

Title	Formation of Sensibility in Mother-Child Relation : Temporal Dephasing and Traumatic Displacement.
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Citation	臨床哲学. 2018, 19, p. 64-78
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/68164
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Formation of Sensibility in Mother

- Child Relation: Temporal Dephasing and Traumatic Displacement.

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Maternity and temporality

Being well known as a philosopher of radical responsibility for the other Levinas develops a model of intersubjective relation and its ethical temporality on the example of maternity. The mother-child relation is described as a prototype of intersubjective relation, it is one-for-the-other and other-in-the-same, i.e., being already affected by the other. Maternal subjectivity is unconditionally responsibility for the other, it is disclosed not only as a metaphor to portray radicality of responsibility for the other but also as a modality of ethical becoming. This ethical becoming has a particular structure of temporality: subjectivity is the one-for-the-other at the very moment of the present but also *is* already for the other in the future, i.e., the futurity of responsibility is penetrating the present.

The ethical becoming is rooted first of all in sensibility, which has, according Levinas's interpretation, intriguing features: taking various interchangeable shapes it involves exposure, vulnerability, trauma but also welcome and care. The maternal sensible embodiment shows that sensibility has a double structure based on auto-affectivity and hetero-affectivity. The hetero-affective sensibility is initiated by the other penetrating subjectivity at the level senses: mother reacts on child's needs, illness, pain or death. The address of the other expels subjectivity depriving it from its locus thought as enjoyment and 'furnishment of needs', it is "no longer dwelling, not stomping any ground" (Levinas, 2006, 49). This is a displacement of the embodied self, of the self as auto-affectivity and as affectivity of life itself might also question the validity of intersubjective temporality of mother-child relation.

I believe that maternity is not only a form and a manifestation of radical responsibility, but also traumatic bias and temporal dephazing which describe a transformation of sensibility.

Let me start with developing Levinas's original view on formation of ethical temporality. The main focus of Levinas's work *Time and the Other* is how to preserve subjectivity in transcendence and, at the same time, not to reduce the alterity of the other: "How can the ego that I am remain myself in a you, without being nonetheless the ego that I am in my present – that is to say, an ego that inevitably returns to itself? How can the ego become other to itself?" (Levinas, 1985, 91). This question has a very explicit temporal dimension. I reformulate it as the following: how to keep the ethical meaning of the presence of the future in the present and not reduce it to the solitary life of subjectivity? The answer is that subjectivity finds this particular modality in maternal relation.

The birth of a child breaks the time of subjectivity as continuity. Levinas argues that the future of the child is "my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other" (Levinas, 2004, 267). In fecundity, given as a relation to the future, subjectivity can be saved from the endless repetition of oneself and from being attached to oneself. (Levinas, 1985, 92) But also in fecundity I find a birth of the other who is not mine and who avoids any possession because in a child I go beyond the fulfillment of all the possibilities of my own ego. The child as a result of the erotic situation appears to be a specific locus of transcendence, where subjectivity while preserving itself is given the possibility of not inevitably returning to itself.

The relationship with a child establishes an "absolute future": a child is not a replication of the identical, because in the case of repetition the alterity of the other is totally neutralized. In fecundity it is preserved. Because of infinite time, the subject transcends death through the discontinuity of its transcendence to others. This peculiar modification of

temporality is not, however, an attempt to reclaim lost opportunities, it is not to be in “search of lost time”. It is rather the only possible actualization of responsibility. The identical in this case is opposed to the true future — the future that is beyond the limits of its own predetermination.

We do not really encounter the term of the maternal subjectivity Levinas’s texts, however, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence* he speaks about maternity as sensibility found inside subjectivity. There is complicated logic of alteration between immanence and transcendence manifested as the other within subjectivity revealed as maternity: “it is being torn up from oneself, being less than nothing, a rejection into negative, behind nothingness; it is maternity, gestation of the other in the same” (Levinas, 2006, 75). In other words, starting from discussion of the erotic relation (where auto-affective sensibility can still hold its strong locus) in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas moves to ethical modality of maternal subjectivity. He writes, “sensibility is being affected by a non-phenomenon, a being put in question by the alterity of the other, before the intervention of a cause, before the appearing of the other” (Levinas, 2006, 75). Here the accent is put on the immediacy of body sensation which exposes one to the signifying of the other as the-other-in-the-same. The-other-in-the-same means that “the subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation” (Levinas, 2006, 75). Maternity, as passing between being and transcendence, expresses a being affected by the other without having a source, and it is also structured as the-other-in-the-same. (Levinas, 2006, 78) Let me elaborate this argument.

In maternity female subjectivity acquires its interpretation as a temporalizing body and discovers a pre-ontological past: because the birth of a child and an appeal of a child break temporal continuity of subjectivity and affect subjectivity before it is aware of being responsible.

“The subjectivity of flesh and blood in matter – the signifyingness of the sensible, the-one-for-the-other itself – is

the preoriginal signifyingness that gives sense, because it gives. Not because, as preoriginal, it would be more original than the origin, but because the diachrony of sensibility, which cannot be assembled in a representational present, refers to an irrecoverable pre-ontological past, that is of maternity” (Levinas, 2006, 78)

Subjectivity as one-for-the-other is born only in maternity, meaning depositing itself, a depositing which, according to Levinas, is the very possibility of giving. This giving could be described as a gift of my body, my food and clothes to the other before I have been born as a sensible subject, even before my free will and without the possibility of being together since the other has already marked me inside.

Thus, maternity means also welcome. I claim that in maternity subjectivity already anticipates the appeal of the other which has not yet come. My argument differs from Levinas’s which claims, as in the quotation above, that maternity bears a sense of a pre-ontological past. Maternity gives also a new look on the future. I am welcoming the other by giving food, clothes and my body: “sensible experience as an obsession by the other, or a maternity, is already corporeality. ...The corporeality of one’s own body signifies, as sensibility itself, a knot or a denouement of being. ... one-for-the-other, which signifies in giving, when giving offers not the superfluxion of the superfluous, but the bread taken from one’s mouth. Signification signifies, consequently, in nourishing, clothing, lodging, in maternal relation, in which matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality” (Levinas, 2006, 77). The gesture of giving signifies here a move towards the future but the act itself of giving is formed as the present. I am giving my food to the other at the moment of now, but still, the origin of present and future is in the other.

The mother-child relation is based on the sensible expressed in sensibility, but it also goes beyond the sensible. In Levinas’s reading of

sensibility in intersubjective relation the sense bestowal is coming from outside. The transcendental character of sensibility is structurally determined by the moment of contact with alterity of the child. The profound nuance that Levinas is at pains to point out is that the contact itself should not be read as the consciousness of contact, but rather subjectivity is subordinated to that with which it is in contact. Thus, Levinas's innovative reading of sensibility tends to see sensibility as alterity, which facilitates our openness to exteriority. The innovation of Levinas's analysis of sensibility is rooted in its openness to alterity happening in maternal relation. His goal is to maintain otherness within the structure of sensibility. However, this openness involves being vulnerable: sensible being is also simply dependent being, being vulnerable in its sensibility, because in openness to the world and together with enjoyment, subjectivity also experiences pain and suffering, and hence it cares for its own protection in the world. This analysis of sensibility fundamentally problematizes subjectivity. Incarnated sensible subjectivity also has the possibility of signification in the sense of donation. However, this ethical gesture takes a radical form of irreversibility of responsibility. Levinas argues that "the ego in itself like one is in one's skin, that is to say, cramped, ill at ease in one's skin, as though the identity of matter weighing on itself concealed a dimension allowing a withdrawal this side of immediate coincidence" (Levinas, 1996, 86). To escape this coincidence with its ipseity, the subjectivity has to move from the modality of "being-in-one's-skin" to "having-the-other-under-one's-skin."¹ "Having-the-other-under-one's-skin" conditions the constitution of ethical sensibility, which leads directly to the non-coincidence with oneself. Here, the initial displacement of the intentional consciousness is rooted in the embodied sensibility: "in the form of corporeality, whose movements are fatigue and whose duration is ageing, the passivity of signification, of the one-for-another is not an act, but patience, that is, of itself sensibility or imminence of pain" (Levinas, 2006, 55).

The category of maternity got a different interpretation than the temporal one. Furthermore, maternity is described as the archetype of nourishment, i.e. a synthesis of the mother and the earth as providers of feeding.² There is also another crucial question which I would like just to mention. The metaphor of maternity reveals also the mother-child relation which is different from the father-child relation. In the father-child relation subjectivity both remains itself and becomes other than itself: “Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me” (Levinas, 2004, 91). The male creates something outside of himself, something “other” that will outline his own mortal body without making an immediate claim on his autonomy. Yet, in the mother-child relation the child belongs to the substance *of* the mother and it is *of* the mother. There is a sharing of substance that finally leads to total substitution: in feeding the mother gives herself to the child; it is one-for-the-other without keeping the same but also torn inside out and displaced in the radicality of substitution. Here the traumatic modality is more visible than in paternity since the very core of sensibility as auto-affectivity is involved.

The general structure of the experience of maternity is built up upon a tension arising between auto-affectivity, self-awareness and disrupted temporal continuity grasped in memories and projections. This tension can be expressed in language emphasizing eventually a meaning of ethical becoming of subjectivity. Maternity thus seems to bring subjectivity to the very limits of rationality, language and self-consciousness. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas makes an interesting turn to the theme of the feminine, maternity and language. Maternity becomes appropriate for the signifying of the sense - “bearing par excellence” (Levinas, 2006, 75). Here I find a remarkable change in the reading of the feminine – it is revealed as the signifying par excellence of alterity, of subjectivity and of the saying. Describing the feminine as the-other-in-the-same Levinas discovers the

ethical saying in the core of the said: “But the saying extended toward the said received this tension from the other, who forces me to speak before appearing to me. The saying extended towards the said is a being obsessed by the other, a sensibility which the other by vocation calls upon and where no escaping is possible” (Levinas, 2006, 77). Before the other appeals to me I am already forced to answer, because in maternity subjectivity is disclosed as being obsessed by the other and being a hostage of the other.

Giving, welcoming and deposing oneself are linked to the saying within the said. Let me also add that maternity as subjectivity in absolute exposedness to the other (to the child) is described by Levinas as speaking to/for (Levinas, 2006, 92). It is a form of an ethical language the essence of which consists in being silent and offering that silence as a gift for the other and as being-for-the-other. This silent speaking is a fundamental passivity that again indicates a non-intentional state of consciousness: “this passivity is the way opposed to the imperialism of consciousness open to the world” (Levinas, 2006, 92).

Maternity, sensibility and dephasing

What we don't see behind Levinas's exposition of temporal structure of paternal relation as a radical form of responsibility is phenomenology of pregnancy and gestation, which reveal the intensity of vulnerability in maternal embodiment.

What is 'how' of subjectivity before it enters into mother-child relation? Following Levinas's description subjectivity is perceived as the one who dwells, enjoys, and builds its life on eating and furnishing, who is 'living from the world'. In forms of dwelling and in “living from”, but also in such existential modalities as at enjoying and bathing in the world, self-affected subjectivity is already determined as being here and as an embodiment, which unfolds itself exactly in the present and it is possessing the very

continuity of the present. In this phenomenological description of subjectivity proposed by Levinas I find a particular temporality deploying as the being here of the body, and sketching its static character: subjectivity constantly tends to localize itself as a center and as a privileged locus, which is the way of how the body experiences to be at home (*chez soi*) and in the world. Therefore, the self-affecting subject is a pure present, a temporal punctum and a center in terms of space and time. In holding its locus, the self-affecting subjectivity is heading towards a temporal synchronization that soothe its interiorized habitation. The emphasis here is on auto-affectation as the continuity of the self's inner-time and as a projective-retentive temporalization of its being-in-the-world. The self-affected subjectivity naturally wants to return to the self, to be able to hold the core of the self and to preserve it as an identity. To leave its ecstatic and sometimes disturbing existence self-affecting subjectivity needs a refuge, a possibility of withdrawal, or a retreat into the locus. However, this auto-affective sensibility and this comforted embodied dwelling are displaced in gestation, pregnancy and maternity. Maternal subjectivity is foremost dephasing: neither in phase with its own affectivity, nor for the self and by the self. Dephasing, brought by gestation and pregnancy, can contribute to a description of a specific form of ethical intersubjective temporality, which has complex framework of intertwined "slices" of time invading subjectivity. Let me examine this thesis in a more detailed way.

The very general structure of women's experience of pregnancy and maternity might be described as a transitional process towards the unknown. The continuity of temporal move is constantly disturbed: the awareness of the past and the moment of the present are not necessarily connected and projected, in an expected way, on the future which is still to come. This includes travelling from the past through the present toward the unknown future. In the modi of gestation, pregnancy and maternity hetero affection is shaped by the alterity of the child, which becomes a primary clue for the

constitution of time. Subjectivity is affected not only by representations and immanent affection (*affection de soi par soi*) but also by the other inseparable from maternal subjectivity, i.e. by “the-other-in-the-same”. Thus, the dialectic relation between continuity and discontinuity, between synchronized present and diachrony comes into play.

In the context of phenomenology the fascinating side of pregnancy and maternity shows that subjectivity does not possess the intentioned object and is not able to manipulate it. In process of gestation the child is not mine in a complete comprehensive way and is not available for consciousness. Being a kind of ‘in-between’ phenomenon pregnancy is inwrought between physical manifestation, cognitive and existential experiences. Here, sensibility of maternal subjectivity takes a different shape. In paternity - father-child relation - the future of the child is the future of a stranger or of the radical other. The danger is that the child still might be conceived as an object of representation. In father-child relation the singularity of paternal subjectivity is preserved while inside maternal subjectivity this singularity is disturbed and shifted. But for maternal subjectivity the condition is rather different: the child, whom she is expecting, will never be an object for consciousness but only as the other (because it is also *of-the-mother*), whose possibilities exceed what can be grasped in terms of her own.

Following Levinas’s description “the sensible-maternity, vulnerability, apprehension – binds the mode of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of the self”. He argues that in the mode of maternity “I am bound to Others before being tied to my body” (Levinas, 2006, 76). In pregnancy mother-child relation has a peculiar structure: the child is felt as a stranger, however, for the expecting mother the child is a “familiar stranger”, who is both of the mother and in oneself. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas develops the metaphor of maternity as an example of radical responsibility for the other to reformulate a meaning of transcendence. (Levinas, 2004, 267-269) Being a constant “growing up” maternity is felt as

a genesis of “experience” and is determined as a phenomenon that befalls subjectivity before it is fully aware of it. Sensibility enters into intersubjective field thanks to the ethical draw of the child. However, this appeal of the child might also dissociate the sense of self-conformity and challenges the assumption that subjectivity is always singular. The unique experience of maternity, its vulnerability, is marked by the anarchic, pre-original touch of the other, which would be otherwise lost in other types of intersubjective relations. Thus, the relation between sensible subjectivity and the child arrive at the high level of vitality because in different senses and in different expressions the structure of embodiment consists at once of the mother’s and of the child’s and therefore singularity of subjectivity is tuned into intersubjective sensibility.

This brings up the further consideration that maternal relation with the child is going beyond any relation between two equal concepts of two subjects, rather this relation is rooted inside subjectivity and it aims at the constitution of ethical becoming of subjectivity. Subjectivity is extending itself into temporality other than its own continuity. To have a child does not literally mean to reproduce but to give birth to diachronical temporality, to the future which is not fully mine but which invades my present. Subjectivity is in a way split by the future that the child will open and develop. Many feminists continue to see the pregnancy not only as a “split subjectivity” but a certain mode of sensibility in-between. This split is a diachronical rupture; it is the future, which is not yet there, however, it establishes a link to ethical temporality.

In “Gender and Anonymous Temporality” Silvia Stiller writes, “it is due to a woman’s awareness of pregnancy that they hold another gender-specific time experience. The pregnant woman experiences carrying somebody in her body for nine months, *waiting* for the birth of her child, being *patient*, continually recognizing the *changes* in and of her body, the *growth* of her child, living an intense double life for a *certain time period*.”

(...) Women do indeed have a specific sense of temporality due to their female bodies” (Stiller, 2011, 80). The auto-affective subjectivity is no longer in continuity of the present, it is no longer dwelling at its locus but it is a hetero-affectivity in a mere transit phase of waiting for. This split of temporality implies a common ontological ambiguity that is inherent to all human conditions – alienation and freedom, immanence and transcendence, singularity and intersubjectivity, the one and the other.

In a more dynamic approach to the problem of maternal subjectivity Iris Marion Young notes: “The pregnant subject, I suggest, is decentered, split, or doubled, in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her bodily boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head. (...) Pregnancy, I argue, reveals a paradigm of bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves” (Young, 2005, 46f).

Young offers the vision of pregnancy as transitional modality of “in-between”. It is also a new mode of sensible embodiment of “in-between”. The subject is not just split but rather diachronical and is in the mode of intersubjective “in-between” happening inside constantly transforming sensibility. Julia Kristeva reinforces an image of pregnant subjectivity: “Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes, grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it but it goes on. Motherhood’s impossible syllogism” (Kristeva, 1982, 237).³ For Kristeva pregnancy is a continuous duality where the awareness of being oneself and of being the other constantly changes.

As it was described above in giving birth the horizon of perspective of embodied subjectivity and its constitution of temporality are bound to the

modes that are not for subjectivity alone to make a choice. In this context Beauvoir's argument comes into play asserting that the birth involves an irreducible element of passivity from female subjectivity: "(She is) a storehouse of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she scares children who are proud of their young, straight bodies and make young people titter contemptuously because she is a human being, a conscious and free individual who has become life's passive instrument" (Beauvoir, 1956, 477). This passivity meant that pregnancy and maternity are bound to immanence of material presence because their biological bodies are becoming confined boxes where possibility to escape and to free oneself is very little. However, I believe that there is a kind of dynamism present in unfolding maternal body. The formation of gestation refers to such structure of temporality that precedes an origin of time rooted in existence of maternal subjectivity. The growth of the child's gestation in the body of a woman comes before an awareness of one's maternal existence as belonging to oneself. In *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* Lisa Guenther fuses an concept of pregnancy as extreme vulnerability with modality of ethical welcoming: "the expectant mother... bears this other who remains a stranger despite he bearing, unseen and perhaps even violent: kicking at her ribs, altering the shape of her body, shifting her bones from within. She bears this weight of the Other *for the sake of the Other* in this bearing, she becomes responsible for the child, for the child's responsibility, and even for the pain that the child inflicts" (Guenther, 2006, 211).

I still want to articulate a complexity of vulnerability of maternal embodiment. Before the child exists as the temporal continuum, i.e. as the present grasped in the world she or he already addresses maternal subjectivity with demands. Lisa Guenther describes it in a very physiological way – child is kicking, squeezing and pressing against ribs of its mother. The child is not only depending on maternal subjectivity but it also conquers her body by creating space for its own existence within her body. By consuming

and destroying mother's body the child grows and gradually gains its independency. Before the child starts to build its existence as a being-in-the-world it affirms itself through dependency, separation, address, response and command. One could already see that these types of relations create anarchic conditions for the child's future existence and establish a radical form of responsibility as the one-for-the-other projected into the future.

There is an important point to stress. For maternal subjectivity the process of gestation marks the immemorial irrecuperable lapse of time that prevents subjectivity from prioritizing or imposing one's own existence. Levinas describes it as "a pre-original, not resting on oneself" (Levinas, 2006, 75). Obviously, gestation disrupts in advance the representation of birth as imagined, fixed, chosen or produced, but also gestation crashes the residue of the self of subjectivity. Being pregnant the woman is exposed to the other whom she has never seen or met in the immediacy of modality of the face-to-face situation but with whom she finds herself in the ultimate proximity. And this is one of the most fascinating move in this anarchic form of intersubjective mother-child relation: the face-to-face embodied encounter of two, the gestating child and the pregnant woman happens only at the very moment of birth, even if they have already been in the closest proximity to one another.

Similar to the function of gestation, in its structure pregnancy refers to an anarchic time that cannot be made entirely one's own; it refers to specific form of temporality as being for the other who is not yet-there but who is still to come. Temporality of the child precedes temporal continuity of the mother, tearing it and creating temporal lapse. Thus, pregnancy is experienced as already diachronical because subjectivity exceeds and breaks up any continuity with the present grasped as its own. In other words, the non-projected future of the child, the future that does not belong to me, but for which I am nevertheless responsible brings forth the anarchy of ethical life. This anarchy of responsibility initiates a form of dephasing where

maternal subjectivity is not coinciding with herself and is shifted from its habitual locus. I want to stress here that these disruptions and shifting are not the same as alienation, because the body that bears the child is still itself but it does not belong to maternal subjectivity as well as it is not becoming fully the property of the other. For Levinas being the-one-for-the-other in proximity is “pure passivity or susceptibility, passive to the point of becoming an inspiration, that is, alterity in the same” (Levinas, 2006, 67). My argument is that brought by gestation and pregnancy the temporal dephasing happening within female embodiment opens up sensibility, which is not entirely mine but shared.

To conclude I would like to advance an idea that in formation of maternal sensibility, ethical becoming is not an innate process of the self, nor is it a conscious decision to take responsibility for its own actions according to ethical norms of behavior. The-other-in-the-same is always more than subjectivity can endure. Responsibility befalls the subject with the demand “bear me”. When Levinas says that maternity as a metaphor of ethical responsibility is the figure of “bearing par excellence”, he articulates the complex meaning of receiving, carrying, sharing, donating, and welcoming which are in the anarchy of gestation and birth. Ethical bearing does not refer to the present as re-presented but rather to the gift of time. To paraphrase Derrida to be responsible is to think time of responsibility as donation of my present and of my future, which are not at my possession. Even though the donation of time does not belong to the subjectivity in full sense, this gift of time happens in intersubjective and shared sensibility of the mother-child relation. The advantage of Levinas’s description of maternity is that he attempts to get closer to what takes place in the experience of ethical becoming of subjectivity. He widens conceptual meaning of temporal structures of sensibility by bringing it from auto-affective state to hetero-affection and to vulnerability of gestation and maternity, and finally, as I believe, to a shared intersubjective sensibility.

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Notes

1. Levinas does not explicitly use the phrase "having-the-other-under-one's-skin"; however, in *Otherwise than being or beyond the Essence*, he describes a traumatic experience of embodied subjectivity being marked by and exposed to the other as being turned inside out and as having the other on the other side of one's skin (Levinas, 2006, 48-51). I introduce a modality of "having-the-other-under-one's-skin" to conceptualize the work of affection, which is close to what Levinas uses as the other-in-the-same.
2. I should also mention a biblical reference in the story of Ruth, which links maternity with nourishment and hospitality. This aspect was discussed by Claire Elize Katz in the essay "Reinhabiting the House of Ruth" in *Feminist interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*. The author makes an interesting point in interpreting the feminine: she discloses the woman as formation of the ethical I, and as the condition of the ethical.
3. Kristeva reveals pregnancy as a mean to question social structures and institutions, opening horizons to conceptualize varieties of woman's practices in intersubjective relations.