The Concept of Substitution in Bergson and Lévinas

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Abstract This chapter explores Bergson's possible influence on Lévinas' concept of substitution. It begins by quickly tracing Lévinas' general philosophical approach and his idea of an ethics as first philosophy, and this in order to show how in his thought the relationship between subjectivity and the Other evolved through the years. Against the independent, self-possessed subject of *Totality and Infinity*, the subject of *Otherwise than Being* is marked by the idea of substitution, an idea that describes a subject that is constituted by the Other before consciousness. To show how this idea is in conversation with Bergson, the article then discusses the philosophical relationship between the two thinkers, highlighting in particular the influence that the idea of duration had for Levinas as well as the various critiques Levinas would level against Bergson. I then look at Bergson's own idea of substitution as it is developed in *Creative Evolution* and *The Possible and The Real*. The chapter then ends by showing that Lévinas' idea of substitution can be read both as an intersubjective re-interpretation of Bergson's original notion of substitution and also a continuation of his critiques against the Bergsonian determinations of subjectivity and temporality.

There is no doubt that Emmanuel Lévinas was heavily influenced by Bergson's work. Lévinas often mentions this fact, which points to a deep, personal admiration for Bergson and his thought, but also to regret at how quickly it had been forgotten. Lévinas' direct engagement with Bergson is nevertheless limited. Compared to the almost hyperbolic declarations of influence and admiration, Lévinas rarely takes the time to engage with Bergson in detail. Instead, most of his philosophical work is usually presented through a discussion with the phenomenology of Heidegger and Husserl (De Warren 2010: 174). In many ways, Lévinas was a phenomenologist at heart.

But Lévinas was no ordinary phenomenologist. By developing his own thought in contrast to that of Heidegger and Husserl, he advanced a series of themes and methods that moved him away from the traditional focus on appearances and essences that marked the phenomenology of his predecessors. Lévinas is sometimes called a 'post-phenomenologist' for this reason (Peperzak 1998: 116). His objects of study are often those things which hardly appear—phenomena that are obscure, hazy, and that resist thematization. Most notably, Lévinas is a thinker of the 'Other.' In this way, he is a descendant of Bergson, a thinker for whom language and the intellect often obscure rather than reveal being. This mistrust in both language and thought is particularly evident in Lévinas' later work,

which is essentially articulated in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. There, Lévinas develops various ideas that would depart in important ways from those that framed the earlier *Totality and Infinity*.

This chapter examines the possible presence of Bergson's thinking in the idea of 'substitution', which Lévinas says is the central notion of his later work. At the same time, the question is: in what sense, if any, is the idea of substitution operative in Bergson's own thought? The chapter first describes Lévinas' general philosophical approach and then discusses its relation to Bergson's thinking. It then looks at how Bergson develops the idea of substitution in *Creative Evolution* and in his short essay *The Possible and the Real* so as to compare it to Lévinas' own concept of substitution as it is explained in both *Otherwise Than Being* as well as his shorter piece, *Substitution*. In the end, I argue that Bergson's own notion of substitution can be read as a forerunner to Lévinas' late philosophy. In typical fashion, what Lévinas did was transform the formal structure of Bergson's substitution by reading it as an encounter with the Other, i.e. as a fundamentally ethical event. For Lévinas, substitution will be *the* ethical event *par excellence*.

1. *Ethics as First Philosophy*

Throughout many drastic changes in both theme and style, Lévinas' work was always concerned with accounting for the possibility of ethics. How is it, Lévinas asks, that subjectivity can encounter the absolutely Other? How is it that such an encounter is ethical? According to Lévinas, were one to judge by the history of philosophy, this seemingly simple question has barely been answered. In the thought of Heidegger and Husserl, the phenomenological method is to blame for this. The idea of philosophy as eidetic method, as the practice of 'revealing' being, *a priori* eliminates otherness in the name of comprehension. As Lévinas would say, these are philosophies of the 'Same,' a kind of thinking marked by comprehension, understanding, and conceptual equivalence. Once the Other is determined in this way, it would no longer be Other. Traditional moral philosophy was likewise unable to answer such a question because it always understood ethics and morality from the point of view of the acting subject. Whether it be an ethics of virtue, utilitarianism, or deontology, the ethical situation was always understood empirically—judged from the point of view of the acting party. Ethics as such, however, Lévinas is keen to point out, has very little to do with actualization, calculation, or disembodied reason. Ethics rather describes a relation with an Other; it is a direct encounter that places the acting subject in question. The question of ethics is not, 'What should I do?' but rather, 'How is it that an Other makes a claim on me? Why am I compelled to act in a certain way towards others?' As such, ethics is

best conceived as an affective, shocking, or even traumatic event. Lévinas' philosophy variously attempts to describe the kind of subject that could suffer such an encounter. Lévinas is not describing empirical events but rather transcendental structures which are later outlined by concrete events.[1] For all its seeming complexity though, Lévinas' goal is very humble. As he says in *Substitution*, having provided a model of subjectivity based on this titular concept, it is "through [this] that there can be pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity in the world—even the little there is, even the simple 'after you sir'"(Lévinas 1996: 91).

This is why Lévinas develops what he calls ethics as first philosophy. He explores how the Other, as that which cannot be fully grasped, controlled, or possessed, plays a determining, fundamental role for subjectivity. Lévinas' task is often paradoxical in this way. How to speak of the otherness involved in the being of the self without it being possessed by the self? These questions set Lévinas apart from the tradition of phenomenology in particular. How does one speak of what one cannot comprehend? How to describe that which resists description and determination without yet lapsing into negative theology? In many ways, philosophy is beholden to a notion of enlightenment: from Plato to Descartes, it is the light of reason which liberates us from confusion and untruth. The Platonic clarity that lies outside the cave is not all that different from that which grants clarity and distinction to Cartesian thought. Heidegger too speaks of light, the light of the phenomenality of phenomena, the clearing of being in which being discloses itself, appears, and shows itself as what it is (see Lévinas 2013: 189). In all of these examples it is the light which provides and guarantees conceptual intelligibility. The form of the Good in Plato, the sun, is what ultimately upholds the relations between all forms. Lévinas objects to this privilege afforded to light and clarity. If the light is what guarantees understanding, it is also that which removes Otherness. For Lévinas, clarity and comprehension are always achieved at a cost. This is not necessarily a problem in itself, for our being in the world often requires making this life our own. We need to work in and change the world in order to survive. When this type of thinking is applied indiscriminately, however, it makes sociality unintelligible. Moreover, a philosophy that is not attuned to this fact runs the risk of legitimizing unspeakable horrors. The drive for clarity and comprehension thus changes phenomena, removing their alterity and transforming them into something that fits our own categories of understanding. Speaking phenomenologically, Lévinas claims that in this way every phenomenon is made into a noema (Lévinas 2013: 130), everything becomes the intentional correlate of an overly intellectual consciousness, the Other is transformed by the totalizing gaze of the Same. Ethics is relegated to mere morality, and intersubjectivity becomes an afterthought.

Lévinas' entire philosophy struggles against this tendency. To make ethics first philosophy means to study the Other in its otherness, without transforming it according to the exigencies of thought. The Other is neither subsequent nor subservient to a more fundamental identity of consciousness. The Other defines metaphysics as such (Lévinas 2013: 33). Yet, otherness resists comprehension. Lévinas is a 'post-phenomenologist' in this sense. He continues the tradition of Husserlian intentional analysis but directs it to those phenomena which escape complete determination. He thus speaks of the night instead of the day, of darkness, and of those things which escape the grasp of reason and of the light. Lévinas is a thinker of the enigmatic, of obscurity, and of the trace.

Lévinas' first reflected in depth on the Other in *Totality and Infinity*. There, he advanced some of the criticisms we just recounted while developing an alternative phenomenology based on the ideas of interruption, transcendence, and responsibility among others. Against the totalizing tendencies of Heideggerian ontology and Husserlian phenomenology, Lévinas favored a kind of metaphysical thinking that was open to the ideas of infinity and transcendence. In that sense he considered himself a Platonist, thinking of the Good as "beyond being"(Lévinas 2013: 293*). Totality and Infinity* develops a phenomenology of subjectivity and interruption. For Lévinas, the subject first brings itself to be from the anonymous 'il y a' through an act he calls hypostasis (Lévinas 1978). Arising out of the dark anonymity of being, the subject is initially defined in its subjectivity by the enjoyment of its communion with the elemental world. Subjectivity is at base affective rather than practical or intellectual. In particular, the subject is formed through enjoyment. Lévinas refers to this subject of enjoyment as egoistic, a 'citizen of paradise' driven solely by the quasi-hedonistic pleasure of elemental desire (Lévinas 2013: 134–144). This egoism of the subject, however, wholly self-possessed and independent, is interrupted by the appearance of the face of Other. The Other contests the sovereign privilege of the subject of enjoyment and calls it to responsibility. The face of the Other appears not horizontally but vertically, it comes to the subject from a place of height and sovereignty which the subject cannot possess or fully determine. The subject of enjoyment must thus account for itself in the face of this Other. The appearance of the Other, traumatic as it may be, will, for Lévinas, nonetheless open the door to the whole breath of what it means to be a human subject. It is through the coming of the Other that responsibility, discourse, and sociality are born.

Although Lévinas would never abandon these general themes, the later *Otherwise than Being* would significantly re-examine the idea and structure of subjectivity. Due in large part to the critique Derrida put forth in his "Violence and Metaphysics," Lévinas abandoned the thought of the initially

egoic and closed subject of enjoyment in favor of a subject that, from the very beginning or, in fact—even before any conceivable beginning of subjectivity—is already haunted by otherness (Bernasconi 2002: 249). With the introduction of the concept of substitution, the transcendence of the Other becomes transcendence-in-immanence, and with this change a whole series of new concepts are introduced to define the nature of subjectivity. The subject *of Otherwise than Being* is now determined by ideas such as anarchy, substitution, passivity, obsession, and the immemorial past.

2. Lévinas and Bergson

Before directly exploring the relation between these concepts and Bergson's thought, it is important to provide first an overview of the general philosophical relation between the two thinkers, as that will set the stage for our interpretation of substitution and its related concepts. In a short, originally untitled piece of 1946, Lévinas tells us that it was Bergson that freed philosophy from the grip of the 'inhumane science' typical of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and its notions of a dead, machinic time. With duration the very idea of an inner life, and thus of freedom, was rehabilitated. In this way, Lévinas says, Bergson "revived philosophy". Lévinas even considered Bergson one of the greatest thinkers in the history of philosophy who "sits in the company of spirits of the first order, at the eternal banquet of Plato, of Descartes, of Spinoza, and of Kant" (Lévinas 2009: 218–219).

In particular, Lévinas saw in Bergson a connection to phenomenology, once stating that it was actually he "who made many of the essential positions of the masters of phenomenology possible". Lévinas thus saw his own phenomenology as Bergsonian (de Warren 2010: 174). By this, he meant a few things. First, Lévinas saw a connection between his practice of phenomenology, understood as intentional analysis (Critchley 2015: 7), and his understanding that for Bergson "meaning cannot be separated from the access leading to it. *The access is part of the meaning itself*" (Lévinas 1996: 44). For both Bergson and Lévinas, the meaning of something is never removed from the corporeal and historical conditions of the unique organism confronting it. Secondly, both Bergson and phenomenologists after him understood that the scientific and technical understandings of the universe do not adequately represent the subject's essential encounter with the world. Although immensely helpful, "the scientific and technical vision" with which we see the world often dissimulate the workings of subjectivity, misguiding the philosopher into the trappings of materialism and determinism (Lévinas 1996: 44). Above all, however, Lévinas' admiration for Bergson was due to the latter's notion of duration. This

explains why Lévinas singled out his first book, *Time and Free Will*, as one of the five greatest works in the history of philosophy, alongside Plato's *Phaedrus*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel's phenomenology and Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Vieillard-Baron 2010: 455).

The concept of duration in Bergson's first work develops two ideas which Lévinas found of particular interest. Lévinas sees in duration, first, the possibility for thinking genuine novelty, with the novel, as what is not yet, being essentially the Other (Lévinas 2008: 77). This is important for Lévinas because novelty, as the thinking of the Other, provides an escape from totalizing systems such as Hegel's. As he explains in *The Old and The New,* Hegelianism represents the peak of one kind of thinking in the history of western philosophy. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* sought the identity of the *same* and the *other* by positing a consciousness that "encompasses, accumulates and organizes a system in an act of knowledge." Such is the culmination of Hegel's phenomenology, an Absolute Spirit that sublates all contradictions and thus stands at the end of history. Hegelianism represents "the ontological supremacy of Identity and [of] the concept of Substance" (Lévinas 2008: 129). Since, for Hegel, all otherness is only something yet to be assimilated by the act of an all-encompassing consciousness, then there can be no place for an ethics of alterity there, i.e. a genuine ethics that treats an encounter with an Other that cannot be reduced to the Same.

Bergson offers Lévinas a way out of such a system because duration, which Bergson describes as "unceasing creation, the uninterrupted up-surge of novelty," fractures the identity of being with itself that Hegel had described. As Lévinas says,

> It is important to underline the importance of Bergsonism for the entire problematic of contemporary philosophy; it is an essential stage of the movement which puts into question the confines of spirituality…In this new analysis of time, one can catch sight of something else than an anthropological peculiarity: with Bergsonism one can think the human as the explosion of being in duration. The human would be the original place of rupture and would have a metaphysical bearing: it would be the very advent of *mind*. Mind is no longer absolute knowledge as consciousness of self and equality to self, but the emergence of the new as duration.(Lévinas 2008: 132)

With the idea of duration, Bergson frees philosophy from the tyranny of identity. In duration, identity becomes change and being in general is open to the other.

Duration is also important for Lévinas in that it proposes a view of subjectivity that is defined and determined by otherness from the very beginning. The Bergsonian subject does not precede duration as an Aristotelian substance underlying change. As qualitative flow, subjectivity is itself this constant change. This explains Bergson's epistemology, with its contrasting methods of intuition and intellect. For Bergson, one cannot think of the self with the tools of mathematics or physics, sciences

concerned with relations of space. Characterized by their use of numbers, these sciences are essentially quantitative whereas consciousness and life are qualitative phenomena. This will all become crucially important for the project of an ethics as first philosophy.

In Bergson we are given an understanding of selfhood that incorporates the Other from the beginning. Thus, before the totalizing consciousness of Hegelianism, before the intellectualism of Husserl, and even before the phenomenological ontology of Heidegger, Bergson's subject is defined by its constant encounter with that which it is not yet. Lévinas underscores the importance of this idea, of an otherness in subjectivity that precedes and qualifies the modes of understanding and comprehension which other philosophies claim as fundamental. "The anthropological upsurge of duration would delineate, *before* logic, the horizons of intelligibility…"(Lévinas 2008: 132). With his notion of duration understood as qualitative heterogeneity, Bergson thus opened the door for a conception of subjectivity and intelligibility which is *defined* by this encounter with the Other. Lévinas will also claim that intelligibility relies on the Other. In calling ethics first philosophy, then, Lévinas' phenomenology is doing more than simply talking about sociality and interpersonal relations. Inspired by Bergson, the question of ethics is for Lévinas also a question of the fundamental intelligibility of life, and, as we can see now, intelligibility is not simply a matter of reason or of the intellect. Just as, for Bergson our proper understanding of ourselves is not quantitative but qualitative, for Lévinas the very question of intelligibility is not one of reason but of ethics.

The second consequence of duration that interested Lévinas regards the implied impossibility of ever completely knowing another person (Mullarkey 1999: 161). *Time and Free Will* argued that choice can never be understood abstractly, as the act of an agent weighing a variety of distinct options at a particular point in time. This is because in duration, the acts of consciousness are never isolated events, disconnected from the earlier unfolding of the individual's life. In duration, the free acts of consciousness represent the creative evolution of a long and complicated life. While duration implies novelty then, it does not imply absolute spontaneity. Springing from the backdrop of one's past, free acts expose and develop one's character. As Bergson says, "free acts express and sum up the whole of our past history" (TFW 185). In defining duration as a *qualitative* heterogeneity, Bergson further emphasized the absolute uniqueness for every psychic state (at least, insofar as one can speak of separate psychic 'states' at all). Each psychic state is a part of an individual duration and, as a part of that individual history, holds a unique quality of feeling: what Bergson calls its intensity. Intensity of feeling is always radically unique. Thus, according to Bergson, an act is not to be understood as the specific, intellectual weighing of possible options in any one circumstance. Rather, an act expresses

the unique character of a consciousness in duration, a consciousness which acts according to this qualitative self-feeling. Further, because entirely qualitative, the feeling of intensity is entirely unmediated. It cannot be represented symbolically without changing its nature (TFW 186).

For Bergson, this all means that a full understanding of another person is impossible. The only recourse one could have, if one wished to completely know another, would be to go through the entirety of their experiences, to live their life just as they lived it, doing the same things in the same places, times, and even with the same body so as to bring about the same intensive experience. In effect, Bergson says that to understand another one would need to substitute oneself for them completely. The problem of course would be that in such a hypothesis the substitution would be complete to the point of identity, where there would be no difference between the person seeking to understand the other, and the other themselves. The notion of duration thus implies a double transcendence in Bergson. The transcendence of the new from the old and the transcendence of the same and the other.

Against thinkers like Hegel, Lévinas too would develop a theory of absolute exteriority between human subjects. For him, this kind of radical difference defines the very essence of metaphysics. Metaphysics is a desire for an Other that one can never fully possess. This is exemplified by the interpersonal relation; the "absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number… Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension." Also, like Bergson, Lévinas mistrusts the possibility of understanding the other symbolically. Signs and language do institute a relation between the two terms but one that is nevertheless marked by the impossibility of possession and comprehension: "…the *relation* between the same and the other … is language. For language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limitrophe within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same" (Lévinas 2013: 139). This mistrustful attitude towards language is a third important point of contact between Lévinas' philosophy and *Time and Free Will*. Beyond the unbreachable otherness between two subjects, both find a distance between language and being that requires seeking new forms of writing. For Bergson, this results in the repeated use of metaphor; for Lévinas, it resulted in an extended treatment of the relationship between signs, language, and meaning.

These similarities aside, Lévinas was often critical of Bergson. For him, Bergson's philosophy was not radical enough when thinking of novelty, duration, and subjectivity. Lévinas espoused a somewhat common phenomenological critique of Bergson—especially of the ideas developed *from*

Matter and Memory onwards. Like Merleau-Ponty, Renaud Barbaras, and others, Lévinas objected to Bergson's overemphasis on evolutionary biology as explanatory for the relation between the organism and the natural world. Bergson described the functioning of the embodied subject according to the needs of the species, stating for instance that perception was an eliminative process where the organism subtracted all those things from the world that had no vital relevance to it, as a living organism. This trend continued in *Creative Evolution*, where Bergson would often take the perspective of the species instead of the individual consciousness. Similar to his critique of Heidegger, Lévinas objected to this view of subjectivity so heavily based on biological utility. As Lévinas said, Bergson's later philosophy came to an "impersonal pantheism which doesn't take sufficient account of the crispation of subjectivity" (Lévinas 2008: 92).[2]

Secondly, Lévinas ultimately objected to Bergson's view of duration, which he said did not allow for a sufficiently radical view of novelty. For him, Bergson's duration is too intimately joined with intuition, that is, with a method of thought that completely grasps its nature, even if it cannot subsequently symbolically express it. Thus, for all its positives, Lévinas says that Bergsonian intuition ends up being much the same as the Husserlian intellect or Heideggerian ontology: it is a kind of thought which pretends to completely grasp the new. At one point, Bergson himself says this, claiming that intuition provides absolute knowledge (CM 188-190). Lévinas asks:

> Is not Bergsonian intuition as consciousness…confusion and coincidence and, thus, an experience still rediscovering its standards in a worked over alterity? Does intuition constitute the modality of thought within which the alterity of the *new* would explode, immaculate and untouchable as alterity or absolute newness, the absolute itself…? Does the thought that relates to the new allow it to maintain its novelty and to stand the wear and tear? Even though, coextensive with consciousness, thought by itself is knowledge, grasp, and preoccupation with being: inter-ested—the *alterity* of the new is reduced to its *being* and invested in a noema which is correlative to a noesis and cut to its measure. Would it not be necessary to put into question the identification of mind with the intellection of being or with the ontology within which the philosophy which has been handed down to us lives? (Lévinas 2008: 133)

For all the positives in his thought, Lévinas thinks that Bergson falls prey to a common philosophical error. In his attempt to ground his knowledge of the new and of duration, he ends up overdetermining the new by eliminating its alterity. Rather than intuition, Lévinas says, "a thought would be necessary that would no longer be constructed as a relation linking the thinker to the thought, or in this thought a relation without correlatives would be necessary" (Lévinas 2008: 134).[3]

Lévinas calls this thought *diachrony* and explains it with reference to the Cartesian idea of the infinite. As in Descartes, diachrony would be a thought with a structure that cannot be entirely thematized or grasped by the mind that has it. It is the idea of an otherness in thought that cannot be

subsumed but that is nevertheless there from the beginning. It is as if time was out of phase with itself, always coming up against the new as radically Other. Such an ungraspable structure is required for the radical alterity that Lévinas seeks. Unsurprisingly, the allusion to Descartes' infinite also brings with it an allusion to the idea of God. Here, various Lévinasian themes meet. Diachrony, as a relation of alterity that does not possess and determine its object, is reminiscent of the metaphysical relation to transcendence. It describes a movement or desire of thought that is entirely one-sided, social, yet non-reciprocal. This kind of thinking is best thought of as a departure, as 'to-God' [A-dieu].

> We think that the idea of the infinite-in-me—or my relation to God—comes to me in the concreteness of my relation to the other person, in the sociality which is my responsibility for the neighbor…it is as if the face of the other person, which straightaway 'demands of me' and ordains me, were the node of the very intrigue of God's surpassing of the idea of God, and every idea where He would be aimed at, visible, and known, and where the Infinite would be denied through thematization, in presence or representation. (Lévinas 2008: 137)

Finally, Lévinas also takes issue with Bergson's emphasis on the continuity in duration. Bergson emphasized this idea, both in defining duration itself as a continuity, but also by describing the virtuality in things like affect and perception. All the metaphors used to explain duration bear this out, from the musical melody to the image of the dancer whose every move prefigures the next. This is problematic for Lévinas because again, as with intuition, the emphasis on continuity diminishes the novelty of the new. For him, any such limitation, be it conceptual, intuitive, or in regard to the connection with the past, is unacceptable. Time, as the relation with the Other, is thus not about limitation but about infinity. As a relation with the Other, time is without knowable end, the infinitely unknown and open.

> The Bergsonian conception of time… adds something new to being, something absolutely new. But the newness of the springtimes that flower in the instant, is already heavy with all the springtimes lived through. The profound work of time delivers from this past, in a subject that breaks with his father. Time is the non-definiteness of the definitive, an ever recommencing alterity of the accomplished—the 'ever' of this recommencement. The work of time goes beyond the suspension of the definitive which the continuity of duration makes possible. There must be a rupture of continuity, and continuation across this rupture… It is not finitude that constitutes the essence of time, as Heidegger thinks, but its infinity…The death sentence does not approach as an end of being, but as an unknown… The constitution of the interval that liberates being from the limitation of fate calls for death. The nothingness of the interval—a dead time—is the production of infinity. Resurrection constitutes the principal event of time. There is therefore no continuity in being. Time is discontinuous… In continuation the instant meets its death and resuscitates; death and resurrection constitute time. But such a formal structure presupposes the relation of the I with the Other…(Lévinas 2013: 284)

Lévinas reiterates this final idea again and again, always emphasizing that the relation to novelty must never be construed as singularly subjective. So, he says this about the continuity that characterizes Bergson's duration: "[a]nticipation of the future and projection of the future … [is] but the present of the future and not the authentic future; the future is what is not grasped… the other is the future… It seems to me impossible to speak of time in a subject alone or to speak of a purely personal duration"(Lévinas 2008: 77).

With this we can see the typical way Lévinas reads and re-interprets Bergson. His procedure consists in taking the formal structure of a Bergsonian idea and, so to speak, ethically transforming it by introducing the idea of radical Otherness into the concept's original framework. In this way, Lévinas ends up with a series of new themes which can then be further developed in original ways. As we will see, something similar happens with Lévinas' notion of substitution.

3. Substitution

The idea of substitution is perhaps the central concept of Lévinas' later writings. The word was first used in his confessional writings of 1964 (Bernasconi 2002: 137) before eventually being treated philosophically in the late 1960's. As Lévinas himself says, substitution is the central concept of *Otherwise than Being*. Consistent with his general interests, the idea of substitution was deployed in order to once again treat subjectivity and identity. Substitution, however, marked a significant break with many of the ideas of *Totality and Infinity*. Against the egoistic subject who has his enjoyment interrupted by the Other, the concept of substitution describes a subject that is already other before being itself; a non-identity in subjectivity that precedes consciousness. With substitution, Otherness is made the fundamental event of subjectivity. Lévinas first presented the idea of substitution in a lecture given in 1967 which he then revised into a standalone piece in 1968. That piece was then further edited and made into the fourth and central chapter of *Otherwise than Being*. For convenience, we will follow Bernasconi's lead and rely on the somewhat simpler, standalone *Substitution* piece.

We know that Bergson was on Lévinas' mind during these writings as he is cited in both versions of *Substitution* as well as in the slightly earlier and related *Enigma and Phenomenon*. Lévinas alludes to Bergson's critique of disorder in both pieces, each time discussing those ideas in relation to his new views of subjectivity. At first glance, this might appear surprising, for Bergson's critique of disorder, although it does make allusion to a common psychological process, does not seem to relate to subjectivity. The task, then, is to try and understand why this specific idea is on Lévinas' mind. How

is substitution both a reading of and a critique of Bergson? The concept of substitution that Lévinas constantly refers to is found both in *Creative Evolution* and in the later essay 'The Possible and the Real'. In both texts, Bergson will refer to substitution as the unfortunate psychological habit that causes various metaphysical confusions centered around the ideas of 'nothingness' and 'disorder'. For Bergson, many philosophical problems come from our failure to realize that these are only relative ideas. The former is responsible for pseudo-problems related to questions of being while the latter leads to pseudo-problems with regards to the theory of knowledge. Both of these notions, however, result from the mistaken belief that "there is *less* in the idea of the empty than of the full, *less* in the concept of disorder than in that of order" (CM 80–81). In fact, Bergson will argue, there is more in both of these seemingly negative concepts.

Bergson maintains that the idea of 'nothing' can only have meaning when it comes to the realm of human affairs. When we say there is nothing, we can only mean that what there is, is different from what we were looking for. "'Nothing' designates the absence of what we are seeking, we desire, expect". If, for instance, I say something like 'there is nothing on my plate', I mean only to express my disappointment in not having any food. But to say that there is nothingness on my plate has no actual meaning. In those instances, Bergson says, we are dealing with mere words and not ideas. 'Nothingness' can have no meaning in such statements for if, by definition, I were to experience nothingness on my plate, "it would be limited, have contours, and would therefore be something." When we speak of nothingness then, we are in fact describing the occurrence of a substitution. We hoped to find food but instead found only a plate. "One thing disappears because another replaces it. Suppression thus means substitution" (CM 78).

This last point is key. We speak of nothingness because, in the unnoticed act of substitution, our attention drifts away from what is actually found and stays with what is missing. The actual is thus suppressed by the absent in the act of substitution. While quite innocuous in daily conversation, this way of speaking leads to tremendous problems in the realm of metaphysics. When we ask, for instance, 'Why is there Being instead of Nothing?' we attempt to suppress the whole of being in thought while failing to realize that suppression must also entail a substitution. As Bergson says, "if the idea of suppression is only the truncated idea of substitution, then to speak of a suppression of everything is to posit a substitution which would not be one, that is, to be self-contradictory" (CM 79). Such is the origin of the idea of a pure vacuum. Never experienced, it is an illusion that results from the misuse of language, from our failure to note that the very idea of nothingness is itself the idea of something plus its suppression by substitution.

The same can be said for the idea of disorder. "Disorder" Bergson says, "Is simply the order we are not looking for" (CM 80). For him, the world is marked by two kinds of orders: mechanistic and vital. Either of the two may appear at any time but one of the two must be present always. Their contingency is thus never absolute: mechanism and vitalism are never contingent in relation to a total absence, they are only so in relation to each other (CE 259). Again, Bergson argues that any positing of disorder is simply the result of the disappointment in not finding the expected order. Like 'nothingness,' the idea of disorder results from a substitution and its accompanying suppression. As he says in CM, "[a]ll disorder thus includes two things: outside of us, one order; within us, the representation of a different order which alone interests us. Suppression therefore again signifies substitution" (CM 80).

In 'The Possible and The Real', Bergson uses these critiques in the context of a discussion of novelty and possibility. The illusion that these critiques highlight—that there is not less but *more* in notions of the empty and of disorder—is similar to the illusion in the belief that possibility predates actuality. This is crucial for Bergson for his entire project relies on the reality of novelty and duration. Were reality to exist as possible before its actualization, then novelty might be compromised. As with the ideas of nothing and disorder, Bergson says that there is *more* and not less in the thought of possibility than in reality.[4] "The possible" Bergson says, "is only the real with the addition of an act of mind which throws its image back into the past, once it has been enacted" (CM 81). For each of the two orders of reality, the mechanical and the vital, possibility has a different meaning. In closed mechanical systems, where everything is given in advance, Bergson grants that possibility might indeed be said to predate actuality. But life is not a closed system, it comprises actual novelty and duration. As such, its events add something new to the world. When we speak of possibility then, we speak of a complicated psychological process that first considers an actuality and then retroactively places its possibility in the past. For Bergson, this understanding of possibility validates human freedom, a fact that goes hand in hand with his conception of duration and novelty: "if we put the possible back in its proper place, evolution becomes something quite different from the realization of a program: the gates of the future open wide; freedom is offered an unlimited field…" For Bergson, it is freedom itself that creates possibility (CM 85).

All of these seemingly unrelated ideas figure in Lévinas' critiques of subjectivity. How can it be, he asks, that something like sacrifice is possible? What would compel a self-possessed, free subject to act gratuitously, ethically? In *Substitution*, Lévinas answers this question by contesting the idea of identity in subjectivity that seems to be the norm in Western thought. He calls this idea the subject as *arche* or for-istelf (Lévinas 1996: 80–81). To this, Lévinas contrasts a picture of subjectivity that is from the very beginning for-another, a subject that is substituted for the Other prior to having a self at all. The subject is in this way always *responsible* for the Other (Bernasconi 2002: 235). This is the subject of substitution, a subject which he deems *an-archic*. By this Lévinas means to speak of a subject that is in a non-thematic relation with an Other that is immanent, prior to consciousness, yet indeterminable. Lévinas uses the term *obsession* here to describe that type of relation, "a way of being affected that can in no way be invested by spontaneity: the subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of re-presentation" (Lévinas 1996: 81). The condition of anarchy thus describes a passivity prior but fundamental to consciousness.

In introducing this idea, Lévinas mentions Bergson's critique of disorder and explicitly contrasts his idea of anarchy with the Bergsonian critique. As we saw, Bergson's critique maintained that the perception of disorder was simply the existence of another order, different from what was expected. Although contingent with regards to each other, either the mechanical or the vital order would always be present. Consciousness would simply move back and forth between the two, seeing a situation in one moment as mechanistic and the other as vital. Distancing himself from this thought, Lévinas wants to speak of a kind of anarchy that is beyond the conscious play between two equally determinable orders. For him, anarchy describes rather an *uneven* state of affairs, where an Other interrupts the subject, before it can even find an order of its own, an identity or arche (Lévinas 1996: 81). Lévinas describes this relation as that of 'proximity,' a term developed in *Enigma and Phenomenon* that is meant to describe a relation which cannot be determined by consciousness—the enigmatic as opposed to the phenomenal. In that essay, Lévinas again cited and distanced himself from Bergson's critique, emphasizing that for the possibility of thinking transcendence, and thus for the possibility of an ethics, an order must be interrupted *absolutely* i.e. not by another, relative order, but by a transcendent Other, the truly Other (Lévinas 1996: 86).

These critiques follow the critique of duration we traced above, where Lévinas introduced the idea of diachrony. In his explanation of Bergson's critique, however, Lévinas presents the encounter between two orders as a social rather than simply intellectual encounter.[5] He gives the example of someone ringing the doorbell and interrupting his work with some queries. The two parties talk, they

discuss problems and come up with a few solutions. In the end, Lévinas says, "[t]he disturbance, the clash of orders, ends in a conciliation, in the constitution of a new order which, more vast, closer to the total, shines through this conflict" (Lévinas 1996: 68). While Lévinas contrasts this end result with the anarchic subject, for whom such reconciliation between orders is never found, it is interesting to note that Lévinas is again reading the formal structure of a Bergsonian thought, which in this case describes a psychological phenomenon, as an inter-subjective encounter.

As anarchic, the subject of substitution can never find such conciliation. Instead, in substitution the subject finds itself riveted to an Other that it can neither comprehend nor escape. Unlike the Bergsonian subject that is essentially marked by its freedom then, the subject of substitution is first defined by a passivity prior to any intentionality. Substituted before the possibility of freedom, the Lévinasian subject is thus a *hostage*. Further, in being a hostage, the subject is also infinitely responsible for the Other, this precisely because it is Other before it can ever be itself.

> Must we not speak of a responsibility that is not assumed? Far from recognizing itself in the freedom of consciousness… the responsibility of obsession implies an absolute passivity of a self that has never been able to depart from itself so as to return within its limits and identify itself by recognizing itself in its past; an absolute passivity whose contraction is a movement this side of identity. Responsibility for the other does not wait for the freedom of commitment to the other. Without ever having done anything, I have always been under accusation: I am persecuted.(Lévinas 1996: 89)

This condition of obsession, of being a hostage, is also marked by a somewhat unusual temporality. Coming before freedom or thought, before the arche of identity, the responsibility of substitution is present before any sense of subjective time. My responsibility for the Other is immemorial, Lévinas says. Preceding and questioning my very sense of identity, the past of responsibility cannot be remembered or recovered (Lévinas 2016: 11, 26). I am confronted by the Other before I am myself, in a time beyond memory. This, Lévinas says, is the non-conjunction of diachrony.

Putting all of these ideas together, we can see very generally how Lévinas counters the usual thinking of subjectivity in his effort to account for ethics. Ethics is only possible for a subject that finds itself substituted for the Other before any sense of identity or consciousness. As he says, the "notion of hostage overturns the position that starts from presence (of the ego to the self) as a beginning of philosophy. I am not merely the origin of myself, but I am disturbed by the Other. Not judged by the Other, but condemned without being able to speak, persecuted…" (Lévinas 1996: 94).

With this brief sketch of Lévinas' later view of subjectivity, it is possible to return to Bergson and lay out the various points of contact and critique that animate the discussion of substitution between these two thinkers. We saw, first, that Lévinas explicitly develops his later notion of subjectivity with reference to Bergson's critique of disorder. Similar to his critique of duration, where he introduced the idea of diachrony, Lévinas will say that Bergson's critique of disorder applies only to an already constituted, thematizing consciousness, for which the two possible orders are intellectually equivalent. Substitution describes a structure of subjectivity prior to this type of consciousness, a subjectivity that is in fact traumatized by its incapacity to thematize the alterity of the Other order which faces it. In this case, the two orders cannot be reconciled. The subject of substitution is thus always persecuted. Nevertheless, the notion of substitution stays true to the original insight of duration which Lévinas so deeply appreciated. Subjectivity is, from the very beginning, an encounter with otherness, with novelty.

Second, we saw how the an-archic subject of substitution is diametrically opposed to the free Bergsonian subject. According to *Time and Free Will*, to say that consciousness is duration means to affirm the reality of novelty and human freedom. Against the unthinking repetition of mechanistic processes, the Bergsonian subject is defined by its free activity in the world. The subject of substitution, on the other hand, is marked not by activity but by its passivity. While it is certainly not a mechanistic subject it is nevertheless not absolutely free. It is hostage through a responsibility to an Other that it can neither fully know nor escape.

But why do passivity and substitution lead to the state of being a hostage? Lévinas explains this with recourse to the ideas of obsession and proximity, but we might also find a compelling reason for this already built into the Bergsonian structure of substitution. As Bergson explained, substitution goes hand in hand with suppression. Thus, when I claim to find disorder, I am actually suppressing the order that I have found in favor of the order I was looking for. In substitution, that is, the actual is suppressed by the absent. Now, although for Bergson this is a merely psychological procedure, Lévinas described the meeting between orders as an intersubjective event. In terms of the uneven relationship of a subject to the Other, then, we might see how the Bergsonian structure of substitution would account for the hostage in terms of suppression. In passivity the subject is substituted for the other before it is present to itself. As the actual is suppressed by the absent order in thought, so now the passive, anarchic subject is suppressed by the absent Other in substitution. This suppression in fact *constitutes* its an-archy. Substituted for the other from the beginning, the subject cannot establish

itself as sovereign principle of action. The hostage is thus denied its freedom and finds itself riveted to the Other.

Finally, in a more speculative, interpretative spirit, we might provide an interpretation of the temporality of substitution by recourse to the retroactivity of possibility in Bergson. While in this case there is no evident or acknowledged relation between the two thinkers, the structure of retroactivity does seem to have some parallels with the idea of an immemorial past. In substitution, the anarchic subject encounters the Other and is hostage to it. Preceding consciousness, the responsibility that chains me to Other is thus immemorial, incompatible with the present of a subjectivity marked by thematization, understanding, and memory.[6] Could we not say that the immemorial past has some resemblance to the structure of retroactive possibility here? As Bernasconi reminds us, there is a tension between the transcendental and the empirical in *Substitution*. Lévinas makes this explicit when he says that "it is in… an ethical situation …that the structure of this anarchy is outlined" (Lévinas 1996: 82). For Bernasconi, "Lévinas's insistence on how it is in the ethical situation, which is concrete, that the formal structure is outlined" is "striking", for "[n]ot only could there not be any transcendental deduction, but experience of the situation, which is already an experience of responsibility that gives ethical meaning to the situation, dictates the structure" (Bernasconi 2002: 248). Accordingly, we might say that in this idea, we again find a Bergsonian theme, the very theme that Bergson's quoted analysis of disorder was leading up to. Like the possible that lodges itself in the past once the actual arrives in its novelty, the ethical event is said to give meaning to the anarchic structure of subjectivity. Although contemporary and concrete, the Other is nevertheless presented as immemorial, from a past that can never be recovered. As Lévinas says, "the I approaches the infinite by going generously towards the You, who is still my contemporary, but, in the trace of illeity, presents himself out of the depth of the past, faces, and approaches me" (Lévinas 1996: 76).

4. Conclusion

The disparity between Lévinas' repeated praise of Bergson and his infrequent direct engagement with his ideas is flagrant. It is, however, clear that Bergson was on Lévinas' mind when he argued that the subject of 'substitution' is in many ways the opposite of the subject of duration. Substitution is thus the natural extension of a critique of Bergsonian thought that began much earlier in Lévinas' career. Looking more closely, however, the aim of this article was to paint a slightly more complicated picture of this relationship than that of a simple critique. By examining what it is that Lévinas found

praiseworthy in Bergson and why, it became clear that in his critiques Lévinas would nevertheless appropriate significant parts of Bergson's thought. Often, his procedure seemed to consist in taking the formal structure of one of Bergson's ideas, be it that of duration or of substitution, and transforming it through the introduction of a wholly transcendent Other. Thus, duration became diachrony and the critique of disorder became the dramatic scene of obsession, the hostage, and persecution. Of course, whether or not Bergson was on Lévinas' mind to the extent that I have argued for here remains an open question; perhaps ultimately an irrelevant one. Even so, the interpretative gains that may result from such an exercise balance out this somewhat-biographical uncertainty. Why must the subject of substitution become hostage? Reading Bergson, we might answer that the hostage is inevitable given that substitution is always suppression.

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Notes:

[1] There are many sources discussing the status of the transcendental in Lévinas. Cf. for instance (Critchley 2015: 7) and (Bernasconi 2002: 248)

[2] For Further discussion on this critique cf. Paley, "Bergson & Lévinas on the Genealogy of Mind."

[3] For further discussion on the issue of diachrony cf. Durie, "Wandering Among Shadows" and Veulemans, "On Time.".

[4] For further discussion on the possible in Bergson cf. (Sinclair, 2014)

[5] This in keeping with his previous determination that it is impossible to speak of a purely personal duration

[6] It's worth remembering here that in Matter and Memory, Bergson famously identified memory with spirit.