing inclinations. Formal and impersonal principles are generally insufficient. Without the proximity field, the second person becomes inaccessible or alien — so that neither the face itself nor its infinite otherness can be perceived. In such cases, the first person can at most illegitimately extend their own perspective to others — effectively imposing it on them — or adopt a hypothetically general point of view, as exemplified by Kant's categorical imperative. The obligatory moral respect owed to the other is, by itself, a weak driving force unless it is sustained by the motivational energies arising from the multifaceted experience of responsible proximity. The motivational basis necessary for the fulfilment of moral imperatives *(ought)* follows from the indicatives of attraction that arise within the proximity field — that belong to the domain of what *is*. Accordingly, when we move beyond its boundaries, we must reckon with normative forms of regulation that, though pertaining to different spheres of life, remain inseparable from the experiences and insights previously acquired within it.

Personal responsibility, as it takes on concrete form in the relationship between the first and second persons, is unconditional; yet it bears the mark of finitude in two inseparable respects. (α) Its extendability is sharply limited; (β) its exercise depends on the resources and opportunities available at a given moment to the first person. At this point, indirect reciprocity assumes particular significance, namely, the lived experience that we ourselves may be the second person for someone else — that is, a person toward whom unconditional responsibility is directed. Not everyone, nor just anyone, can be close to us. As distance increases — from acquaintances, through familiar strangers, to entirely unknown strangers — the question arises: By what logic do various forms of moral or legal regulation that govern relationships come into play? And what reasons, motives, and commitments determine whether our orientation toward strangers is benevolent, indifferent, or hostile? The obvious answer is that religious and moral precepts, cultural patterns, collective traditions, and individual experiences that shape our way of life play a decisive role in forming that orientation.

## 5. Concluding Reflection

What overarching conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing?

### 5.1. Contingency of Personhood

Our practical life is an interwoven network of reactions to events and spontaneous initiatives. Human activity is transformed into personal responsibility within the field opened by the proximity of the other. Three main factors fundamentally influence the open or hidden decisions — sometimes of inexplicable logic — that give way to actions arising from alternal responsibility and allow a human life and history to be shaped by this moral logic. (α) The number and demands of the assumed relations of responsibility; (β) the indicatives of attraction — joy at the other's existence, gratitude for their unfolding, pain at their vulnerability, etc.; (γ) the material and spiritual resources available to the person in a given situation.

Our personal existence — both in its ontological ground-structure and in its unfolding — remains exposed to the contingencies of encounter, of proximity, and of assuming responsibility. Personhood is not a necessary given but a possibility offered by the order of being, never guaranteed. Human life can indeed subsist without assuming responsibility toward the second person — yet such a life will possess an altogether different ontic structure. It is precisely this vulnerability and contingency that make visible the weight of human freedom and the stakes inherent in every turning toward or away from the second person. At the threshold of a posthuman epoch — one that sharpens, more than any before, the question of how we deal with humans and with our co-beings — there is scarcely any insight more important than this. The second person is not a rupture in the order of the world, but the promise of an ethical order of proximity.

### 5.2. Event as Continuity and Metamorphosis

In contemporary philosophy, the event is often conceived as an unforeseen and dramatic occurrence that fractures the accustomed order of the world. Yet the exposure, openness, and historicity of personal existence point to how sharp ontological boundaries cannot always be drawn between *structures of being,* the *processes* that dynamize them, and the *events* that set those processes in motion. Such distinctions acquire significance on the planes of lived experience and reflection. Within the proximity field, some of the events that befall a person are transformed into processes; otherwise neither pain nor joy could be woven into the fabric of life, could become an event in one's life, and then enter one's life history.

Consequently, an event does not bring about an (ontic) rupture, but rather interweaves itself with the existence it affects, to the extent that the organic order of life allows — however painful or joyful that permeation may be. Whatever takes place there and then as an event is at the same time a singular *continuation* and *metamorphosis* of the structure of existence it affects. This also means that an existential event has no end comparable to the clarity and suddenness of its historical beginning; it seeps into the layers of being, even breaking through them, unfolding into a process characterized by *partial continuity*. What has taken place is not merely a matter of remembrance or forgetting, but remains within us as a living and active element of human existence, in accordance with its particular stratification.

The upheaval of the soul is not annihilation, but a weightier step into the next moment. The contingency of the event is not a rupture, but a continuity — an ontological arc that opens, contingently, toward the other.

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