

Doctoral dissertation title: **Tensing Maternal Time** [*Napetosti materinega časa*]

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Summary:

My dissertation argues that the complex temporality of the maternal experience constitutes an affective tension within the maternal voice which accounts for the ethical singularity of the maternal figure. In support of this thesis, I explore the 'double' register of competing temporalities which resonate within the maternal voice; I argue that the unpredictable experience of disruptive temporality tangentially coupled with an impossible promise of temporal continuity creates an affective tension within the maternal experience which elicits a creative, improvisational, and singularly moral responsiveness. With the help of Vladimir Jankelevitch's discussion of the oscillation of time between "the interval and the instant," I attempt to think the transformative relation between the continuity of inherited generational temporality, which I articulate in terms of Edmund Husserl's internal time consciousness, and the temporal disruption of subjectivity which Emmanuel Levinas presents as the necessary condition for ethical consciousness, the paradigm of which is the maternal figure.

While spatial descriptions of the maternal provide obvious metaphors for the experience of pregnancy and giving birth, temporal descriptions of endurance and disruption have the advantage that they evoke the ethical tension of *becoming* a mother to another, without relying on the visual trope of the withdrawal, replacement, or disappearance of the mother. Not only does the temporal description reflect the intergenerational relations of continuity between the mother and a child, it likewise marks the disruptions and everyday lived events of separation belonging to the maternal experience. I argue that because competing forms of temporality belong to the temporal experience of the mother, the tension between these senses of temporality creates unforeseeable ethically demanding situations. Accordingly, by explicating the temporal complexity of the maternal voice, I hope to articulate the ethical weight that the maternal voice bears. By challenging the ancient philosophical privilege afforded to the stable, the certain, and the eternal, and by redirecting us or "converting" us to think the "newness" of deformed time, my dissertation shows that the singularity of the maternal lived experience of time provides us with a compelling alternative pathway to think "newness" and "innovation" within time itself.

I argue that philosophy's historical challenge of giving conceptual determination to existence is a direct consequence of philosophy's desire to grasp what is eternal in time and to conceive of time within a teleological framework. According to this view, what comes to exist, that is, what is born in time, must have its law, reason or cause of existence elsewhere, that is, outside of time. Because the movement of time is traditionally understood as the realization of a pre-existing

possibility outside of time, temporal existence is seen as an inadequate incarnation of a pre-existing possibility. Alternatively, I contend that the category of the *possible* be conceived as the becoming of temporal existence which contains more reality and therefore weighs more heavily than the *actual*, as is conceded by teleological thinking. We are thus challenged to “rethink” the newness of possibility, that is, the power or agency of *becoming* belonging to maternal experience, and the weight of the maternal voice.

My philosophical intervention in the field of women and children’s Holocaust testimony further advances a theory of maternal experience which grows out of a phenomenological analysis of the temporal tension and moral paradoxicality of the maternal experience and which defends the maternal as a signature “event” of ethical action and agency. In so doing, I highlight the active resistance, tensed courage, and empathetic relations of each of the survivors whom I interviewed. My intervention additionally initiates a discussion of the singularity of mothers - or those who acted *like mothers* - without reducing mothers to agents of a patriarchal system. Rather than seeing mothers primarily as care givers for the family unit, tribe, or state, I defend a view of the maternal which vindicates the singularity of the maternal by highlighting the ethical tension and resulting ethical dilemmas produced by the conflicting pull of an inclination to empathy and the courageous call to action as experienced by those who acted like mothers. I show that this transformative tension, which characterizes the maternal experience, is reflected in the heroic agency and improvisational talent of mothers and those who acted like mothers during the Holocaust. I focus on the heroic actions of those who acted *like mothers* in an effort to defend an account of maternal virtue, where the mother is figured as moving between empathy and courage, constantly recreating herself, therein “becoming a mother to another.” My thesis therefore supports an alternative account of the maternal, that is, a new account of maternal ethics which enables us to speak about mothers, without relying on stereotypical maternal tropes or minimizing the heroic actions of mothers, and to which I attribute the singularity of the maternal temporal experience.

In exploring the ethical exigency of the experience of the maternal voice as heard through Holocaust testimony, my dissertation thus argues that the temporal experience of the maternal emerges as a risky yet possible harbor for the competing yet irrecuperable forces, one of temporal continuity and endurance and one of disruption and rupture; as such, the maternal voice singularly commands our attention as a source for ethical creativity, resistance, and ethical action. The precarity and unpredictability of the maternal voice contributes to its compelling quality; always on edge, the maternal stakes itself out to secure a future for the next generation while all the while providing compassion and empathy within the present extension of the past. The experience of rupture coupled with a shared sensibility of enduring temporality forces our attention and constitutes that which I argue is the uniquely compelling mark of the maternal, namely, the possibility of becoming a mother to another through an ethics of empathetic courage.