

Trajectories of Responsivity: Alterity, Responsibility, and Democracy in Waldenfels, Levinas, and Derrida

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Trajectories of Responsivity

Alterity, Responsibility, and Democracy in Waldenfels, Levinas, and Derrida

Abstract

The article reconstructs how responsivity bears subject-constitutive, ethical, and political implications. First, drawing on Bernhard Waldenfels, it outlines the contours of a phenomenology of responsivity: responsivity is not a belated reaction of an already constituted subject to what is given, but the site where subjectivity takes shape in the very act of responding. Second, it shows that this perspective yields a renewed understanding of responsibility: the subject faces a prior appeal that it cannot evade. With the figure of the third, the asymmetrical relation between I and Other opens onto a plurality of others and thus onto questions of comparison, generalizability, and justice. The central challenge, then, is to respond not only to the claim of the singular Other but also to the conflicting claims advanced by multiple others. The intersection of ethics and politics does not mark a departure from responsivity but its extension into the political. Third, engaging Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, the article develops a political account that does not rely on presupposed identity, reciprocity, or sovereignty, but on the inevitability of responding to the "Other-in-the-plural"—and thus a politics that understands decision, judgment, and action as remaining continuously exposed to alterity.

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Introduction

The notion of responsivity spans diverse discourses in the humanities and social sciences. In democratic theory, it designates the capacity of political institutions to engage demands of citizens (Pennock 1952; Pitkin 1967, 113); in care ethics, it names attentiveness to the other's concrete neediness and the capacity to respond to it appropriately (Tronto 1993, 134); and in pedagogy, it designates the capacity to engage the learners' utterances and movements of thought rather than subsuming them under pre-given categories (van Es and Sherin 2008). New Materialist discourse extends this perspective into a relational response-ability, in which the capacity to respond is not understood as a property of an autonomous subject but as a capacity produced within human and nonhuman entanglements (Haraway 2016, 2 and 110; Folkers 2026, 341–394). For all the heterogeneity, what unites them is a departure from an understanding of action as the sovereign initiative of an already constituted subject: responsivity instead names an originary relation to something that precedes one's own action and calls it forth as a response.

The German phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels radicalizes this understanding of responsivity, construing it not as a form of appropriate reaction but as a fundamental, subject-constituting, and ethically consequential relation to alterity. Responsivity does not mean simply responding appropriately to something already familiar; rather, it means being struck by something whose claim cannot be fully resolved within the categories of the responding subject. Waldenfels unfolds this understanding of responsivity above all in his major work *Antwortregister* (Waldenfels 1994; see Busch et al. 2007), expanding and modifying it in his later thought (especially in Waldenfels 2002 and 2007; see Flatscher 2011). Waldenfels traces his usage of the term to the neuropsychologist Kurt Goldstein, whom he explicitly cites as a reference (Waldenfels 1994, 14 and 326). In *Der Aufbau des Organismus*, Goldstein characterizes illness as a "deficient responsivity" (Goldstein 1934, 270), by which he means the impairment of an organism's capacity to respond appropriately to the demands of its social and natural environment. Goldstein, in turn, takes the term from another source: in *Grundlagen der ärztlichen Betrachtung*, the physician Louis R. Grote conceives the capacity of the embodied organism to respond as a fundamental dimension of health (Grote 1921, 8-9). Even this brief sketch of a conceptual history points to two interlinked aspects of responsivity: its embodied, subject-constituting dimension and its ethical dimension. First, responsivity

names the primordial embodied embeddedness of the human being in a world that precedes any intentional or volitional directedness. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, Waldenfels likewise shows that the human being does not primarily experience itself as a sovereign subject acting on its own initiative and relating autonomously to an already constituted world. Rather, as an embodied self it always finds itself inserted into a nexus of occurrences and claims: something or someone encounters it, addresses it, concerns it, and lays claim to it before it can actively relate to it. An appeal thus precedes one's own cognition and action, one to which it is incumbent to respond. Responsivity, in this sense, designates a prereflective relation of responding in which subjectivity is first constituted in its embodied vulnerability. Given this precedence of the appellative structure and the inescapability of responding, a second question immediately arises: how is one to respond appropriately to a claim? With Levinas, Waldenfels radicalizes this asymmetry, understanding the encounter with the Other as an ethical claim that precedes any free decision and self-determination and yet wrestles with the appropriateness of responding. Here responsivity takes on the character of responsibility.

The present article advances the thesis that Waldenfels's concept of responsivity exhibits a systematic movement from the subject-constituting relation of response, through ethical obligation, and to a political dimension of relations of response—one that Waldenfels himself develops only in outline. The argument proceeds in three steps. *First*, I reconstruct the basic contours of a phenomenology of responsivity in Waldenfels. At the center is the claim that response is not to be understood as the subsequent reaction of an already constituted subject to a given state of affairs; rather, subjectivity is constituted in the very act of responding. *Second*, I examine the ethical radicalization of this responsivity, focusing on Waldenfels's Levinas-inspired account of responsibility. To be sure, the subject does not choose this responsibility of its own free will; rather, it is already entangled in it insofar as the singular subject must respond to an appeal that precedes it. The asymmetrical relation between I and Other opens, with the figure of the Third, onto a plurality of others and thereby onto questions of comparison and universalizable justice (see Bedorf 2010, 159–191). The decisive question thus arises of how one can respond adequately not only to the claim of the singular Other but also to the conflicting claims of other others. The intersection of the ethical and the political is therefore not to be understood as a departure from responsivity, but as its consistent continuation within the domain of the political. *Third*, I pursue this movement further with reference to Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* (1997), asking how to develop a political thought that grounds itself not in presupposed identity, reciprocity, or sovereignty, but in the inescapability of responding to the "Other-in-the-plural" sketched above (see Zeillinger 2010). *Finally*, a concise conclusion summarizes the argument and brings the central insights into sharp focus once again.

Responsivity thus appears as a fundamental figure not only of subjectivity and ethical relatedness but also of the political. Politics does not begin where already constituted subjects act together; it begins where human beings are placed, through the claims of others, into a shared, conflictual world that demands institutional articulation and redress. In Derrida's figure of a "democracy to come", this insight assumes its political radicality: democracy then names not the completed realization of a determinate political order, but the ongoing obligation to respond to claims that exceed existing forms of recognition, representation, and membership. Its openness is therefore not merely a deficit or an imperfection but belongs to its constitutive structure. In this sense, democracy would be a political order that must institutionally cultivate its own incompleteness, allowing itself to be claimed and transformed by what it cannot yet anticipate.

1. Responsivity and Subjectivity

According to the classical phenomenological understanding, consciousness is always intentional consciousness. For Husserl, consciousness is characterized by always being consciousness of something (Husserl 1976, §36; Husserl 1984, §§9–21). This rejects the assumption that consciousness is initially empty and would subsequently need to be filled with worldly contents; rather, every act of consciousness occurs as a directedness toward an object. It further emphasizes that every object remains tied to its mode of givenness for a consciousness (Husserl 1966, 19–20). Thus, Husserlian phenomenology refuses any posterior synthesis of a reality that exists “in itself” with a consciousness that exists “for itself,” in favor of a correlative relation between subject and world: hearing is never without something heard, thinking never without something thought, expecting never without something expected. The converse is equally true: what is seen is never without seeing, what is imagined never without imagining, what is remembered never without remembering. By virtue of its intentional constitution, consciousness therefore already bears the relation to its object within itself; at the same time, the appearing of actual, remembered, imagined, possible, and so forth, objectivity proves dependent upon the directedness of the act of consciousness. Both moments are indispensable to the event of appearing, such that phenomenology resists unilateral reductionisms to either the subject-pole or the object-pole. In short: every appearing of something is to be understood as an appearing for an experiencing consciousness.

Yet how can this category of experience, fundamental for the life of consciousness, be given more precise phenomenological articulation, and why is it decisive for an understanding of subjectivity? Waldenfels’s answer is as disconcerting as it is simple: experiencing is a responsive event. Before consciousness can relate to itself or to the world, it is compelled to respond to a pressing impingement that befalls it and, as it were, seizes it *ab ovo*. The dictum provocatively and allusively introduced in his seminal work *Antwortregister*—“In the beginning was the response” (Waldenfels 1994, 270)¹ marks the reorientation of his phenomenological thinking. With this maxim Waldenfels effects a “transformation of the phenomenological conception of intentionality” (Waldenfels 1994, 332): the correspondence emphasized by classical phenomenology between act of consciousness and intentional object, he argues, succumbs prematurely to the temptation of systematically tying everything objectively given to a transcendently conceived subjectivity. Waldenfels problematizes this accentuation by insisting that experience retains its own refractory, resistant potential.

He underscores that the subject has no sovereign command over experience in a self-determining manner; rather, it is ever anew challenged and called into question by it: experiences can fulfill expectations but also thwart, exceed, or shatter them, such that the experiencing subject—within an uncontrollable, embodied susceptibility—must always reckon with the unforeseeable. Subjectivity no longer functions as a transcendental instance that carries within itself the conditions of possibility of all experiencing; instead, it emerges out of a responsive event.

With this radicalized consideration of experience—which thus retains its potential to unsettle and its mode of resistance—it becomes clear that the subject does not begin from itself, but from the very outset is compelled to respond to a happening that seizes it, and it emerges from this process. For Waldenfels, then, responsivity is the fundamental trait of all human comportment and is constitutive for the formation of subjectivity. Every speaking and acting can be characterized as a taking up of ... or an engaging with It thereby becomes evident that Waldenfels understands responding not in a narrow sense (for example, as the speech act of answering a question) but in a much more encompassing sense, “which in a certain way shapes everything that goes on in our speaking and doing and in our other forms of behavior” (Waldenfels 1994, 320). To sharpen this understanding of experience, Waldenfels subjects the relation between claim and response to a deepened phenomenological analysis. He particularly

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Waldenfels’s work from the German original are my own.

emphasizes the temporality inherent in this relation: one might assume that first an appeal occurs, then a hearing follows, and finally a response is given. This linear causal conception, in the sense of a stimulus-reaction schema, is, however, undermined. For Waldenfels insists on a single enactment out of which appeal and response emerge, without—this point is crucial—abolishing their difference. Rather, his aim is to bring into view the intertwining of claim and response as an double event.

The occurrence, according to Waldenfels, comes to light only in the response, not independently of it. The precedence of the occurrence is not to be grasped as an isolable “before”; nor does the belatedness of the response constitute a detachable “after.” Rather, Waldenfels points to a fissuring within experience itself, which he conceives as a temporal displacement, indicating that only in the ever-belated responding does the appeal that precedes it break open. The occurrence therefore does not take place in a (intratemporal) “before” of the response; it simply comes too early. And the response does not articulate itself in a (intratemporal) “after” of the occurrence; it always comes *too late*. To put it differently: it is only in responding that one comes to see that one had already been addressed by an occurrence that had always already befallen one. Waldenfels thus insists on a “responsive difference,” which marks the gap between “the what and the to-what of a response” (Waldenfels 1994, 332), a distance between appeal and response. For Waldenfels, then, phenomenological consideration of experience brings to light a temporality that resists any chronology understood as a succession of now-points. It is therefore no longer possible to speak of a “beginning” in the classical sense, for the response—although we must always begin with it—no longer provides a point of departure that can be fixed in the present. Rather, responding is characterized, for Waldenfels, by always having to begin belatedly, without ever being able to make up for this delay: “Responding happens here and now, yet it begins elsewhere” (Waldenfels 1998, 47). What follows is clear: the occurrence does not strike an already constituted subject as an identifiable other; indeed, it cannot be described in spatial categories or as exteriority. For what strikes the subject is not a something in the usual sense; instead, Waldenfels insists on the “disquiet that proceeds from a non-something and a non-someone” (Waldenfels 1994, 478). Any attempt to identify the occurrence must therefore, on his account, be rejected.

At the same time, according to Waldenfels, the subject emerges as subject out of responding, without being able to make up for this belatedness or to shed its alterity. To drive these insights home for questions of the constitution of the subject—again in contrast to classical phenomenology—the subject does not act, in the nominal sense, as a sovereign, autonomous “I can,” but experiences itself as always already addressed and constitutively furrowed by moments of alterity. As Waldenfels puts it:

“What addresses us reaches us from a spatiotemporal distance. Measured against our own initiative, it always already comes too early. Conversely, measured against what befalls us, our response comes too late. It is not that something precedes us, for example as a causal stimulus that produces an effect. We precede *ourselves*. [...] *I am younger and older than myself*. We are dealing with an originary precedence and an equally originary belatedness. As a consequence, our speaking and doing are never fully up to time. A responding that begins elsewhere is separated from that to which it responds by a hiatus.” (Waldenfels 2010, 77–78)

The interweaving of claim and response within the same event is thus marked by an asynchronicity captured memorably by the very paradox Waldenfels himself adduces: that the subject is at once “*younger and older than itself*.” The ego never begins out of and with itself; it always starts “elsewhere”—or better: “elsewhen”—and cannot rid itself, even in the future, of this retardant moment. As Waldenfels emphasizes, it is never “fully up to time,” that is, it never arrives at itself without remainder; it invariably finds itself entangled in preconditions

and prehistories, demands and addressings, from which it cannot completely free itself but to which it—*nolens volens*—must respond. In short, subjectivity is available only as responsive. It thus becomes apparent that in the belated responding not only the that of the occurrence breaks open—something that eludes subjective disposability—but the fragile mode of being of the responsive subject also comes to light. Where what is at stake is not merely an external perceiving of otherness, but where a becoming-otherwise of one's own mode of being can always take place, the subject no longer acts unbrokenly as the sovereign center of reference for all that is. The ground is withdrawn from it that would allow what is heard to be integrated into its own horizon of understanding. The responsive subject no longer functions as the antecedent and underlying of all that is (as *sub-iectum* in the literal sense), but occupies, within the event of response, an irreducibly precarious stance. Nevertheless, on the level of the matter itself, Waldenfels decisively holds fast to the subject—even if it is no longer understood as an unbroken, primary instance, but rather finds itself in an unreserved and always embodied vulnerability and openness to the world. At the same time, he emphasizes the singularity of each subject, for experiences are always experiences of someone: “The occurrence is no occurrence without someone who is struck by it, just as sufferings are no sufferings without being struck by something” (Waldenfels 2002, 100). This dimension of undergoing—Waldenfels, in his later work, also reaches back to the Greek term *páthos*—marks a specific understanding of embodiment.

For Waldenfels, then, responsivity is unthinkable without embodiment. On the one hand, the appellative moment he discerns within the phenomenological tradition is already, in many respects, considered under bodily auspices. This is evident, for example, in Sartre's analysis of the gaze or in Levinas's emphasis on the face of the Other—both of which point beyond an objectifying grasp. Waldenfels puts this connection succinctly: “I could not respond to body parts. Claim and sight are precisely that to which we respond by listening and by looking. In knowing myself to be addressed and beheld, the foreign voice and the foreign gaze come before me” (Waldenfels 1994, 314–15). On the other hand, responsivity presupposes an embodied receptivity through which something can be experienced at all as claim, as sight, or as voice. For the lived body (*Leib*) is not a thing among things; rather, every experience is mediated bodily. The world discloses itself bodily, such that Waldenfels, following Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 2012), can emphasize that the body is “constitutively involved in the phenomenality of all phenomena” (Waldenfels 1994, 464). The functioning lived body is thus always already the site and medium of experience. There is, accordingly, no pleasing melody without hearing ears that perceive it, and no piercing odor without a smelling nose that becomes aware of it. In this sense, the lived body can be understood as a *bodily responsorium* (Waldenfels 1994, 463–538): an organ of receptivity in which experience occurs before it is explicitly thematized as such.²

Against the background of a responsive framing of experience, what becomes clear is not only the irreplaceability of each singular subject—when occurrences befall me or haunt me, it is I, and no one else, who must respond. Yet this conjunction of precedence and irreplaceability leads beyond the question of the constitution of the subject. For if the subject does not sovereignly dispose over the origin of that to which it responds, the question nonetheless remains open as to how it should respond and in what sense it can answer for its response. In other words: responsibility does not straightforwardly follow from the primordial must of responding; rather, the question arises of how responsivity can pass over into responsibility. The next section pursues this ethical dimension.

2. Responsivity and Responsibility

² In the highly readable lecture course *The Bodily Self* (Waldenfels 2000), Waldenfels examines how world-, self-, and other-relation interweave in corporeality.

How, for Waldenfels, are responsivity and responsibility connected, and what understanding of responsibility follows from this relation? It should already be clear: all speaking and acting—indeed, all comportment—of the subject can be understood, according to Waldenfels, as responding (see Tengelyi 2001). From this perspective it is therefore impossible not to respond. Even a “non-response” in the sense of a Bartlebyan refusal is already a specific mode of responding: a deliberate ignoring of foreign claims, a decided looking away, or a calculated silence every purported indifference is a way of responding to a prior claim upon the subject. In short: *one cannot not respond*. From this double negation Waldenfels infers a must. The inescapability of responding, however, cannot to be understood in terms of a stimulus-response schema in which an effect follows upon a cause like an automatism. Rather, the following insight is central: inescapable is the *that* of the response; the *how* of that response remains to be found (*finden*)—or better: invented (*erfinden*). Without this moment of invention, responding would not be an answering but merely a blind reflex. Waldenfels emphasizes unambiguously in *Antwortregister* that in responding the question of the how of an appropriate rejoinder always arises.

“The basic question therefore cannot be: Should I respond or not? Or: What should I respond to? In that way one would be treating responding itself as a doing whose initiative lies with us. [...] The question that grows out of being put into question can at most be: What, and how, should I respond? If every response were equally good, it would no longer be a response that takes up what has been said and enters into foreign offers; if there were only one right response, the response would no longer be a response that replies. Here we reach the point at which a response is invented as a response and is heightened into a creative response.” (Waldenfels 1994, 576)

The citation makes clear that with the impossibility of not responding the question of *how* one ought to respond simultaneously breaks open; the question of the appropriateness of the response thereby becomes pressing. For not all responding is of equal validity—which would make any further inquiry into right action impossible—nor can the response consist in a single correct and thus ultimately valid answer. Between indifference and fundamentalism Waldenfels therefore explores the leeway of responsivity. He describes this in-between as pre-normative (see Waldenfels 2010, 72), since it is neither arbitrary nor predetermined by fixed rules. In responding, the subject faces the challenge of finding—indeed, inventing—an appropriate response (*Antwort*) and taking responsibility (*Verantwortung*) for it. *Responsivity is thus not to be had without responsibility*.

To underscore this ethical dimension of responsivity, Waldenfels points to the “paradox of creative responding” (Waldenfels 2011, 5). This paradox consists, first, in the fact that responding is not a *creatio ex nihilo*; as noted above, it does not begin with and out of itself. Rather, responding always remains mindful of the prior givenness of the appeal and cannot detach itself from it. Second, in heeding the Other’s appeal, responding itself brings something forth; it is creative. Precisely in the necessity of having to respond, there shows itself a freedom in the each-time capacity to respond—this way or that—and thus a creative capacity to answer. A responding, to be sure, for which the subject is henceforth answerable.

With these considerations, Waldenfels subverts the conventional understanding of responsibility. Commonly it is assumed that an imputable subject, of its own accord, takes responsibility for someone or something and, in the event of failure, can be called to account before a third, ostensibly neutral instance. Waldenfels subjects this ternary structure of responsibility—in which someone bears responsibility for someone or something before someone—to a revision: the subject neither decides on its own initiative to be addressed (or not), nor does it autonomously assume this or that responsibility for something or someone. And yet, although the subject never consents to assume responsibility, the burden of

responsibility is always already imposed upon it. For Waldenfels, drawing on Levinas, the point is to understand responsibility against the background of a pre-originary being-responsible (see Levinas 1981). For if answering is nothing other than answering for, the subject is always already confronted with responsibilities and thus entangled in ethical concerns. Waldenfels explicitly calls attention here to the complex situation in which the answering-and-answerable subject finds itself: “I always come too late to assume my responsibility, so that the response of my responsibility is earlier than any response that I give”. (Waldenfels 1995, 338)

From the inescapability of not being able not to respond to an occurrence—and thus of having to find, indeed invent, a response and oneself as a responsible subject *hic et nunc*—Waldenfels draws far-reaching consequences that set him against traditional ethical designs. In *Schattenrisse der Moral* (Waldenfels 2007) he subjects chiefly teleological and deontic approaches to revision. Above all by according to greater weight to the temporality sketched earlier—one that plays scarcely any decisive role in ethical conceptions that appeal to Aristotle or Kant—Waldenfels aims to show where what has remained unthought in the tradition must be revisited. These ethics are oriented primarily not only toward the active deeds of an autonomous subject; they also revolve around the attainment of ends or the fulfillment of inherited norms. Yet the *agathón* as telos belongs to an order that always already persists: the Good as such is already there before it can be concretely realized as a good for us. A similarly atemporal rigidity marks a deontic understanding of ethics, since here, too, one proceeds from a given “ought” to which everything must ultimately return. Disruptions of the precharted course or of the inherited order can only be grasped as deviations from the norm. There is always a teleological or deontic circle at work that must integrate the factual—however heterogeneous it may be—into the prescribed ought. What does not yet find its place there will in the end have to be fitted in—or, in the case of a wholesale deviation, be excluded from the norming or teleological discourse. For Waldenfels, then, the question of ethics in the tradition is restricted to the realization of the norm or of the Good. In this connection Waldenfels points to the “blind spot of morality” (Waldenfels 1994, 584) in traditional ethical conceptions, which are unable to bring into view the striving for the Good or the Ought in terms of freedom itself (see Waldenfels 2010, 73).

For Waldenfels, teleological and deontic conceptions of ethics therefore begin too late. They already proceed from a starting point that is no longer subject to question—whether it be the Good or the “Fact of Reason”—without considering the specific temporality of all that is ethical. Waldenfels’s concern, by contrast, is to bring responsibility into view in such a way that it becomes clear that the subject must respond to an appeal it cannot catch up with. The responsible response is mindful not only of its own anteriority but also of the unavailability of its own future. Both major ethical projects of the Western tradition, according to Waldenfels, fail to face the heterochrony of what is to come: “The moral ought does not tell us what we should do in the future; rather, in it there is expressed what we, as rational beings, have always already willed” (Waldenfels 2007, 322). The unforeseeable—which cannot be anticipated and thus, as a moment of alterity, eludes the given order—is, within this normative orientation of ethics, simply ignored or dismissed as an abnormal deviation.

Thus the following can be maintained: responsibility has already, “before” the subject—that is, before its consenting assumption—laid claim to it, and it is not something that can be settled by means of responses. Responsibility can never be discharged, just as one cannot rid oneself of the claim of the Other. This “pre-originary” responsibility will therefore never be dischargeable; rather, as Levinas emphatically stresses in *Otherwise than Being*, it “increases in the measures that it is paid” (Levinas 1981, 12). Responsibility thus, in a radical sense, knows neither a starting nor an end point, no economy and no balancing of accounts. But are these reflections helpful for the question “What should I do?” Can a guiding “criterion” for action be derived from them?

I am trying to draw consequences from this responsive conception of responsibility: An ethical situation is thus marked by the fact that the subject must take the risk of finding—indeed, inventing—appropriate responses, and of finding itself therein as an answering-and-answerable subject. In the self-inventing response one takes a risk: to meet the appeal without ever having the certainty whether this enactment of (in)vention will have been appropriate. No action can say with ultimate certainty whether it has succeeded in responding appropriately and thus justly. The only “criterion” of an ethics understood responsively would then consist not in appealing to a “positively” demonstrable ground of reason or to a system of prescriptive rules, but in showing that one has responded not in one’s own name but in the name of the Other. In this way—as Waldenfels notes no new “rules” or “goals” are being formulated, and yet it also becomes intelligible in what sense a responsive ethics claims to reach “deeper.” It must always be evident from the response that it seeks to answer an alteritary appeal and does not advance self-interest. In short, in all speaking and acting this “binding force” must come to expression: that one has responded to an irrecoverable anteriority. But inventing the response is always oriented toward futurity as well: this responding understands itself as never the first word, but also never the last. The response can therefore never be definitive; the claim of the Other can always require one to respond again and otherwise—that is, more appropriately—and to call earlier responses into question in the name of the Other and of the justice to be effected. In this way responding not only remains mindful of its belatedness but also seeks to keep what is coming open as what is coming.

At this neuralgic juncture—where questions of responsibility are linked with questions of justice—it is indispensable to draw on Levinas’s late work and recall the intersection of the ethical and the political that he delineates. In *Otherwise than Being*, the conception of responsive subjectivity undergoes a profound systematic revision through the consideration of the Third. Although this figure is introduced explicitly only relatively late (see Levinas 1981, 157), one can, without undue exaggeration, claim that Levinas’s second major work as a whole revolves around the Third (see Zeillinger 2010, 238; n. 25). The figure of the Third is not established empirically, as the following reflections will show; rather, it is invoked methodologically, in the sense of a necessary reconstruction, since without its explicit consideration the process of subjectivation cannot, in a principled sense, be rendered intelligible. With the Third there emerges, both the question of a subject endowed with the capacity for judgment and the demand for an institutionalizable justice that seeks answers at once sensitive to singularity and yet universalizable—and capable of answering for them (see Waldenfels 1994, 293–301). In short: in this connection responsivity becomes legible not only as a fundamental figure of the constitution of the subject and of the ethical, but also of the political. To mark clearly the necessary inclusion of the Third, Levinas, in a surprising move, first draws attention to the inadequacy of the discussions up to that point in his second major work:

“If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would have not been any problem, in even the most general sense of the term. [...] The responsibility [...] is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters.” (Levinas 1981, 157)

It is crucial to understand why, in Levinas’s view, without the Third there would have been no further difficulties, and in what way his entire approach thereby once again gets set in motion. The figure of the Third disrupts every exclusivity of the relation to the Other so fundamentally that any dyadic or exclusive understanding of alterity is undermined at its root. Levinas insists that the Third represents an “incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity” (Levinas 1981, 158). The considerations thus far regarding the Other harbor the danger of simplification: a subject delivered over solely to the appeal of a (single) Other would remain entirely in a single

dependency, would have no decision to make and no judgment to answer for. It would thus not (have to) constitute itself as a (judgment-capable) subject.

The Third therefore does not, for Levinas, constitute an “empirical fact” that could simply fail to occur; nor does it join an already established relation in a merely additive way. Levinas explicitly rejects the notion that with the Third “the initial duo would become a trio” (Levinas 1981, 159). The plurality of Others now at issue is thus not reducible to a numerical multiplicity but must be understood as unrestricted and hence open. To think alterity as an interwoven plural means to grasp it, *ab ovo*, in the form of mutually conflicting claims. In the claim of the Other there always also break forth the co-claims of other Others. Thus the claim of the Third proves to be as irreducible as that of the Other. The Third and the Other cannot be understood merely as different specimens of the same genus and thereby homogenized on a “higher” level. Against this background, the indispensability of speaking of “Other-in-the-plural” becomes apparent.³ “Other-in-the-plural” cannot be understood as a momentary opposition that could be resolved on a meta-level. The indicated contention between the claim of the Other and that of the Third remains unreconciled, insofar as each claim bears irreducibly conflictual moments within itself. It is, to be sure, a conflict that, for Levinas, presses toward a decision. Only with a plurality of claims do the questions of responsibility and of justice become urgent, and a judgment on the part of the subject thereby being formed becomes inescapable. Only with the Third is the subject compelled to ask itself the question of how to respond, to form a (con)science, and thus to understand itself as consciousness, indeed self-consciousness—in short, to prove itself as a subject in the responsive-and-answerable sense, and thereby both to bear responsibility for the Other *and* to bring justice to other Others.

Levinas undertakes nothing less here than an attempt to retrace the constitution process of the subject from the question of responsibility and justice, in order to show from this the necessity of developing—traditionally speaking—practical and theoretical reason. This genealogy would be unintelligible without recourse to “Other-in-the-plural”. To begin with the Other thus does not, for Levinas, mean dispensing with a subject; rather, it means pointing out how, from the claim-process that is plural in itself, the subject first emerges as judging and acting. For the constitution of the subject, this situatedness within a field of contending claims is indispensable. Out of and within it there breaks forth the necessity to respond to conflicting appeals and thereby to render judgments, to ground and justify them, indeed to find—invent—a measure. For in this unavoidable and thus necessary “comparison of incomparables” (Levinas 1981, 158), which lacks any prior ground of mediation, the subject constitutes itself by seeking—so to speak, with the best knowledge and conscience available—to bring justice into effect and must henceforth answer for this decision. The responsibility of the subject is thus not determined in the response to the claim of the Other alone but equally has to answer for the responses thereby implicated with respect to other Others.

The consideration of a plural field of claims should not be misunderstood as a leveling reconciliation. Levinas emphasizes that the justice demanded must not be read as a “degradation of obsession” or a “limitation of anarchic responsibility” (Levinas 1981, 159). A responding carried out in the name of the Other and of the Third will never be comprehensive in such a way that full satisfaction is rendered to all claims, that they are entirely accommodated within a single order. No leveling compromise of ethical asymmetry is thereby established; rather, the challenge lies in recognizing that responding cannot evade the tension between the Other and the Third. What systematic consequences can be drawn from these reflections—especially for a responsive understanding of the political and for an understanding of democracy—will now be made clear, in the final section, by turning to Jacques Derrida.

³ Both with regard to the substantive challenge and at the level of terminology, I follow Zeillinger, who explicitly addresses the “Other-in-the-plural” (Zeillinger 2010, 224). Bensussan, for his part, accommodates this by speaking not of the Third (*le tiers*) but of Thirds (*les tiers*) (Bensussan 2008, 66).

3. Responsivity and the Political

In recent decades, political theory has been preoccupied with the question of the political. That is to say, its focus has shifted from politics – state institutions and administrative procedures – to the contingent and always contested division of the social. This difference between *politics* and *the political* raises the question of how the political ought to be understood. According to Oliver Marchart, whose book *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (2007) has systematized the debates on this question and fueled the discussion on the ontology of the political, there are broadly speaking two possible answers: an *associative* understanding of the political, and a *dissociative* understanding of the political. The former focuses on forms of cooperation; the latter, on forms of difference. In my view, Derrida's political thought of responsivity points to a way out of this impasse. By allowing us to think conflictuality and normativity together, it compensates for the deficiencies of both conception of the political. The result is an alternative conception of the political. As already emphasized earlier, drawing on Waldenfels: that there is a response is inescapable; how, however, one ought to respond to the appeal of the Other constitutes the challenge—indeed the constitutive feature—of the subject. For the subject is compelled to respond and called to account before it can decide to do so of its own free will. Derrida's reflections in *Politics of Friendship* reprise this insight:

“We have begun to respond. We are already caught up, we are caught out, in a certain responsibility, and the most ineluctable responsibility—as if it were possible to think a responsibility without freedom. We are invested with an undeniable responsibility at the moment we begin to signify something. But where does this begin? Does it ever begin? This responsibility that assigns freedom to us *without leaving it with us*, as it were - we see it coming from the other. It is assigned to us by the other, from the place of the other, well before any hope of reappropriation allows us the assumption of this responsibility - allowing us, as we say, to assume responsibility, *in the name, in one's own name*, in the space of autonomy, where the law one gives oneself and the name one receives conspire.” (Derrida 1997, 231f.)

According to Derrida, responsibility is always the decision of the Other within me.⁴ Responsivity here means that the subject remains, in a fundamental way, passive and vulnerable, without being able, as it were, to sign in its own name. But why does the appeal of the Other demand a decision from the subject at all? To answer this question, Derrida draws on Levinas's earlier reflections on the Third.⁵ The appeal of the Other precedes any autonomous action, yet it never occurs in isolation; it proves to be intrinsically plural from the start. In other words, alterity must be understood as plurality: if the subject were only confronted with the solitary demand of the Other, its dependence would be singular, so that no decision would have to be made and no responsibility would have to be assumed. That is to say, it would not (have to) constitute itself as a responsive subject. It is only because there is “Other-in-the-plural” that the subject must decide *how* to respond both to the Other's demand *and* to the conflicting co-demands of other Others. Responsibility straddles the realms of the ethical and the political; the two are inseparable. It is precisely the heterogeneity of a plurality of demands that makes it

⁴ This is what he says in the interview “Not Utopia, the Im-possible”: “A decision, while it remains ‘mine,’ active and free, as a phenomenon, must not be simply the deployment of my potentials or aptitudes, of what is ‘possible for me.’ In order to be a decision, it has to cut off this ‘possible,’ tear up my history, and thus be first of all, in a particular and strange way, the decision of the other in me: coming from the other with regard to the other in me.” (Derrida 2005, 129) Mauro Senatore (2022) offers a more detailed treatment of these reflections on a “passive decision.”

⁵ Cillian Ó Fathaigh (2022) has examined Derrida's often subcutaneous reading of Levinas in *Politics of Friendship*. He shows that Derrida's analysis of friendship is grounded in an engagement with Levinas's concepts of the face-to-face and the Third (*le tiers*), yet also turns against Montaigne, Kant, and Levinas in order to counter an apolitical reading of friendship.

necessary to compare the singular and the incomparable and to decide how to deal with this incommensurability, to make a judgment and to justify it.

In doing so, Derrida undermines the ideal of an intimate friendship between two—highlighted especially by Montaigne—and politicizes this paradigm. Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* revolves constantly around the question of number. The dictum attributed to Aristotle, "O my friends, there is no friend!", is not only reconstructed in its various historical contexts as a guiding motif, but is made systematically fruitful for a reconception of the political: the question of number here points to the in-principle open number of claims to which the political must answer, and thus to the necessity of dealing with a heterogeneous and potentially unending field of claims without dissolving its plurality into a definitive order. In *Politics of Friendship*, he states:

"The third party is there. And the one qua 'more than one' which simultaneously allows and limits calculability. This drama or this chance of a singular multiplicity is witnessed in both versions, if only in the divide, within each of them, of singular and plural." (Derrida 1997, 215)

If the third party is always already there, this means that it is not just an addition to a dyadic relationship. What is at stake here is a heterogeneous bundle of contradictory demands that not only necessitates a calculation but also thwarts any attempt at fully resolving the "drama": the subject's calculation always remains inadequate because of the incommensurability of the conflicting demands and may always be problematized with regard to the violence of its inclusions and exclusions. Thus, the third party not only refers to the political as the site of calculation but also implies the possibility of deposing any political order or institutional setting in the name of the Other. Every decision, against the backdrop of this responsive understanding of the political, must take account of the "Other-in-the-plural"; that is, such a politics must prove itself both sensitive to singularity with regard to the claim of the Other and capable of universalization with respect to the co-claims of other Others. How this relationship is determined always remains precarious. Political decisions that affect the community as a whole can always be challenged by the ethical.

Thus Derrida does not, as one might at first think, lapse into a lament that there is no longer any friend; rather, he problematizes the irreducible plurality of friends: "*there is never a sole friend*. Not that there would be none, but that there never is one. And one is already more than one, with or without my consent." (Derrida 1997, 215) Let us return to the question posed at the beginning: why is this understanding of the political dimension of responsivity an alternative to both an associative and a dissociative understanding of the political? It is important to note that Derrida insists on the unresolvability of conflict – conflict, not in the sense of a dispute between the subject and the Other but in terms of how one ought to deal with an infinite plurality of conflicting demands. This question of how to respond to the "Other-in-the-plural" has a normative dimension in that it requires a decision *hic et nunc*. A "politics of alterity" must try to meet the "im-possible" task of being both sensitive to singularity and universalizable.

The relation to the Other in its irreducible singularity therefore necessarily unfolds in tension with universalizability, and thus with legislation: the claim of the Other becomes audible and assertible against the background of the Third insofar as it is framed by the general order of law. Yet this relation is simultaneously reversed: precisely the singularity of the Other subjects the universality of the law to constant testing. It cannot be fully dissolved into the generality of the rule; rather, it challenges, interrupts, and compels the law to redefine itself in the face of the ever-singular. The claim of the Other never articulates itself without reference to the Third, yet without being exhaustively absorbed by it. Conversely, on this understanding, every form of universalizability not only emerges from the confrontation with the singular; universality remains constantly related to the possible objection of the Other (and thus to what is

non-universalizable) and is therefore intrinsically open to revision (see Posselt/Seitz 2020; Flatscher/Pistol 2024).

What is at stake here is a far-reaching aporetic structure that marks an irreducible entanglement of the ethical and the political: responsiveness comprises both the historically contingent calculability of law and the incalculability of singularity. It requires calculus without being exhaustible by it. For as soon as the claim of the Other became fully calculable, its singularity would be missed; and conversely, as soon as every rule were suspended in favor of singularity, the universality of law itself would be undone. Thus there are always two heterogeneous logics at work that can neither be synthesized nor separated: on the one hand, the logic of universality, of the Third, and of calculus; on the other hand, the logic of singularity, of the Other, and of incalculability. The normativity of this understanding of an ethical-political responsiveness manifests itself in the (im)possible endeavor of having to enact both at once.

If every decision we make is confronted with the relationship between the ethical and the political, then what understanding of democracy is at play here? It is important to note that Derrida does not infer democracy from alterity but rather shows that if there is such a thing as a “politics of alterity,” it can only be democratic. Or, to put it chiasmatically: no “politics of alterity” without democracy, and no democracy without a “politics of alterity.” According to Derrida, the precarious balance between sensitivity to singularity and universalizability can only be negotiated democratically, for only democracy takes into account the heterogeneity of singularity and universality. At the same time, Derrida distances himself from liberal and republican appropriations of democracy that absolutize either the individual or the community and thus ignore the constitutive tension of democracy. As he puts it in *Politics of Friendship*:

“There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy [...] without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal. These two laws are irreducible one to the other. Tragically irreconcilable and forever wounding.” (Derrida 1997, 22)

It is this permanent conflict between the irreconcilable logics of incommensurability and commensurability that is at the center of Derrida’s reflections on democracy. Democracy is the regime that affirms the heterogeneity of singularity and universality and constantly renegotiates the relationship between them. It follows that democracy is understood by Derrida not simply as the “rule of the people” or as a particular institutional setting with fixed procedures, but as the im-possible endeavor to accommodate two irreconcilable logics in a concrete “politics of alterity”.

What does this mean? It means that democracy cannot be reduced to a particular constitution or form of government; nor is it a set of basic principles (freedom, equality, solidarity, or self-government) or a *Lebensform*. Rather, democracy is characterized by the double movement of making decisions while knowing full well that these decisions are provisional and therefore open to revision. Repoliticizations take place when an established order is challenged by the concrete demands of the Other. In this sense, there are no fixed concepts or principles of democracy.

The realization that calculations aimed at universality must constantly be overthrown and redone in the name of irreducible singularities not only goes hand in hand with an affirmation of contingency but also forces one to keep this relationship permanently open. In other words, the awareness of contingency makes one appreciate the necessity and productivity of ongoing conflict. And it is precisely the possibility of conflict and revision that must be kept open. In Derrida’s sense, what is special about democracy is that it accepts its own inconclusiveness and deals with the autoimmunity at issue here, which potentially leads to self-dissolution; indeed, it constantly allows radical self-criticism to recalibrate the complex relationship between singularity and universality (see Patton 2007).

It is in this sense that Derrida's talk of democracy *to come* should be understood. It does not refer to something that might one day become a present reality, nor is it a utopian ideal to guide us. Rather, democracy is always to come in the sense that, thanks to the heterogeneous logics of singularity and universality, it is always possible to criticize and intervene. It is precisely this imperfectibility – the fact that democracy never has a final form – that Derrida considers to be genuinely democratic. The imperfection of democracy and the self-criticism it entails do not amount to Hamlet-like hesitation. Derrida's critique of self-enclosure provides a normative criterion for distinguishing between democratic and undemocratic politics. In the interview *Politics and Friendship*, he explains:

“Non-democratic systems are above all systems that *close* and *close themselves off* from this coming of the other. They are systems of homogenization and of integral calculability. In the end and beyond all the classical critique of fascist, Nazi, and totalitarian violence in general, one can say that these are systems that dose the ‘to come’ and that dose themselves into the presentation of the presentable.” (Derrida 1993, 216)

What is at stake here is a democratic imperative to act decisively—indeed, in the name of democracy—against all fundamentalisms and totalitarianisms. For Derrida, “democracy to come” is vigilantly defensive: keeping the future open—by sustaining the tension between the two heterogeneous logics outlined above—serves as the normative criterion for resisting any identitarianism that closes itself off from a future that belongs to the Other. Democracy has a future only as a responsive politics oriented toward alterity—or none at all.

4. Conclusio

The traversal of Waldenfels, Levinas, and Derrida has shown that responsivity is not merely a particular form of answering, but a fundamental structure in which experience, subjectivity, ethics, and politics are interwoven. It therefore has systematic significance, especially for a political phenomenology. For if political experience proceeds from the concrete situatedness of embodied subjects, from historical formations of meaning, institutional orders, and the sedimented forms of inclusion and exclusion within them, then we must also always ask how these conditions affect us, lay claim to us, and compel us to respond. Responsivity names the peculiar in-between position of the subject between embeddedness and transcendence: we always respond from within historically and socially determined horizons of meaning without being fully absorbed by them; at the same time, we can never take what befalls us into view from a position of sovereign exteriority. This is precisely where the ethical-political potential of responsivity lies. It makes visible that the given conditions of our experience are neither merely unchangeable presuppositions nor fully available constructions, but determine us in a way that simultaneously opens the possibility of their transformation. The ethical-political question then is not only under what conditions subjects can act, but also to what they must respond, who can count as capable of making claims, and which responses are enabled, hindered, or excluded by existing orders of meaning and power. Responsivity thus designates a form of openness to that which breaks into an existing order and unsettles its taken-for-grantedness. In this sense, political phenomenology can be understood, not least, as a phenomenology of responsivity: as an investigation of those historical, embodied, affective, and institutional conditions under which claims emerge to which we must respond, without ever possessing a final rule that could fully determine that response. Responsivity thereby connects the descriptive question concerning the conditions of ethical-political experience with the critical question of their adequacy and opens an approach to a democratic politics reducible neither to the sovereignty of the subject nor to mere determination by social structures. Democracy, on this account, is best understood as *(im)possible*: an order that must permanently

hold together two heterogeneous logics—universality and singularity—without ever synthesizing or separating them.⁶

⁶ This text was originally written in German and subsequently translated into English with the assistance of AI. I would like to thank Rebecca Rose Mitzner for refining the translation and I am grateful to Florian Pistol for his careful review of the third part.

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