Attila Ákos Tóth
Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest / St. Athanasius Greek Catholic Theological Institute in Nyíregyháza, Hungary
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9529-410X
tothattila942@gmail.com

MORAL IDENTITY AS EVENT AND RUPTURE*

Abstract: Classical ethical thought often conceives the moral subject as autonomous and rational, a self-sufficient agent guided by reason. Emmanuel Levinas and, in a related way, Bernhard Waldenfels challenge this image. For them, moral identity is not a stable possession but an event that interrupts and unsettles the subject's prior self-understanding.

At the heart of this reorientation lies responsibility — something not chosen but imposed. Responsibility precedes reflection, arriving as a demand that defines identity before the subject can consciously assume it. Moral identity, in this sense, is not secured but disrupted, marked by an encounter that obliges a response.

For Levinas, this rupture occurs in the event-like appearance of the Other's face. The face is not a sign to be interpreted but the immediate message: "Do not kill me!" It resists reduction to an object within my horizon and commands me irreversibly. My identity is nothing other than the duty to answer this appeal.

Waldenfels, by contrast, situates the genesis of moral identity in the experience of the alien. The alien cannot be domesticated into familiar categories; it interrupts my world unexpectedly and demands a response I cannot fully prepare. Yet every answer remains incomplete, haunted by what escapes assimilation. Moral identity, for him, is a continual process of responding to what exceeds me, an identity constituted through rupture and never closed.

Despite their different emphases, Levinas and Waldenfels converge on a decisive point: the moral subject is not grounded in autonomy or stability but in exposure to what arrives from beyond. Ethics is not the gradual cultivation of a sovereign self but the ongoing constitution of identity through disruptive events — whether the command of the Other or the intrusion of the alien.

Keywords: *ethics, subjectivity, Levinas, Waldenfels, rupture*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of philosophy, ethical thought has often begun from a reassuring image: the subject of moral action is a figure of stability.[1] The moral agent appears as someone capable of reflecting on possible courses of action, discerning the right one, and then executing it with rational control. This figure, stable and self-possessed, stands at the center of classical accounts of ethics. The dream of ethics in the tradition could be this, that morality grants us an inner equilibrium, a reliable selfhood, a sense that the good life is possible because we can ground it in ourselves.

Consider Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* remains a cornerstone of moral philosophy. At first, the ethical subject he describes is indeed wavering: a young person unsure of how to act, easily misled by passions, caught in uncertainty.[2] Yet the very point of cultivating the virtues is to overcome this instability.[3] Through repetition and practice, through habituation and correction, the subject slowly becomes more stable. Virtue becomes a habit, and habit, in turn, produces character.[4] The virtuous person eventually chooses rightly without hesitation, almost as if by instinct — but an instinct painstakingly built over years of training. Here, ethics culminates in a kind of moral second nature.[5]

Now contrast this with Kant, a key figure of modern ethics. His framework is different — rational legislation rather than habituation — but the orientation remains similar. For Kant, the human subject may be tempted by inclinations and self-interest, but it remains capable of recognizing the moral law. This law does not command because of outcomes or utility; it obligates for its own sake.[6] And the subject, in acknowledging this law, achieves a form of inner autonomy, rising above inclination

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1 Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 204–225; 239–263.

2 "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit." Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), II. 1, 1103a24–26, 27.

3 "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it." Ibid., II. 1, 1103b1–2, 27.

4 "By doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust; and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly." Ibid., II. 6, 1106b36–1107a2, 35.

5 "And thus the virtue acquired by habit is said to be a second nature. Hence the Philosopher says in *Ethics* II that 'habits acquired by operation are like a second nature'." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1912), q. 63, a. 2., 820.

6 "Duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law." Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), AA. IV, 400.

to act from duty. The Kantian agent, like the Aristotelian, is one who gains stability: the stability of reason disciplining desire, the stability of freedom aligning itself with universal law.[7]

What unites these two otherwise divergent traditions is the conviction that morality rests on consolidation. Whether through the exercise of virtue or the legislation of reason, the moral subject progressively stills the turbulence of life. Ethics here is the cultivation of inner calm, a stability or order over fluctuation, the building of a character that endures. Moral identity, in this picture, is nothing other than the steady solidification of the self.

But can this really capture what it means to be ethical? Does the moral life truly unfold as a smooth line from instability toward inner equilibrium? Does responsibility reduce to a process of self-mastery, as if ethics were simply another form of self-improvement? Or is something more dramatic, more destabilizing involved? Perhaps morality is not a slow consolidation but an interruption, not the stillness of mastery but the shock of being summoned.

This is the guiding question of the present essay. I argue that moral identity cannot be reduced to a static possession or a linear development. Ethical selfhood does not grow necessarily like a tree that slowly takes root. It is not secured only through rational deliberation, nor is it just a predictable outcome of disciplined training. Rather, it arises in events — sudden, unforeseeable, and foundational events. These are not moments we plan for, nor achievements we can claim. They are events that break in upon the ordinary order of life, events that interrupt continuity, events that cannot be foreseen or forced.

To use a stronger word: ethics originates in rupture. The moral subject is not the calm legislator of meaning, but the one who is called, even wounded, by what exceeds him or her. In the pages that follow, I will call this the *founding event* — an event that does not build on our capacities but unsettles them, an event that constitutes the self by demanding a response it cannot refuse. If the classical picture of ethics is grounded in stability, the alternative sees its ground in the event. My paper contends that moral identity is constituted mostly not in stability but in rupture, drawing on Levinas's ethics of the face and Waldenfels' responsive ethics.

2. Critical Problems of the Stable Moral Subject

The image of the stable moral subject has long exerted its appeal, but the very features that made it reassuring also expose its limits. Here I would like to mention three difficulties that reveal why it cannot remain the absolute foundation of ethical thought.

[7] "Autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself, independently of any property of the objects of volition." Ibid., AA. IV, 431.

The first problem is, that the image of the stable moral subject has always depended on an abstraction. It imagines a person who deliberates calmly, considers alternatives, and executes the right choice. So, this model rests on the assumption that ethical life begins and originates with the reflective judgement that is described, for example by Aristotle as the *phronesis*, the practical wisdom. "It is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sort of things conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general."[8] The wise man is, and becomes such by serenity, reflectivity and by the possession of himself. But is that really our everyday life experience? Do we live the ethically significant moments as places where we should remain "just wisely observer"? I would definitely say that the ethical experience differs from this picture. The moment of responsibility does not arrive as an opportunity for deliberation but as an interruption, it arrives as a cry, a face, anger or fear, a sudden event that throws me radically off my balance. If we imagine the beginning of moral life as an ordered reflection, we are just partial, we forget its disquieting character, the fact that disturbance is the very structure, meaning, and origin of ethical life. I am not saying, that deliberation is useless. Clearly, reflection plays an important role in sustaining responsibility. It becomes difficult if we think that this abstract figure of the rational agent is its very first moment and ground, and we do not know what to do with our lived experience of disturbance. So, if we want an ethics that responds to that way, how life is actually lived, the abstraction must be set aside. Stability is what remains as the sediment of the fact that we respond, as an image and state caused by earlier disruptions.

A second difficulty would be the preference for universality over singularity. At this point Kant certainly should be mentioned. "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[9] In the Kantian ethics the demand is not tied to a particular situation, event, experience, but it is tested by universality. It is not only the situation, that is universalized, but also the subject itself. He gains stability by situating himself within a universal reason. The system of Kant certainly has a very strong and impressive insight, but misses an important point, which is the origin. Responsibility does not arrive as an abstract maxim, but as an experience of something new, strange, uncertain, that calls me — experiences, that Kant would like to exclude from the ethical sphere of life, when he writes, "since reason, in deriving laws from the supreme principle of practical reason, if it is not to borrow anything from experience, must exclude every empirical

[8] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, VI. 1, 1139a25–31, 146.
[9] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, AA. IV, 421.

condition entirely…"[10] It is assumed, that the singular cases draw their meaning from general rules, but in our experience it is something different. The universal rule derives its urgency from singular encounters.

The third problem that I would like to mention is the denial of vulnerability. The stable subject is seen as autonomous, self-possessed, who is capable of disciplining desire and securing his inner harmony — he is powerful and self-secure. But in an ethically significant situation we do not experience ourself as absolute sovereign, but as exposed, and vulnerable subjects. Emmanuel Levinas formulates it clearly: "subjectivity is exposure to the other",[11] it is subsequent to my ethical responsibility; it is formed from this last one. According to Levinas, there is no myself — properly spoken — before that responsibility. And responsibility before my own stability means exposure, means fragility and vulnerability, it means that I am structurally subordinated.

3. Emmanuel Levinas – The Event of the Face

To understand what it means to ground ethics not in stability but in disruption, not in autonomy but in exposure, let us turn to Emmanuel Levinas. The twentieth-century French philosopher of Lithuanian–Jewish origin is perhaps the most decisive voice in rethinking the foundations of ethics. His project is radical, since it wants to dislodge the rational, autonomous subject that has dominated western philosophy from its sovereign place, also at the center of moral theory.[12]

Levinas begins with a critique of phenomenology as he inherited it. In Husserl's account of intersubjectivity, as well as in Heidegger's analysis of being-in-the-world, the subject remains the point of origin. The whole world is disclosed in their views in relation to the self. The other persons are also recognized only in relation to the horizon of my own intentional life. The problem that Levinas makes clear in each case is that for these thinkers the only truly real basis, the most original one, is and can only be my subjectivity. Others, and everything appear only in its light.[13]

Levinas tries instead to reverse this perspective. For him, the decisive center of moral life does not lie within me. It comes from beyond me, from the encounter with the Other. The self is no longer sovereign but vulnerable, no longer autonomous but

[10] Ibid., AA. IV, 400.

[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1991), 117.

[12] Cf. Adrian Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: North-western University Press, 1997), 114–118.

[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 33–40; 44–48.

heteronomous. Moral identity is not self-grounded but constituted in an event that ruptures the closed circle of selfhood and confronts me with a demand I did not choose.

This event is the face of the Other that arrives to me as an epiphany.[14] It is important not to misunderstand Levinas. The face is not simply the visible countenance, not the material surface of perception. It is not reducible to eyes, mouth, or skin. It is not an object among others that I might grasp, categorize, or interpret. The face is something else than merely an object: it resists reduction, refuses assimilation, exceeds representation. "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched — for in visual or tactical sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content."[15]

The face, then, is not a bearer of meaning but meaning itself. It speaks — not in words, not in signs that can be decoded, but in its very presence. And what it says is singular: "you shall not commit murder."[16] This is not a metaphorical command but the most concrete imperative. The Other, by appearing, already prohibits violence, already demands that I respond with responsibility.

What matters here is that this imperative is not the result of my reasoning. It is not a norm that can be generalized, nor a principle I could deduce from autonomy. It arrives as a rupture, an event of interruption. It comes unbidden, without preparation, outside all systems. It breaks continuity and undoes the sovereignty of the self. The obligation it imposes is prior to freedom, prior to decision, prior even to intentionality itself.[17]

The consequence is a radical rethinking of subjectivity. The self is not first a subject who then assumes moral obligations. It is, rather, that I am a subject because I have already been claimed. Levinas insists: "To be I is to be responsible. To be I is to be hostage."[18] Responsibility is not a later addition to my identity; it is the very structure of identity itself. We could replace here the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" by a new formula: "I am because I am responsible."

The ethical event of the face, therefore, is not an external episode added to an already existing self. It is the founding event in which subjectivity itself is constituted. The self emerges not by thinking, not by choosing, but by being summoned — by being addressed by an Other who cannot be absorbed into my categories. Ethics here

14 Cf. Ibid., 201.
15 Ibid., 194.
16 Ibid., 199.
17 Cf. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 99–127.
18 Ibid., 114.

is not secondary but primary. It is not a branch of philosophy; it is the condition of subjectivity itself.[19]

This encounter is always unpredictable. It cannot be scheduled, planned, or contained. It arrives suddenly, as a disturbance that unsettles comprehension. And the response it demands is infinite. I can never fully answer, never balance the scales. I can only respond again and again, without end. Responsibility here is not a task that can be completed, but a burden that defines me.

Seen in this light, moral identity is no longer a narrative of growth or a set of stable virtues. It is not the outcome of mastery but the exposure to what masters me. It is the ceaseless obligation that begins in the event of the Other. In Levinas's radical reorientation, the moral subject is not the source of meaning but its hostage, called into responsibility by an event that it did not anticipate and cannot escape. Ethics, in this vision, is not something I do. It is something that happens to me. It is the event that constitutes me from the outside.

4. Bernhard Waldenfels: The Event of the Alien

If Levinas confronts us with the event of the face, Bernhard Waldenfels broadens the horizon of disruption. He also resists the idea of a stable moral subject who acts simply by applying universal rules. For him as well, ethics does not begin with autonomy. But while Levinas focuses on the commanding presence of the Other person, Waldenfels directs us toward something broader, more diffuse, and more unsettling, that is the alien. "Dealing with the alien thus acquires a genuine ethical and political dimension, just as, conversely, ethics and politics cannot be conceived without reference to the foreign."[20]

What is the alien? It is not simply another individual, though it may appear in another. Nor is it just what is unusual or strange in an everyday sense. The alien, as Waldenfels defines it, is whatever resists being integrated into my horizon of meaning. It is what I cannot domesticate into my categories, what unsettles the order of my lived world. The alien is the element that remains foreign, the surplus that slips away, the interruption that I cannot grasp completely.[21]

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[19] "Ethics is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy." Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. A Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

[20] "Der Umgang mit dem fremden erhält von daher eine genuine ethische und politische Dimension, so wie umgekehrt die Ethik und Politik ohne den Bezug auf Fremdes nicht zu denken sind." Bernhard Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden I*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 110. Translation is mine – A.T.

[21] Cf. Ibid., 16–50.

Encountering the alien is not like discovering a hidden truth. It is not the fruit of more careful analysis or deeper knowledge. It is instead the interruption of my ordinary experience, the breakdown of my interpretive frameworks, the sudden exposure of being addressed by something beyond me. As Waldenfels puts it, "The alien, which leads us outside ourselves and makes us transgress the boundaries of the respective order, cannot be something we bring about on our own initiative. It can only be conceived as a pathos that befalls us."[22] Ethics, then, does not rest on my decision, but on the event of being overtaken by what is alien.

This intrusion does not follow a pattern, but it arrives without warning, without justification, without reason. I am overtaken by it, before I even know how to react. I am not autonomous anymore, because my identity is not the origin of action but the effect of being addressed.

So, if we try to systematize ethics into the universally codified set of rules, we just miss the point. The very structure of responsivity is, that it cannot be prepared in advance. If we are questioned, we must create a new response each time in every singular situation. Responsibility is not general, but it includes someone or something in its particularity and individuality.

This is what Waldenfels means by *Antwortethik*, or the responsive ethics. We should constantly answer, because our answer is never finished once and for all. There is always something — the alien – that exceeds it.

Therefore, we can draw some conclusions regarding moral identity. The ethical self should not be described as a stable possession, that already has the consequent answers for every ethical challenge. Nor is it something, that grows in a straight line. Instead, it is continually reshaped, disturbed and reconfigured, and is always searching for new answers, because it is called into question by strange events. The alien interrupts again and again continually, so that the moral subject is a site of repeated disruption.

It is also clear, that if we try to assimilate the alien, to use some solutions and answers from the past, because the alien seems to be similar to those passed events, we surely destroy it. Its ethical force lies precisely in the irreducibility, in the fact that it cannot be contained.

Here Waldenfels challenges not only the image of the stable moral subject but also the hope that ethics could ever be complete. Yet this does not lessen our responsibility, or the significance of ethics, quite the opposite, it deepens it, because if ethics is not a

[22] "Fremdes, das uns außer uns selbst geraten und die Grenzen der jeweiligen Ordnung überschreiten läßt, kann nichts sein, was wir selbsttätig herbeiführen. Es ist nur zu denken als ein Pathos, das uns widerfährt." Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 131. Translation is mine – A.T.

collection of already prepared answers, solutions that work, but the readiness to remain unsettled, to be addressed, to remain open for the alien, then it requires a very different level of responsibility in every ethically significant situation.

5. RECONFIGURING MORAL SUBJECTIVITY

Having followed Levinas and Waldenfels separately, the question now would be, what happens if we read them together. Their emphases seem to be partly divergent. Levinas points to the Other's face as the decisive site of the ethical event. The face speaks to us in the language of command. Waldenfels, however, emphasizes the alien as disruption, stressing the unfinished and questioning quality of our response. But beneath these differences lies a deeper agreement. Both are insisting on the importance of the event. The moral subject is not given in advance, facing as such different ethical challenges, but it is formed and reformed through the challenging events of alterity.

For Levinas, the structure is an imperative one. The Other appears not as a neutral presence but as a command that cannot be ignored. "You shall not commit murder."[23] This is an order, not an exchange between equals, not a dialogue. The relation is asymmetrical from the very beginning. I do not constitute the Other, but I am constituted by the event and experience of the Other, by being called into responsibility.

Waldenfels approaches from another angle. The alien is not necessarily personal, and does not give a law. It can appear and just be there as a silence, a gesture, a disturbance that unsettles my prior order. It resists every assimilation into categories that are already familiar to us. "What appeals to us in the alien is not what we already know, but what remains out of reach."[24] The ethical force of the alien lies in its very excess, in the way it escapes comprehension. I do not receive a law to follow, but I am caught in a situation where I am faced with the necessity of a formulation and constant reformulation of my response.

I would not like to exaggerate the contrast: Levinas as the philosopher of command, Waldenfels as the philosopher of questioning. Both show that the origin of ethics cannot be reduced to rational deliberation, nor seen as merely a conceptual system. Both describe ethics as something that comes unbidden, as an event that interrupts and, more importantly, displaces the self. Responsibility, is not chosen but imposed from beyond.

This means that subjectivity itself must be reconceived. In both, the self is not the foundation of meaning but the site where meaning arrives and unsettles. Moral

[23] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

[24] "Das, was uns im Fremden anspricht, ist nicht das, was wir schon kennen, sondern das, was uns entzogen bleibt." Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden,* 41. Translation is mine – A.T.

identity is not some possession, by which we have to face ethical challenges, but is something continually reshaped by interruptions. The decisive question should be: What kind of event calls me into an ethical being, and how can I remain open to what I cannot master?

Levinas pushes this into the language of substitution: "…it is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation."[25] The self exists by standing in for the Other, bearing responsibility in its place. Waldenfels, in turn, insists that responsibility is haunted by what cannot be resolved. "Every answer remains haunted by the question it cannot suppress."[26] Taken together, these insights reconfigure subjectivity as fractured, heteronomous, and never completely finished.

Here emerges a dynamic conception of moral identity. At its origin, we do not find some stable subject, with his possession of virtues, or some rational coherence of his autonomy, but first of all the exposure, and the open-ended, unfinished, vulnerable subject, in its formation process. The moral self is not built once and for all, but rather, it is reconstituted in every encounter with alterity.

So, this is not ethics as a system, but ethics firstly as a rupture. The ethical behavior is not something initiated from within, but something that happens from without. It interrupts our imagined continuity, unsettles our self-possession, and makes us responsible.

6. RECONCILIATION

But after all, what remains of the classical accounts? If they cannot stand as the origin of ethics, does that mean that it is totally worthless? I would certainly not agree. Their descriptions, though not about the first moment of morality, may still capture what comes after.

Take again Aristotle's idea of virtue as a second nature. "It is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself… about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general."[27] Virtue becomes a habit, character becomes firm, and the good life appears as something steady. But what if we read this not as the genesis of morality but as its sedimentation? On such a view, the original ethical moment is not the apprentice's training, but the encounter with alterity, the appeal, that unsettles. Habituation would then be the way the ethical event leaves its trace in daily life.

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25 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 15.

26 "Jede Antwort bleibt von der Frage heimgesucht, die sie nicht los wird." Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 46. Translation is mine – A.T.

27 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.1, 1139a25–31, 146.

Seen in this light, virtue is not the origin of responsibility but its continuation. Habituation becomes the labor of memory: it ensures that the shock of the event does not fade too quickly, that the wound does not close before it has transformed me. The steadiness of character is no longer an autonomous possession but a fragile memorial, the trace left by earlier interruptions, carried forward so that later ones may find me more responsive.

This perspective does not trivialize Aristotle or Kant. On the contrary, it grants their insights a different dignity. The cultivation of character, the discipline of habits, the pursuit of rational consistency — these are not the sources of ethics, but they help sustain it. Without them, the event might be forgotten; its shock may be dulled by time. With them, the subject remains prepared, not by securing itself in autonomy but by carrying within itself the echo of what has already exceeded it.

Thus, the gap between virtue and rupture is surely not absolute. "To be I is to be responsible before having assumed responsibility."[28] Second nature is not the foundation of ethics, but it is how responsibility takes root in finite human life. Ethics originates in exposure, but it endures through discipline. The classical dream of stability is not false, but incomplete: stability is real, yet it comes after the fact, as the congealed form of earlier disruptions.

7. CONCLUSION

The philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Bernhard Waldenfels invite us to rethink moral identity at its roots. Both turn against the classical image that morality is the work of stabilizing the subject, cultivating equilibrium, or gradually mastering oneself through reason and virtue. Instead, they point to a different origin: ethics begins not from sovereignty but from disturbance, from what breaks into continuity and obliges me to respond.

Levinas places this origin in the encounter with the face. The Other does not appear as an object among objects but as a presence that commands. The imperative "you shall not commit murder" is not derived from reason, nor is it chosen. It arrives as an intrusion that cannot be assimilated.

Waldenfels speaks instead of the alien that is not reducible to a norm or a clear command. The alien is a disturbance of sense, a rupture in meaning that escapes every domestication. It calls me, not through law, but through the question itself, that I cannot fully resolve, that always exceeds me.

In spite of their differences, both converge on a decisive reorientation: responsibility precedes freedom. Subjectivity itself is not the foundation of ethics but its effect. I am

[28] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 114.

not the sovereign originator but a responder, always at the second place. Whether in the commanding presence of the Other's face or in the unsettling intrusion of the alien, the self is constituted through encounters of alterity that he cannot control.

The consequence is, that moral identity cannot be described only as coherence, stability, or linear growth. It is not the product of virtue or the reward of autonomy. The true origin of ethics is the exposure, the openness to events that I cannot master, because my answers are never final or complete. We may therefore summarize, that ethics is mostly not a system but an event. It does not unfold as the steady progress of an autonomous subject, but as the repeated rupture of alterity. Levinas names this substitution, for Waldenfels it is haunting, but both point to a similar structure. Subjectivity is constituted not in mastery but in exposure. The value of their theories today lies not only in their critique of the stable subject, on a theoretical level, but in showing how fragility and exposure — as phenomena of our everyday life — can themselves be sources of ethical depth.

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