

Article

“Existence Without Existents”: On Levinas’s Concerns About Beauty as an Expression of the Sacred and Its Complex Relationship with the Holy

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Abstract

In a certain sense, the experience of beauty is objectless. Obviously, only in a *certain* sense: for the experience evidently makes some objects manifest—namely, the object found beautiful. Yet to find an object beautiful means finding that it somehow, given the juxtaposition of its material elements, expresses something beyond conception, which thus directs us towards something that could never be given as an object of experience. Kant thus claimed that beauty ultimately expresses the purportedly supersensible basis of all being, accounting for the sense of meaningfulness and repose engendered by the experience of beauty. Levinas, expanding on such ideas, calls this an expression of the sacred. Levinas, however, thus worries about our appreciation of beauty: for if the sacred, as he argues, discloses an ostensibly unmanifestable mystical or metaphysical absolute as if it were at one with the material forces that traverse and underlie beings, then beauty’s repose ultimately represents the moral complacency of a disclosure that all is right on some “deeper level.” By contrast, the holy, which reveals itself in the relation to another and which Levinas opposes to the sacred, represents a different unmanifestability—of the other as such and of the infinite responsibility to which the other’s appeal, by decentering one absolutely, subjects one thereby—but this encounter, instead of inviting complacency, thus incessantly challenges us. In the following, I clarify Levinas’s position by explicating his account of beauty and his claim that beauty manifests an unmanifestable sacred and then discussing Levinas’s distinction between the sacred and holy and explicating his worries about the sacred. I conclude by discussing the caution he believes we should exercise in appreciating beauty, but also the latter’s *exigency*, a consideration that can help resolve issues in Levinas scholarship as well as current debates on the moral value of art.

Keywords: Levinas; ethics; art; aesthetics; beauty; sacred; revelation



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Introduction

No doubt, Husserl has demonstrated that all consciousness is consciousness of *something*—of precisely what must be considered the *object* of a given act of consciousness. Or rather, Husserl has demonstrated that this is so within certain essential *limits*—for although conscious acts, since always intentional, always manifest an object, in certain cases, this may not hold in some specific and highly qualified sense. This includes cases in which a given object allows *in turn* for the manifestation of something that, strictly speaking, cannot be considered an object of consciousness at all insofar as what is thereby made manifest is merely “presented” as something that could never actually *be* present to a given subject, through whatever strange indirect or indicatory intentionality this might

involve, and it perhaps even includes a case of the greatest possible significance, in which an encounter comes to precondition subjectivity, and thus, a being's very consciousness or intentionality, without making any object manifest itself, precisely because it lacks, or exceeds, intentionality *tout court*. The works of Emmanuel Levinas, in particular, teem with analyses of such non-objectivating, and even non-intentional, encounters or acts of consciousness, which an uncaredful reader might easily conflate despite the vast differences between them.

Nowhere in Levinas's work are these differences more pronounced than in his notions of the *sacred* and the *holy*, whose distinction I'll clarify here. The former, Levinas argues, is found most profoundly in experiences of art and beauty, while the latter is the province of the relation to the other alone, so, in order to understand and properly distinguish these two types of non-objectivating or non-intentional encounters I'll have to turn to Levinas's descriptions of art and beauty, on the one hand, and the relation to the other *as such* on the other. In the process, we'll be able to see that on Levinas's account, these two encounters must be *opposed* insofar as the manifestation of the sacred that produces itself in experiences of beauty inspires a kind of moral complacency in us, while the holy instead produces itself in the relation to the other as the bottomless ground of all ethical obligation. Yet we'll also see that if Levinas is right, this opposition doesn't preclude, but in fact *entails* that these two types of encounters are essentially interconnected or serve as conditions, albeit in much different ways, of the very possibility of each other, which thus appears to implicate the holy and the sacred in an ever-uneasy alliance that I will ultimately attempt to describe in this article.

As my clarification proceeds, I hope that the significance of Levinas's account for current debates in the literature on both religious studies and aesthetics, phenomenologically informed or not, will become obvious. This includes recent debates about the nature of Levinas's estimation of art, since both supporters and detractors of Levinas's account regularly ignore the way that it connects art and aesthetic experience with the sacred and the consideration of this connection is simply indispensable if one hopes to understand the value of art on Levinas's account.¹ It also includes recent debates in art criticism about the value and moral worth of art, and particularly those concerning Rosanna McLaughlin's *Against Morality*, which opposes the moral didacticism that McLaughlin finds in contemporary art criticism by recourse to a more ambiguous understanding of art's connection to our moral vocation (and, I think, of our moral vocation itself) that remains only vaguely defined in McLaughlin's book and that could be fruitfully elaborated by considering how Levinas connects art with the sacred and the complex relationship that this implies with what he calls the holy.² Given the complexity of Levinas's analyses, however, I'll have to content myself here with their clarification alone, leaving a discussion of their significance, and their evaluation *vis-à-vis* other accounts of the same sorts of phenomena, for future work.

1. The Sacred and Beauty

In a number of his works, Levinas describes the *sacred*, or as he sometimes puts it, the numinous or mythical, as that which becomes manifest—however paradoxical this manifestation must be—whenever we experience some identity between being itself and the absolute. Now as I indicated in my introduction, Levinas thinks that this experience, which “envelops and transports man beyond his powers and wishes,” (Levinas 1990, p. 14) is always in some sense misguided, and he also describes our encounters with *art* and the *beautiful* as exemplary experiences of the sort. For reasons that should become apparent shortly, however, explicating Levinas's account of these experiences will require me to explicate his account of the “elemental” (See, e.g., Levinas 1978, pp. 53–64; 1991b, pp. 130–43) beforehand; thus, I'll have to start with the latter before turning to the sacred

and its connection with experiences of beauty. I should note in advance that Levinas's discussions of beauty almost always concern beauty in *art*, although I hope to show that his analyses of this are broad enough to constitute a basic account of the beauty, not simply of artworks, but of natural objects also.

1.1. The Elemental

In any event, I'll begin, as I just noted, with Levinas's account of the "elemental"—this term denoting what gets given or disclosed (although only in the most qualified fashion, as we'll straightaway see) whenever the being of beings discloses itself as something "pointless," preceding and refractory to all of our sense-making.³ Now Levinas, drawing from Heidegger, insists that a given subject always makes sense of beings in light of its own projects, and thus, of the contingent, socially conditioned way in which it, at the very basis of its self-consciousness and intentionality, is given to understand the meaning of its own existence—a "Dasein" is always "in-the-world" and so, characterized by transcendence or the determination of itself on the basis of such an understanding or its given conception of the good.⁴ Yet without contesting this "existentiality" of consciousness, Levinas insists that some kind of disclosure of beings insofar as they simply *are* appears possible, which is just to say, of beings *irrespective* of the way that a given subject makes sense of them or that they meaningfully disclose themselves to it in light of its own projects and the understanding of the meaning of its own existence that anchors its "projection"—and so, without the *world* of the given subject. For this reason, Levinas tells us that what gets given in a disclosure of the elemental—assuming that a disclosure of it *is* possible—is "absolutely without transcendence" and "does not resemble the comprehension of the world by the Heideggerian *Da*," (Levinas 1991b, p. 138) leading Michael Fagenblat to describe the elemental as "being independently of the intelligibility borne by being-in-the-world" and as "the darkness of material existence—'before the light comes.'" (Fagenblat 2019, p. 118 [spelling altered for consistency]). For the same reason, Levinas associates it with "untruth" (See: Levinas 1987b, pp. 7, 13) in Heidegger's sense, in contradistinction to the "truth of being" or the meaningful disclosure of being for a given subject.⁵ Later on, I'll discuss exactly *how* a paradoxical disclosure of the elemental, which Levinas refers to as the "there is,"⁶ is in fact possible *at all*—or at least, the paradoxical disclosure of the elemental that Levinas connects with beauty and its manifestation of the sacred. For the time being, however, I'll remain with the elemental in order to work out why, strictly speaking, it cannot possibly constitute an object of consciousness for us.

Though I cannot spend too long on this point, it seems to me that there are *two* interconnected reasons for this. The first is obviously implied by what I said above: for if objects are always given to us on the horizon of the world—or in light of the socially conditioned way in which one understands one's own projects, once more, and thus, the purpose of one's existence—then the elemental, strictly speaking, can never be given to one at all; Fagenblat thus insists that it "cannot be experienced directly by consciousness" or get "disclosed by Dasein." (Fagenblat 2019, p. 120) There is, however, a second, connected, reason that the elemental can never constitute an object for us: for here, we are dealing with beings simply *being what they are*—which means, not being determined, in their own being, through the "transcendence" of a given subject or its determination of *itself* on the basis of its conception of the meaning of its own existence—which precisely implies that they must *instead* appear determined by their mere position in the "flux" of what is; Levinas speaks in this regard of the elemental as the very "fatalism of being" (See, e.g., Levinas 1978, p. 65 and especially p. 83 [translation slightly modified for clarity]) that subjectivity, as transcendent, always *resists* (Levinas 1978, pp. 51, 83). But as such, beings themselves must always recede in any disclosure of this elemental "flux" so that in such

a disclosure, the flux itself, as the being of beings in its purposelessness, can overshadow them. It is in this sense that Levinas refers to the elemental as a “milieu” (See, e.g., Levinas 1991b, pp. 37, 129) and insists that in its paradoxical disclosure, whose strange possibility I still have to discuss, we find that “the anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing” so that only “being remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one.” (Levinas 1978, p. 58) But thus, it appears that however this strange disclosure of the elemental might prove possible, which would disclose the being of beings in its meaninglessness, it could not disclose any actual beings—and thus, could not constitute a disclosure at all.

1.2. The Elemental Embeddedness of Sensibility

Now at this point, we could be forgiven for doubting that such a disclosure is even possible. Yet at the very least, Levinas’s analyses indicate that there is an irreducible element in all of our experiencing that remains closely connected to the elemental, or that even remains embedded in it: namely, what Husserl calls the “hyletic” content of experiencing, which is just to say, the sensory *Erlebnisse* or “lived-experiences” going on prior to or below the surface of perception—and so, of all the self-awareness and intentionality of one’s “being-in-the-world”—from which perception itself emerges (Levinas 1998i, p. 14). Husserl claims that these experiences, taken on their own, constitute “a constant broad horizon of background lived-experiences to which the ego is not present and ‘in’ which it does not reside”—a background *without* “lived-experiences of the ego-cogito”—in which “tendencies, lived-experiences of drive, may be rooted. . . which for instance incline away from malcontentment, but the ego is not present there.”⁷ Such experiences belong to an animal’s participation in its milieu, prompted, in its behavioral unfoldings, by natural forces that unfurl themselves about the living being as if they were, as Levinas puts it, “its substance, co-substantial with it, essentially immediate, an element and an environment.” (Levinas 1998i, p. 13). For subjectivity or self-aware existence, Levinas argues, these subterranean rumblings survive in the sensibility as felt urges and, ultimately, the pleasure and pain, or enjoyment and suffering, that a subject takes in its experiences, which maintain their independence as facticities of the subject despite the complicated relationship they bear to its subjectivity and the understanding it has of the purpose of its own existence that anchors its ongoing self-determination (See, e.g., Levinas 1998i, pp. 13–15). It is for this reason that Levinas calls our feelings of enjoyment “a set of autonomous finalities which ignore one another” (Levinas 1991b, p. 133) and that Fagenblat, remarking that “Levinas shows how the ‘I can’ [of consciousness or our being-in-the-world] is accompanied by an ‘I enjoy,’” tells us that the latter’s “value is independent of the intelligibility it attains” (Fagenblat 2019, p. 118) and constitutes “the source of our profound enjoyment of being.” (Fagenblat 2019, p. 117).

Despite this fact, however, or perhaps better, precisely because of it, Levinas associates the elemental with a notion of radical evil (Levinas 1978, p. 20. See also: Fagenblat 2019, pp. 119–23). But why? Although for reasons we just saw, it is, as Fagenblat tells us, the elemental depth of our being that constitutes “the primal value of individuating as a self through sensibility”—“Levinas came round to affirming this. . . as ‘the permanent truth of hedonist moralities,’” Fagenblat goes on to say—nonetheless we are, in these depths, “abandoned as much to evil as to good,” Fagenblat continues, precisely because in them we are “essentially accompanied by an indifference to the other.” (Fagenblat 2019, p. 119) Levinas puts it thus:

in enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the other, . . . innocently egoist and alone. Not against the others, not ‘as for me’ . . .—but entirely deaf to the other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate.⁸

With the advent of subjectivity, of course, comes a break from this indifference, however partial or incomplete it will always then be—Fagenblat writes of “the openness of shared modes of meaning, be they in the form of activity, discourse or objectivity,” that always presupposes such a break (Fagenblat 2019, p. 119)—and in fact, we’ll need to return to this point later on when we turn to Levinas’s conception of the holy.

1.3. The Disclosure of the Elemental

Before we can even move on to the *sacred*, however, we’ll need to examine the disclosure of the elemental more thoroughly, because the sacred, as I indicated above, presupposes just this, and yet however much our experiences of enjoyment and suffering retain a *tie* to the elemental, they do not, in themselves, constitute a disclosure of the elemental *itself*. Now in the strictest possible sense, of course, they could *never* constitute such a disclosure, given that the elemental, as we’ve already discovered, cannot strictly speaking be disclosed at all.⁹ And yet although the elemental, like other forms of the “undisclosable,” can, as we’ll soon see, get disclosed *indirectly* in some manner, and precisely so disclosed *as* undisclosable, experiences of enjoyment and suffering nonetheless don’t indirectly disclose the elemental *either*, given that in and of themselves, enjoyment and suffering, since preceding all transcendence, don’t constitute a disclosure of *anything*—Levinas writes that the sensibility is not, in itself, “a relation with existents” and “is not to be ascribed to the totality to which it is closed.” (Levinas 1991b, p. 138). Such experiences, which are not clarified through any conception of the good and thus precede all value or “finality” *strictly put*, are not conscious; we are instead dealing here with life in its immediacy.¹⁰ Of course, experiences of enjoyment or suffering surely do come to constitute a disclosure of *something* when they rise to become part of a *subject’s* self-conscious engagement within-the-world, but insofar as they *do*, as such experiences largely do for us, they get made sense of on the horizon of the aims and objectives that orient our being-in-the-world and thus become thoroughly connected with our consciousness of objects after all, albeit in highly complex ways, and as such help to constitute the *affectivity*, or as Heidegger would say, *Befindlichkeit* of our existence.¹¹ Though they retain their tie to the elemental, that is to say, experiences of enjoyment and suffering, when risen to consciousness, help us make sense of beings or objects, and always then in light of our own aims and objectives, rather than disclosing the pre-objective elemental *itself* in its purposelessness. Some *other* sort of experience is required to disclose *this*, however indirect and even paradoxical this again must be, and in this vein Fagenblat insists that the elemental can at least

be “formally indicated,” as Heidegger might say, in dystopia, apocalypse, mythology, science fiction, and other instances where the abyssal underside of the worldhood of the world manifests [itself]¹²

—it is instead in affects such as horror¹³ that we find, in Levinas’s words, “a situation in which the freedom with respect to being. . . comes up against *the absence of the world, the elemental*.” (Levinas 1978, p. 51). But even more significantly, or at least concerning my purposes here, is that experiences of art and beauty constitute such a “situation” as well, and ultimately do so given that they manifest the sacred.

1.4. Aesthetic Experience

But how exactly *does* the sacred figure in the manifestation of the elemental? And what does art, or anything like it, have to do with this? According to Levinas, “the movement of art consists in leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate sensation,” which precisely detaches “the quality from [its] object reference. Instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost in the sensation itself.” (Levinas 1978, p. 53). In experiences of art, this is to say, we discover an occurrence of sensation that does not come to take its place as a

perception within our self-aware engagement with objects—and thus, that does not come to play a role in the manifestation of beings for us in light of our various projects and, ultimately, the conception of the good that underlies them. Here Levinas, echoing Kant's pronouncements on aesthetic experience, speaks of a kind of "disinterestedness" of art.¹⁴ But thus, this occasional "wandering about in sensation," (Levinas 1978, p. 53) as Levinas calls it, ensures that the objects at hand—which in our everyday experience "refer to an inwardness as parts of the given world, objects of knowledge or objects of use, caught up in the current of practice," as Levinas puts it—are made to "*stand out from the world*" instead (Levinas 1978, p. 52). Thus, Jussi Pentikäinen tells us that on Levinas's account, "all forms of art. . . instantiate a detachment of sensible qualities, which leads to the works being separated from their world." (Pentikäinen 2024, p. 147). And in the same stroke, the work-object thereby detaches itself from the concepts that normally guide a given subject's sense-making, thus effecting a "deconceptualization of reality," (Levinas 1987b, p. 4) as Levinas says (although here he's surely referring, not to concepts or *Begriffe* proper, but to the *Vorgriffe* of everyday "circumspection"¹⁵). Pentikäinen thus continues:

because the sensible qualities of an object—or its "shadow"—are detached from it. . . we are impeded from grasping the object conceptually. This means that our consciousness is halted at the level of aesthetic qualities without being able to pierce them, so to speak, in order to seize the object.¹⁶

Drawing the ultimate conclusion from these considerations, Levinas claims that art is thereby able to manifest the untruth of being, (Levinas 1987b, p. 13) which is to say, once again, being "before the light comes" to make sense of it.

Now one can easily compare this notion of sensation to the "subterranean rumblings" of enjoyment and suffering that I examined above. Up to a point this comparison is justified, and no doubt such feelings have pride of place in the experience of artwork; yet on their own, as I discussed earlier, they come to be manifest to us only on the horizon of the *world* to the extent that they become manifest at all, and for this reason cannot disclose the elemental *as such*. According to Levinas, however, sensation comes forth in its own right precisely in experiences of *art*, as well as in disorientating experiences of natural objects which, we might add, Levinas sometimes discusses: (See, e.g., Levinas 1978, p. 59) experiences that thus constitute what we now generally—and for good reason, Levinas insists—call *aesthetic* experiences; it is this "wandering about in sensation, in *aisthesis*, that produces the aesthetic effect," Levinas writes (Levinas 1978, p. 53 [spelling changed for consistency]). And by thus getting "lost in sensation itself," as Levinas again puts the matter, one precisely then "returns to the impersonality of elements," (Levinas 1978, p. 53) he insists—to that which is, for reasons we've already discovered, "foreign to the distinction of a 'without' from a 'within'" (Levinas 1978, p. 54)—which thus makes the elemental manifest as the mere "there is" of "being in general" (Levinas 1978, p. 57) or of a pure "existence without existents." (Levinas 1978, p. 53) This does not mean that no object *at all* is made manifest to a given subject through experiences of art or aesthetic experiences more broadly, but simply that the object so "deworloded," (Sharpe 2005, p. 35) as Matthew Sharpe puts it, thereby gestures towards its dissolution in the elemental; Levinas speaks of "the formless proliferation" of "the materiality of being" (Levinas 1978, p. 57) that it is thus able to disclose.

To be clear, also: it's surely not the case in aesthetic experience that our self-aware engagement with objects gets totally dissolved or suspended, just as it's clearly not the case that the objects of one's current engagements cease to appear to one in these experiences. Rather: in aesthetic experience properly speaking, the subject still surely *finds itself*, but it precisely finds itself being *undermined* by the subterranean rumblings of its *aisthesis* insofar as they dispossess it of the sense of obvious meaningfulness that normally characterizes its everyday engagements. This is then to say that in aesthetic experiences—which thereby

disclose, in Sharpe's words, the "elemental plenitude into which our sense of world and meaning can always collapse or revert" (Sharpe 2005, p. 36)—the subject, instead of becoming wholly dissolved in the anonymity of the elements and losing itself completely therein, as if it reverted into a purely non-conscious experiencing, becomes captivated by this profusion of material forces lying beneath and traversing all beings and, *qua* subject, is taken aback in the encounter.¹⁷

There is thus a very real sense in which, on Levinas's account, an experience of artwork or aesthetic experience more generally produces a sense of unreality. Thus when Richard A. Cohen claims that in art, on Levinas's reckoning, "qualities replace realities, without remorse," (Cohen 2016, p. 175) he immediately adds that when "I am reading *Moby Dick* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*"—or for that matter, engaging with any artwork at all, Cohen will insist—"surely I have stepped into another world" (Cohen 2016, p. 175) or, as he later puts it, "another or alternative 'reality.'" (Cohen 2016, p. 176) Yet does this mean that art, on Levinas's account, serves to "set up in its own *artificial world*," as Cohen claims? (Cohen 2016, p. 182 [emphasis mine]). As though art, in place of reality, created something like a pure fiction in which the subject might get lost? Presenting the same general idea, Kevin Hart claims that in art, as Levinas understands it, "being has withdrawn, leaving only an image" which thus "detaches the essence of an object from its existence, and then presents this existence as inessential."¹⁸ Now such claims certainly appear accurate from the perspective of individuals currently caught up in their own world—for whom the experience of art will seem like a flight from the practical matters that constitute our concrete reality into a make-believe world of good-for-nothing imagination or dreaming—and yet as Levinas himself actually insists, these claims do not appear accurate at all from the perspective of those caught up in aesthetic experience—for whom the experience *instead* appears to mark a return to the really real *itself*. This is why Levinas writes that "the forms and colors of a painting do not cover over but *uncover* the *things in themselves*, precisely because they preserve the exteriority of those things" (Levinas 1978, p. 53 [my emphasis]) and likewise criticizes Bergson for thinking that the "elementary function of art" consists in disclosing "something *less* than the object, instead of seeing in it the *more* of what is aesthetic." (Levinas 1978, p. 52 [spelling altered for consistency]). Similarly, Levinas, who praises Fink for pointing out that when we appreciate a "painted tree. . . , we thereby enter into the world of the painting, which is different from the real world," immediately *criticizes* Fink for thinking that "this world is unreal, neutralized, suspended," instead of constituting, in Levinas's words, "reality as it is in itself." (Levinas 1978, p. 56) Commentors such as Cohen and Hart, then, surely fail to recognize the sort of deeper contact with reality that, on Levinas's reckoning, aesthetic experience affords us by disclosing the elemental (a oversight, in fact, that's endemic in much of the literature on Levinas's account, beyond Cohen or Hart's commentary).¹⁹

But what leads Cohen and Hart to misconstrue Levinas's account in this way? I'm sure that, faced with this objection to their reading, either would simply counter that the experience of artwork—which *appears*, once again, to constitute this "more of what is aesthetic" for an individual *caught up* in aesthetic experience—*merely* appears to do so and instead only constitutes a kind of delusional "enchantment" and, to support this claim, would draw on all the evidence, already present to some extent in their commentary on Levinas's account of art, indicating that for Levinas, there is always a kind of "enchantment" at play in aesthetic experience that precisely misleads us. The problem with this response, though, indicating the oversight in Cohen and Hart's reading, is that the misleading nature of aesthetic experience on Levinas's account is not what they take it to be. Now I won't be able to clarify the sense in which Levinas thinks that art does mislead us until the end of this article, after I discuss his notion of the holy, but Levinas's idea is certainly not that

art, by deworlding an object and thus manifesting the elemental, leads us to substitute a make-believe reality for the “real” one—as is clear from both his claims that art discloses reality in itself, free from the (subjective) perspective of our worldly engagements, and his criticism of Bergson and Fink for advancing the very position that Cohen and Hart attribute to Levinas.²⁰ This is not to say, however, that by manifesting the untruth of being, art, on Levinas’s account, shows that the objects of our everyday engagements in-the-world are mere semblances *instead*, the simple result of our subjectivizing “projections”: for if the objective reality of these things cannot, or should not, be doubted, it is nevertheless, on Levinas’s accounting, precisely the aims and objectives that anchor or orient all of our everyday engagements *with them* that come across, in our experiences of art or aesthetic experience more generally, as superficial or perhaps even *false* and ultimately *futile*, so that abandoned to the elemental, as these experiences appear to abandon us, we discover that being itself is totally oblivious to all of our everyday concerns and objectives—concerns now appearing like ripples on the surface of a pond that in a moment will spread out and then vanish. In this bottomless epiphany, that is, which constitutes the “deeper contact with reality” that I spoke of above, we become confronted by “the sheer fact of being,” as Levinas puts it, and realize that something like the whole of being goes on unfolding itself *irrespective of* all our busy-ness and of the meaning that we make of being itself and our own existence that orients this conduct. Or at least: *irrespective of* what *usually* passes for this meaning, or of what orients our *everydayness*.

1.5. Aesthetic Experience and the Sacred

Now this last qualification is surely crucial, given that clearly, our experiences of art don’t usually *stop* with the disorientation I just described—or at least, not if they constitute an experience of beauty rather than horror or some related affect. Even horror, as a disclosure of the elemental, will need to present the latter as a collapse of meaning to be *resisted*, since if the elemental, as being in its purposelessness, is to be given as such *at all* it must be related in *some* way to the purposes of the given subject, albeit, as we’ll see, to them *qua* totality rather than to any distinct ends.²¹ But in the experience of *artistic beauty*, Levinas insists, the elemental, which opens up beneath our being-in-the-world and would otherwise threaten to undermine its assurance, instead appears to constitute the very ground upon which our world is able to erect itself—as if we discovered some *unity* here or the elemental somehow appeared *at one* with our world or with the historical existence of the subject and its people and the most profound purposes that guide, and get hidden under, their everyday comings-and-goings. This is why Levinas writes that although art, disclosing the elemental, “makes [objects] stand out from the world,” (Levinas 1978, p. 52) he nonetheless goes on to claim that “an artwork,” in the same stroke, “expresses what we call the world of the artist” (Levinas 1978, p. 58) so that “poetry and art celebrates, which is to say, manifests dwelling in the world.” (Levinas 1998h, p. 87) But how does such a purported accord or unity—in which the elemental, as the unfathomable obscurity of being, appears to provide the very ground of the world or disclosure of being that comes to clarify it—become manifest through a work of art? This is possible because, from out of the “formless proliferation” of the elemental, the work of art “brings forth a *form* in the material of things”²²—a new, or perhaps more ancient, but in any event more profound form than that which is connected with our everyday conceptualization of the world, and that thus first truly “expresses what we call the world of the artist,” as Levinas puts the matter again; “the artistic expression would assemble being into a meaning and thus provide the original light,” he concludes (Levinas 1987a, p. 82). This thus amounts to “a creation of perceptible expressive forms in being by a non-thematizing wisdom of the flesh,” (Levinas 1998l, p. 183) through which, as Levinas goes on to say, “the human” serves as

the very locus of that expression and of the whole arrangement indispensable to the manifestation of the *Beautiful*, to art and poetry, which are the active modes of this celebration or of the original incarnation of the Same in the Other. (Levinas 1998l, p. 183 [italics mine])

Levinas's claim is thus that by pulling perception back from our conceptualization of a given object, an artwork thereby discloses the elemental and, with this, undermines our usual absorption in the aims and projects of our everyday being-in-the-world, but only in order to make manifest a purportedly original interrelationship between the elemental and the very world that comes to pass as its clarification, or a kind of "belonging together" of the two at the ground of all sense.²³ Yet this manifestation is precisely that of the *beautiful*, as Levinas understands this: "beauty is *being*. . . covering over or absorbing its shadow," (Levinas 1987b, p. 8 [emphasis mine]) he tells us, incorporating the elemental into the very depths of its meaningful disclosure so that in the process, it appears that "matter, or nature, or being reveals or expresses or celebrates. . . its soul." (Levinas 1998l, p. 183) And in this way, being gets understood, as it were, through an understanding that isn't *really* any understanding at all—Levinas speaks of this as

a precocious or original embodiment of thought. . . in which the meaningful does not refer to the noetic/noematic structure of the transcendental constitution in knowing. (Levinas 1998l, p. 183)

—as though there were here a kind of comprehension without concepts or sense that yet constitutes itself as a *nonsense* that precedes our everyday sense of being, and perhaps thus ultimately, as a kind of sense in a deeper or more profound register.²⁴ Referring, then, to the Heideggerian notions of the "truth" and "untruth" of being, Levinas thus writes that if "the artwork can and must be treated as a myth" or expression of the sacred—as it *must* be treated, Levinas argues, for reasons that we'll look at in a moment—this "myth is then *at the same time* untruth and the source of philosophical truth," (Levinas 1987b, p. 13 [my italics]) bringing together into an unthinkable unity the *obscurity* of being itself—i.e., the untruth of being—and the most profound *meaning* or *sense* of being—i.e., its truth, through which being gives itself to us to be understood and we ever find ourselves oriented in our ongoing existence. But thus the "more of what is aesthetic," which we saw Levinas discuss earlier, must refer not only to the paradoxical manifestation of the elemental *obscurity* of being, but at once to the *truth* of being that comes to constitute itself as the clarification, in the work of art, of this very obscurity. In this way, "art belongs to the ontological order, in that it discloses being" or makes "the understanding of being possible," so that "artistic creation," Levinas says, is in fact "ontological *par excellence*."²⁵

Before moving on, I should note that all of this, apparently, concerns only beauty in art and not natural beauty or, *a fortiori*, beauty in general. Nonetheless, Levinas appears to understand natural beauty akin to that of art; he thus speaks of the beauty of landscapes in the same vein—comparing, for instance, "the solemnity of ceremonies and cults which can transport" with "the growth and flowering of nature, the freshness and harmony of the landscapes" (Levinas 1991a, p. 182)—and insists that the distinction between natural and artistic beauty is itself artificial (Levinas 1987b, p. 7). And should we also think the same? After all, it seems that we must bring something like the world of our encounters into our experiences of nature whenever we find natural objects beautiful, seeing in them some kind of unity with the deepest meaning of our existence and thus interpreting them as though they were works of art;²⁶ and we also appear to engage with works of art as though they were in some sense merely natural objects (the deconceptualization of artwork, which leads to the disclosure of the elemental, appears to imply just this).²⁷ Without ignoring, then, all the differences between the beauty that we find in artworks and that which we find in

natural objects, we can at least insist that on Levinas's account the same basic dynamic must unfold itself in *both* and, thus, extend this basic account of artistic beauty to natural beauty as well.

In any event, it's in the experience of beauty, as Levinas understands it, that what he calls the *sacred* manifests itself exemplarily. For Levinas, once more, takes the sacred to constitute our sense of an identity between being and the absolute, and yet if he is right, then the experience of beauty discloses the elemental obscurity of being as if it were ineffably united with the most profound purposes that anchor our world-constitution.²⁸ Thus, Levinas tells us that art-experience unfolds as if it "coincides with metaphysical intuition" (Levinas 1987b, p. 1) and even claims (for reasons that we'll only be able to understand *fully* later on) that "a work of art substitutes itself for God." (Levinas 1991a, p. 199 note 21). But this then allows us to clarify the characteristic *enjoyment* that belongs to the experience of beauty—one that is part and parcel of the experience as an exemplary manifestation of the sacred. For since in experiences of beauty, on Levinas's understanding, the elemental is disclosed as if it were inexpressibly unified with the world of the subject, the subterranean *destabilization* that is essentially connected with its manifestation appears to immediately overcome itself in a kind of *reassurance* or *release*, as if on the deepest or most profound level, where the elemental's ineffable unity with the world is ostensibly to be found, all were somehow *right*. And so, Levinas writes that

art brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as a lightness and grace. It frees. . . . Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. Magic, recognized everywhere as the devil's part, enjoys an incomprehensible tolerance in poetry. (Levinas 1987b, p. 12)

1.6. The Non-Objectivation of the Sacred

Evidently, Levinas understands this reassurance to be a form of *complacency*. We'll have to understand his notion of the *holy* to see why, and yet before I discuss this notion and compare it with that of the sacred, I'll have to discuss the way in which experiences of beauty disclose something like a "non-object" for us, assuming Levinas's account is correct.

These experiences, in fact, appear to do so in two related ways. By withdrawing from perceptual engagement, for one, aesthetic experiences pull back to the preobjective, Levinas argues, but thus, their "deworled" objects direct us towards something that could never appear *as such* itself: being itself in its elemental obscurity, which can nowise be an object, again. Yet for this to be disclosed at all, however indirectly, it still must be made sense of *in some way* in light of a given subject's conception of the purpose of its existence, just like anything else that might be given to it. And since the elemental, as being in its purposelessness, has no relevance for any specific determinate ends and so, cannot be present within-the-world as horizon of all the subject's everyday engagements, it must thus appear in light of one's ends *as a whole* or, rather, of what *underpins* them, namely, the most profound meaning or purposiveness at the basis of world-constitution itself, which in the experience of beauty, comes to pass precisely insofar as a given object's form somehow refers to the elemental as if it were an obscurity ever-clarified by the world and thus essentially unified with this. But that means that in this experience, the sacred, as the very unity disclosed, enables the elemental's paradoxical appearance, and since this unity is as incomprehensible as the elemental itself, the sacred *also* discloses itself in the encounter as non-phenomenon, something that can never come to light.²⁹ In this disclosure, again, the nonsense or untruth of being senselessly gives way to sense or being's *truth*. And precisely *because* it accomplishes this, we just saw, the experience of beauty gives us over to a profound complacency or sense of good conscience, as if we found ourselves here, at

the mystical foundation of it all, delivered up unto the answer to every possible question, precisely at the foot of the sacred.

2. The Holy and Ethics

This should sufficiently clarify Levinas's account of the sacred and its manifestation in an experience of beauty, and so I'll turn now to his notion of the *holy* before discussing its relation to the sacred. In fact, I broached this notion a little earlier when I discussed Levinas's claim about a solipsistic "radical evil" connected with the elemental, and I mentioned at that point that because our being-in-the-world presupposes a *break* from this evil—which it always does given that it always determines itself through the shared practices and discourses that ground our world and the disclosure of being for us—our being-in-the-world thus presupposes the advent of the holy.

2.1. The Ethical Relationship

But what can we make of Levinas's account of the holy itself? Levinas, again, connects the latter with the relation to another, and as Joëlle Hansel insists, "the relation with the other tears me away from myself in a completely different sense than the contact with the sacred." (Hansel 2012, p. 197). We've just seen that in the manifestation of the sacred that constitutes itself in experiences of beauty, a subject gets rended from its own being-in-the-world only insofar as the disorientation that this brings about resolves itself into a greater reassurance or release, allowing the subject to rejoin its world at a deeper level or with a more profound commitment to whatever conception of the good it is that will go on orienting its existence. As we'll see in just a moment, however, the relation with the other rends a living being from its own being so that it can constitute itself as a subject in the first place, or its being-in-the-world can emerge at all, and as such can always recur as a troubling of this being-in-the-world of a wholly different order than that which comes to pass in experiences of beauty.

What sort of troubling is this, then? For reasons that we've already seen, Levinas tells us that "that which lives, . . . exists as totality, as if it occupied the center of being and were its source" (Levinas 1998i, p. 13)—this is the very notion of a "radical evil" that I discussed above, entailed by the fact that a living being distinguishes nothing from itself insofar as it remains fatefully determined by its place within the nexus. Levinas thus goes on to say that, existing in this way "as totality,"

the forces that traverse it are already assumed—it experiences them as already integrated into its needs and enjoyment. What is perceived by the thinking being as exteriority inviting it to labor and assume ownership is experienced by the living being as its substance, co-substantial with it, essentially immediate, an element and an environment. (Levinas 1998i, p. 13)

This is just to say again that insofar as experience remains on the level of sensibility, understood in the previously described sense, nothing appears to the being living through it at all; there is no consciousness here in any strict sense or, put otherwise, no disclosure of being and, so, any being-in-the-world. And for this reason, Levinas insists that, lacking disclosure or intentionality, sensibility thus represents something like a

consciousness not concerned with situating itself in relation to an exteriority. . . ,
[a] consciousness without consciousness to which the term unconscious. . . or
instinct corresponds. (Levinas 1998i, p. 14)

But as such, Levinas argues, this living-sensibility must become "transfigured" through "the clarity in which a horizon is opened" for anything like subjectivity or being-in-the-world to emerge (Levinas 1998i, p. 14). And only in the process will this sensibility

become interrelated with the subject's emergent existence in the myriad complex ways that I discussed earlier to some extent.

What this “transfiguration” thus implies, in any event, is that if a living being *is* to be a subject, or if its being is to be that of a being-in-the-world *at all*, it must find itself *deposed* from its unreservedly central position, no longer existing “as totality” itself, so that it can be *open* to what is as such and in the same stroke get delivered over to itself in its existence. But how is this deposition *possible*? How does a living being come to recognize that it *doesn't* occupy “the center of being” and *isn't* in fact “its source;” how can it realize, in fact, the essential *vanity* of its solipsistic self-absorption? Only insofar as it has been approached by *another* revealing himself or herself *as such*, Levinas argues, can anything of the sort come to pass—an other revealed in his or her alterity precisely *by* decentering the one addressed and subjecting the being thereby made *subject* in the encounter to moral responsibility, to the obligation to recognize the other *as* other and take him or her into account. It is precisely in the face-to-face encounter, Levinas insists, that such a relation produces itself; Levinas thus writes, e.g., that this “otherness and this absolute separation manifest themselves in the epiphany of the face, in the face-to-face” (Levinas 1998l, p. 185 [slightly altered for consistency in spelling]) and calls the face of the other “a surplus that does not represent itself—is not presented—but signifies in the *imperative* with authority or glory” (Levinas 1998e, p. 151 [emphasis mine]). Thus:

the relationship of the individual to the totality... in which the *I* takes into account what is not itself and yet is not dissolved in it, assumes that the totality is manifested not as a milieu brushing against the skin... of living being as an element in which it is immersed, but as a face in which being *faces* me... Hence, the relationship of the *I* with the totality is a relationship with human beings whose face I recognize. Before them, I am guilty or innocent. The condition of thought is a moral consciousness. (Levinas 1998i, p. 17)

Now by claiming that the face reveals a “surplus” that “is not presented,” Levinas calls attention to the fact that the lived-experience of another is precisely what can *never* appear to the subject and can never be *anything at all* for a living being merely enveloped in the elemental; I will never live through the perceptions, the posits, and the sense-making of the other as I live through my own and, most significantly, will never feel the pleasures and pains that, at the elemental ground of the other's existence, rivet the other to his or her own being just as the pleasures and pains that I *do* feel rivet me to my own. Strictly speaking, the other's own experience must always remain *nothing* to me. And yet at the ground of my being-in-the-world or of a subject's own existence—and in fact as its very subjection—this “nothing” somehow becomes *everything* for this being, for *me*, so that “this facing of the face in its expression,” as Levinas describes it, “summons me, demands me, claims me: as if the invisible death faced by the face of the other—pure otherness, separated somehow from all unity—were ‘my business.’”³⁰

We should note that because the other's address or appeal makes the emergence of a being's being-in-the-world *possible* by wrenching open the elemental absorption of that being's own being-itself, the responsibility to which this appeal subjects the one made subject thereby must be deemed an *unconditional* one. After all, we've seen that there must always be some concrete conception of the good that orients a given subject's sense-making or that anchors its being-in-the-world, constituting, for that subject, its sense of its own aims and objectives. And because it always is in-the-world with others, and determines itself in accordance with the shared discourses and practices of a people, this conception is thus in the first place a conception of who exactly is to be helped, assisted, or supported, immediately or mediately, through the subject's various endeavors—and in the same stroke, of who exactly is *outside* of its sphere of concern. Yet the face-to-face encounter, coming

to pass prior to all this, thus subjects the one made subject to a responsibility *preceding* any such conditions, and so when appealed to by another—whose very revelation, again, comes to pass as a wrenching open of its solipsistic solitude—the one made subject thereby simply gets delivered up to an obligation to take the other into account, *full stop*, without any of the details of the other’s identity mattering, or even being *able* to matter, yet at this point. Levinas thus writes of the “gratuitousness or grace of unconditional charity” that belongs to one’s responsibility for another, which has ever dawned or produced itself in the other’s appeal or the face-to-face relationship (Levinas 1998k, p. 229).

And yet this appeal cannot remain that of a *single* other, Levinas insists. Instead, the one made subject by the appeal must be reached by the appeal of a *plurality*—or at least, must be so reached if any kind of subjectivity or being-in-the-world is to emerge at all—given that

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. A question would not have been born, nor consciousness, nor self-consciousness. The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions. . . [and] is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters. (Levinas 1991a, p. 157)

Only after the one made subject finds itself appealed to, not simply by a *single* individual, but by *myriad* ones and, at the limit, by *everyone* other, that is to say—i.e., after the “third party” enters the scene—will it find itself having to make *choices* and, thus, to make sense of itself and its world and to adopt some conception of the good to orient all this. Here we discover the origin of the *self-determination* belonging to a given subject’s existence, refractory to the fateful determination of the elemental (however much a subject, for reasons that I’ll discuss in just a moment, can never fully overcome that determination). But this implies that the one made subject by another’s appeal only truly comes to be a *subject*, a being whose existence is its being-in-the-world, when the appeal of others, in their *countlessness*, have reached it, endlessly redoubling the unconditional responsibility that dawns in the relation to another. And thus to be a subject ultimately always means to be subjected to unconditional responsibility for everyone other *in turn*, which thus subjects one to what Gabriela Bastera has called an “endless task, the self’s responsibility for all,” (Bastera 2004, p. 148) with all the unmanageable complications that this will imply. And as a finite being thus subject to an *infinite* obligation, the most *profound* “truth” of the subject’s existence—which is irreducible to any “truth of being” and which Levinas identifies with an ideal of absolute justice (See, for example, Levinas 1998a, pp. 55–56; 1991a, p. 44)—must be conceived of on his account as an *unlivable* one.³¹

2.2. The Ethical Relationship and the Holy

Now to understand Levinas’s notion of the *holy*, we’re going to have to examine this “unlivable truth” in more detail, reemphasizing, in the first place, that an infinite obligation, to *truly* take everyone other in turn into account, could never come to be realized concretely or be put into practice as such.³² Such an obligation, however, is not only ultimately unpracticable by one but *inconceivable* by one as well given the very impossibility of its realization, and for this reason, it can constitute no concrete conception of the good, but rather only what I, in a previous publication, called an “inconceivable idea of it” (Coate 2020, p. 445)—Levinas pronounces it “a thought that thinks more than it thinks.”³³ Yet for the very same reason, Levinas insists that although we are unconditionally obligated with the same necessity before everyone other in turn—each of whom must thus constitute someone “incomparable”—a “comparison between incomparables” is always necessary for us (Levinas 1991a, p. 16); “in the very name of the absolute obligations toward one’s fellow man,” in fact, “a certain abandonment of the absolute allegiance he calls forth is necessary,”

Levinas thus writes (Levinas 1998d, p. 203). Without becoming limited in this way, that is, our unconditional moral obligation could never be put into practice *at all* but would simply *remain* unlivable, and so standing at the ground of our existence, it can only constitute a kind of groundless ground for it.

But thus, Levinas insists that our being-in-the-world not only constitutes itself in the trace of the other's revelation but does so as the *erasure* of this trace. For insofar as we're made subject to an infinite responsibility by everyone other in turn, and yet surely remain irremediably *finite*, our being-in-the world can only realize itself as *marginalization* and *exclusion*—or as I noted earlier, as the self-appropriation of a responsibility for a *people*, or for certain others in certain more-or-less determinate ways, over and *against* those who are left out, as it were, in the cold or made to face the elements on their own—Levinas writes specifically of the other who “has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons.”³⁴ Because of this, our outstanding obligation for all the others can only go on troubling us beneath the surface, a dimly felt insistence that we can and should do better that might always re-erupt in another's further appeal to call us to better ourselves once more. But everything thus comes to pass as if the subject were conceived from out of a love that always remained too big for the world and that would thus have to limit or put constraints upon itself to make its mark within the world at all, leaving the subject ever haunted by the reserve or remainder beyond these current limitations or constraints—though largely haunted, and always irreducibly so to a greater or lesser extent, unknowingly or beneath consciousness in the manner of a primal repression or arche-violence.³⁵ This is the very “hither side of my identity” of which Levinas speaks, in which, “prior to all self-consciousness,” one is found as if “hunted down even in one's home, contested in one's own identity” (Levinas 1991a, p. 92) or always, intractably, in question.

Should we recall, here, Kierkegaard's repeated insistence that before God “one is always in the wrong?” (Kierkegaard 1987, pp. 339–54). For if Levinas is correct, then it's precisely insofar as we're so subject or delivered up to an obligation that absolutely exceeds us that the *holy* produces itself. As Levinas understands it, that is, the holy is part and parcel of the other's *revelation* insofar as this breaks open a being's unreflective attachment to its own being by calling it to take everyone other in turn into account and thus subjecting it to an absolute and unconditional responsibility. In fact, Levinas argues that by calling its very being into question, this revelation delivers a being *beyond* its *being* or its own rivetedness to itself and only thereby allows its being to appear to itself at all or to be-there for it to get made sense of as a being-in-the-world (and always thus with a sense, albeit an always-limited sense, of its own responsibility).³⁶ For this reason, Levinas writes that in the “attitude of holiness”

there is a reversal of the . . . natural order of things, the persistence in being of the ontology of things and of the living. For me that is the moment where, through the human, the *beyond being*—God—comes to mind (Levinas 2002, p. 47 [my emphasis])

and that

the in-itself of being-persisting-in-being goes beyond itself in the gratuitousness of the outside-of-itself-for-the-other, in sacrifice, or the possibility of sacrifice, in the perspective of holiness. (Levinas 1998b, p. xiii)

2.3. The Non-Intentionality of the Holy

But thus the holy is, like the sacred but in an entirely different manner, without *object*, and in fact again in a double sense. For through it, in the first place, the other reveals himself or herself precisely as other, which as we saw, means revealing, anterior to or

beneath all intentionality, that his or her experience is something wholly foreign *vis-à-vis* the one made subject that could never appear to the latter *at all*, leading Levinas to write that

the ‘relationship’ from me to the other is thus asymmetrical, without noematic correlation of any thematizable presence. An awakening to the other man, which is not knowledge (Levinas 1998c, p. 168)

and that

the for-the-other in the approach to the face—a for-the-other older than consciousness of. . .—precedes, in its obedience, all grasping, and remains prior to the intentionality of the *I*-subject in its being-in-the-world, . . . as if the intrigue of alterity were woven prior to knowledge. (Levinas 1998c, p. 166)

But since here, there is no intentionality manifesting the nonapparent as such, unlike the elemental’s appearance, the face-to-face encounter is thus, strictly speaking, not a consciousness at all but, as the *Erlebnis* that wrenches a living being from a total absorption in all its *Erlebnisse* or its envelopment in the elemental, instead serves as the groundless *ground* or *condition* of all consciousness, haunting the subject beneath the surface of its awareness.³⁷ Yet because it breaks from all instinct, the face-to-face no longer represents an unconscious experience *either*, and for this reason Levinas deems it the unique “nonintentional consciousness,” signifying as the *conscience* that belongs to all *consciousness*—however much the latter always, to some extent, must repress it.³⁸ And this leads to the *second* sense in which the encounter must be deemed non-objectivating: for coming to pass precisely by subjecting the one made subject to an unconditional responsibility for everyone other in turn, as we saw, the other’s revelation thus appears to subject the subject to a responsibility that absolutely exceeds it—and exceeds not only its abilities but even its *conception* as an “inconceivable idea of the good,” which we can thus understand as a kind of nonsense at the basis of all sense wholly other than that of the sacred which, as we’ll ultimately see, will ever come to replace it.³⁹ But because the holy thus always remains inconceivable in this fashion, its way of refusing all appearance far exceeds that of the sacred, given that unlike the sacred, it doesn’t provide *any* sort of horizon that would allow the subject to make sense of anything and, thus, that would proffer it any resolution of uncertainty to set free its ongoing projection, even if only the ineffable horizon of the sacred allowing the world to “reabsorb” its elemental “shadow.” Instead, the holy can only ever call forth a *further* questioning,⁴⁰ and its excess only becomes greater, rather than decreasing, as a given subject comes to realize it *more fully* in its existence, so that, as Levinas tells us, “the more I answer the more I am responsible; the more I approach the neighbor with whom I am encharged the further away I am” (Levinas 1991a, p. 93 [wording slightly altered for clarity])—“the debt increases in the measures that it is paid,” he insists.⁴¹ This is the unsettling of life in its every complacency: a complacency which the sacred, in its incomprehensible return of good conscience, would instead appear to fix anew.⁴²

2.4. The Sacred and the Holy

So much, then, for the distinction of, and opposition between, the sacred and the holy; and yet it thus appears that despite this opposition—or perhaps precisely *because* of it—the two mutually *imply* one another. But how? Surely if Levinas’s account of both is correct, then the sacred must *presuppose* the holy, given, if nothing else, that the former is manifest only to and for a subject and the latter represents the subject’s very subjection or the groundless ground of its self-constitution *as* subject.⁴³ Yet for *its* part, the holy must imply the sacred itself, albeit in a much different sense than the sacred presupposes it. For after all: as subjection to an endless task or infinite responsibility, once again—or as I put

the matter earlier, to the unlivable truth of our existence—the holy must always give way to its own limitation, so that so constrained, it can come to constitute a comprehensible and broadly calculable conception of a good life capable of guiding the life of a subject or of being “lived” by one *at all*, and yet it would appear that by introducing some notion of the divine or of a metaphysical absolute that could come to *fix* an order of right and legality and place it beyond all questioning in the first place, the sacred that comes to manifest itself in an experience of beauty must thus constitute the original *possibility* of this limitation. Manifesting itself in experiences of art and beauty, that is, the sacred comes to pass as the very limitation of the holy that the holy *itself* will ever demand, precisely in order to realize itself concretely in any given case. And for this very reason, Levinas writes that since the holy:

is intolerable for thought[,] [t]hus there is an exigency to stop. . . . The movement beyond being becomes ontology and theology[;] and thus there is *also* an idolatry of the beautiful. In its indiscrete exposition. . . a work of art substitutes itself for God. . . . By an irresistible subreption, the incomparable, the diachronic, the non-contemporaneous. . . is “imitated” by art, which is iconography. The movement beyond being is fixed in beauty.⁴⁴

2.5. Levinas’s Critique of the Sacred in Beauty

This, then, constitutes Levinas’s ultimate conception of art and beauty, and the essence of his critique of it. He is *not* primarily concerned that the appreciation of artwork can constitute the kind of superfluous enjoyment that contributes essentially nothing to the pursuit of our committed aims while taking time and resources from this pursuit and that thus—even if its *occasional* enjoyment might recharge us for our mission—threatens to become a mere distraction if engaged in *excessively*. This, in fact, is how commentators on Levinas’s account such as Cohen and Hart—who as we saw, take Levinas to claim that art merely throws us into unreality—think Levinas understands the enjoyment of art (Hart writes, e.g., that because on Levinas’s account “all art is at heart disengaged from reality” its continual enjoyment will “render one ineffective in daily life” (Hart 2019, p. 58)). Yet if there were nothing further to Levinas’s critique of art, then it would have no more significance than would a critique of, say, crossword puzzles; such readings, that is, are unable to account for the potential seduction that is *unique* to art and beauty given their tie to the disclosure of being’s truth and thus, the sense of *good conscience*, coming to pass even as a kind of spiritual epiphany, that their experience engenders. Experiences of art and beauty thus possess an incredibly *ambivalent* significance on Levinas’s account: for insofar as they give the subject to feel that there exists some absolute rightfulness that that subject has at long last truly discovered, these experiences, once again, always allow for the fixation of value, and thus, for the realization of responsibility in some concrete form. Yet as important as this is, it means reinforcing, in the very same stroke, the subject’s commitment to certain marginalizations and exclusions, or to a violence that must ever be *challenged*.

As an imitation of an always-unpresentable holiness, however—and one which thus, as Levinas insists, ever amounts to a sort of idolatry⁴⁵—the sacred that manifests itself in an experience of beauty will before all else effect itself as a return of the subject to its own *being* or a resumption of that subject’s *life*. Allowing the subject to more-or-less concretize, and thus fix in place, the responsibility that commands it—always imperfectly, once again, and with some degree of injustice—beauty appears to attenuate the holy, so that the latter, as the most profound *truth* of our existence, becomes something that we can bear or endure as we go on with our lives. On Levinas’s account, that is, art and beauty make this truth *livable*. But if this is *so*, then we might say along with Nietzsche—redeploying, here, his famous words or perhaps instead finally expressing them in their most profound sense—that we

have art, or more broadly, that we have *beauty* precisely so that we do not perish of the truth (Nietzsche 1968, p. 435).

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Notes

- ¹ In some of my endnotes below, I explore the significance of Levinas's account of the sacred and beauty in particular for debates in aesthetics and philosophy of religion in the continental tradition. I specifically mention Lyotard's work, but more work discussing Levinas's account vis-a-vis the aesthetics theories of Adorno and Rancier, exploring both the parallels and divergences, would also be significant.
- ² It would be particularly significant to discuss Levinas's account in connection with McLaughlin's *Against Morality* (McLaughlin 2025) given the latter's reach beyond academia and into popular culture, although this discussion is obviously beyond the purview of this article.
- ³ (Levinas 1978, pp. 47, 56–57), (Levinas 1991b, p. 134). See also Levinas's claim that "as an impersonal going on, an incessant splashing, a mute murmuring, as *there is*, does not essence swallow up the signification that will give light to it?" (Levinas 1991a, p. 140). This is the very "phantom essence which cannot be identified with the essence revealed in truth" that Levinas speaks of (Levinas 1987b, p. 8).
- ⁴ That is to say that a Dasein, in its being-in-the-world, always determines itself on basis of what Heidegger calls the "for-the-wake-of-which" or *Worumwillen*: see, e.g., (Heidegger 1962, pp. 170, 295–96).
- ⁵ (Levinas 1987b, pp. 3, 6–7). Heidegger of course takes ontic truths to be derivative of the "truth of being," given that the former are always consequent to the latter as the disclosure of being, see, e.g., (Heidegger 1977b, pp. 127–30). Of interest here is also Sartre's notion of "being-in-itself," see, e.g., (Sartre 2003, pp. 18–23).
- ⁶ See, e.g., (Levinas 1978, pp. 19–20, 57–59). Levinas always refers to the "there is" as something that comes to *trouble* a given subject; what we will have to understand, then, is why, when the elemental gets *disclosed* to a given subject, it *must* be unsettling for it (a matter that I will examine later in this article).
- ⁷ (Husserl 2001, p. 19). This echoes Heidegger's similar claims (Heidegger 1995, p. 256) about the "disinhibition" of behavior, since this represents a notion of sensation not insofar as it comes to take its place within our self-aware engagement with objects—which means, not insofar as it comes to present objects or manifest beings as such in their being—but rather, insofar as it comes to pass underneath and in advance of all this as something akin to a stimulus. Of course, Heidegger, taking there to be an absolute chasm between the being of the Dasein and that of the animal, doesn't think that there is an element of disinhibition belonging to our being at all—a point with which Levinas will very much disagree, however much, as we'll see below, the emergence of subjectivity or a Dasein's existence will "transfigure" this level of being within us. For more, see (Coate 2026).
- ⁸ (Levinas 1991b, p. 134). "Innocent and without malicious intent," Fagenblat concludes, "the enjoyment of material existence runs the risk of radical indifference to the other" (Fagenblat 2019, p. 119).
- ⁹ Fagenblat, again, writes that the elemental "cannot be experienced directly by consciousness" or be "disclosed by Dasein."
- ¹⁰ This means that, although non-intentional, experiences of pure sensibility do not constitute instances of non-intentional *consciousness*, given, again, their status as non-conscious experience. This, incidentally, runs counter to Zahavi's claim that the sensing that constitutes the *Urimpression* of Husserl's early work on time-consciousness is a non-intentional *consciousness* (for more, see (Coate 2018)). More importantly here, it also rules out interpretations of Levinas's account that partially or even fully equate the non-intentionality of pure sensibility with that of the face-to-face relationship and thus see pure sensibility as already open to alterity on his account (see, e.g., Poleshchuk 2016, especially 7–8).
- ¹¹ See, e.g., Levinas's discussion of this at (Levinas 1998g, p. 131). Also see (Coate 2023).
- ¹² (Fagenblat 2019, pp. 120–21). Fagenblat here doesn't appear to use the term "formal indication" as phenomenologists generally use it, since it's usually used to refer to the employment of a word or phrase that has been repurposed from its mundane use (i.e., to refer to something ontic) to be instead used by the phenomenologist to refer to phenomena of sense-making (or something ontological, in Heidegger's sense); run-of-the-mill "indication" is probably more what Fagenblat has in mind here instead.

Perhaps this is why he puts the phrase in quotation marks (intending them as “scare quotes” rather than as a reference, which is borne out by the fact that no reference is given).

- 13 As well as, we might add, affects of *shame*, given Levinas’s indications elsewhere; See: (Levinas 2003). Of course, Levinas doesn’t refer specifically to the elemental in *On Escape*, as he hadn’t yet coined the term at that point, but it is evident that shame, as he understands it, is supposed to constitute such a disclosure. Fagenblat agrees and writes that in shame “one is not just thrown open into possibility; one is thrown back on oneself, to the impossibility of avoiding oneself” (Fagenblat 2019, p. 115), thus disclosing the fatalism that characterizes the elemental. Incidentally, Levinas denies that *angst*, as Heidegger describes it, constitutes a disclosure of the elemental, but I’m not sure that can be maintained, particularly given its connection to the “untruth.”
- 14 (Levinas 1978, p. 52). There is, to be sure, a strange kind of interest that we nonetheless discover in aesthetic experience (see, e.g., Levinas 1987b, p. 4). However, we can only make sense of this after describing such experiences more fully, and particularly, after describing the unique form of enjoyment that belongs to them.
- 15 Levinas writes here that “a concept is the object grasped. . . already by action we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it” (Levinas 1987b, p. 3).
- 16 (Pentikäinen 2024, p. 149). By speaking of grasping or seizing here, Pentikäinen is obviously playing on the literal meaning of the “-ceive” in “conceive,” just as Levinas does (using the corresponding terms in French) in the passage I cited in the previous footnote. Both are drawing from Heidegger’s notion of a *Vorgriff* as everyday concept or *Begriff*, and of course in German, the same connection is seen between the noun “Begriff” and the verb “greifen.” In any event, we should note that Levinas’s account here echoes Kant’s claims about the non-conceptuality of aesthetic judgment: for objects of aesthetic judgement, *qua* such objects, are understood, on Kant’s score, through only the most general type of concept, as though we were enraptured before a mere “this.” See, e.g., Kant’s notion of the always merely “indeterminate concept of the understanding” employed in aesthetic judgment (Kant 2000, p. 128).
- 17 Levinas insists that aesthetic experience is not unconscious while insisting at the same time that in the experience, “consciousness” is “paralyzed in its freedom” (Levinas 1987b, p. 4). Were this experience instead the *mere* unconscious happening in the subject of a pure sensibility embedded in the elements, we would simply be dealing with the unfolding of instinctual or habitual behaviors on “autopilot,” the sleepwalking, as it were, from which our conscious or “wakeful” experiences are always emerging and ultimately relapsing. Perhaps, then, the strange disclosure of the elemental *as such* in aesthetic experience could be described as a disquieting realization that, at basis, our very engagement in the world always billows out of and returns into such “sleepwalking,” a thoughtless or unreflective unfolding that, at this “deeper” level, goes on without purpose.
- 18 (Hart 2019, p. 56). In fact, Hart’s claim would present Levinas’s position correctly if he reversed it and wrote that art “detaches the essence of an object from its existence, and then presents this *essence* as inessential.” See, for instance, Levinas’s claim that “the disappearance of all things and of the I” that art is able to produce “leaves what cannot disappear, *the sheer fact of being* in which one participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously” (Levinas 1978, p. 58 [my emphasis]). What this means, of course, is that art, according to Levinas, does not present an existence-free essence as if it merely constituted some fictional presentation of reality, but rather, presents an *essence-less existence* as the being-in-itself of the elemental flux of being, shorn of the ever-ephemeral forms by which the subject would, through the guise of what will thereby constitute comprehensible categories for it, grasp the being of a being in light of its own interests and conception of the good.
- 19 For reasons that we’ll see below, this omission in interpretations of the elemental in Levinas’s theory of art makes it impossible to understand its connection to the sacred, and hence, the issue in debates about this account in the literature that I mentioned in my introduction. In fact, one gets the impression that many of the commentators in the literature on Levinas’s theory of art are only taking Levinas’s “Reality and its Shadow” into account in their interpretations, as both Cohen and Hart appear to do (in their explications of Levinas’s account, neither Cohen (Cohen 2016, pp. 160–91) nor Hart (Hart 2019, pp. 55–58) provide anything more than the most passing reference to any of Levinas’s other writings on art), and this probably leads to the one-sided readings of Levinas’s account that we find—for unlike his other writings on art, in this early publication Levinas focuses very narrowly on art’s deworlding from the world’s, as it were, perspective. In *Existents and Existence*, published in the prior year, as well as his later writings on art, Levinas discusses the same ideas presented in “Reality and its Shadow” while placing them in their larger context.
- 20 When Levinas, e.g., contrasts our everyday activities or conscious engagements with the appreciation of artwork he claims that “already by action we maintain a living relationship with a *real object*; we grasp it, we conceive it.” (Levinas 1987b, p. 3 [my emphasis]). On Levinas’s evaluations of the claims of science to truth over art, see (Cohen 2016), and on his positive view of the disenchantment of the world that results from the advances of science and technology, see, for example (Levinas 2000, p. 168).
- 21 In an experience like that of horror, to be precise, the elemental, in its senselessness, appears to get constituted or made sense of *as such* precisely as something that has to be overcome or resisted (even if the resistance in a given case may appear futile, which in general would appear to be the case in an experience of horror). Without going too far afield, however, I think that it’s obvious that in at least *some* of the types of encounters that Levinas refers to as those of horror, there is a kind of beauty that

constitutes itself in the experience, specifically the sort that we could refer to as a *terrible beauty*, which if so will surely complicate the analysis of such phenomena, but will also ultimately lead their analysis back into the one that I'm presenting.

- 22 (Levinas 1998, p. 181). The question can, and should, then be asked: how, exactly, *does* the form of an object give rise to a given subject's sense that the obscurity of being indicating itself in that object's materiality is in fact at one with the world of this subject? Kant's writings on aesthetic judgment, in particular, should make it clear that we can never be absolutely certain about *when* this sort of experience will arise, and yet the dynamic itself is something that genetic analysis is able to clarify. Given the obvious limitations on space here, however, I can only present a static analysis of the experience, describing the experience of beauty only insofar as it is an already-constituted unity or act of consciousness. However, genetic analysis, going deeper, will allow us to see how associations evoked by the material components of an object become juxtaposed, given the object's composition, so that assuming this composition is somehow "just right," and the evoked associations thus combine in a "properly" evocative fashion (whose happening again, we can never predict with certainty), the constitution of a given subject's sense of some sort of harmonious intertwining of elemental and world is thereby able to emerge. But once this is clarified, what will then need to be discussed is how the happening of this juxtaposition recalls the face-to-face as something "immemorial" (in Levinas's sense) along with subjectivity's emergence in something like a subject's "second birth" into the world (as Arendt would have it). Luckily, however, the clarification of these points isn't necessary for my purposes here.
- 23 The language of the earth and world's "belonging together" is of course very Heideggerian, which I purposefully employ here in order to indicate how close Levinas's conception of art is to Heidegger's. The major difference, of course, is that Levinas expresses concerns about artwork for the very reasons that make Heidegger champion it. For more, see (Coate 2013, p. 184, p. 257 note 1).
- 24 I should note here that the "as though" related to aesthetic experience that I express here and, a little later, in my section on Levinas's notion of the sacred in art is meant to indicate a modalization in the very experience of art and beauty itself, for such experiences evidently do not present matters in the manner of a straightforward assertion of reality as do the sorts of experiences we could call cognition (following Kant, of course). I discuss this more below in note 28.
- 25 (Levinas 1987a, p. 82 [italics mine]). In "What is Postmodernism?," Lyotard presents a critique of the aims of at least *much* artwork, particularly what he calls "realism" (Lyotard 1984, pp. 72–77), that is broadly consistent with the worries that Levinas has about art and beauty *in general* that I'll explore at the end of this article. Strengthening the parallels, in fact, Lyotard implies that the root issue with all such problematic art is its aiming at beauty (Lyotard 1984, pp. 75–76, 78). Lyotard, however, goes on to argue that art today *ought* to rectify matters by expressing the sublime instead (Lyotard 1984, pp. 77–79), and here, I am certain that he and Levinas would part ways, because although Levinas doesn't ever address Lyotard's well-known notion of the sublime in "What is Postmodernism?," he would surely claim that this notion (which admittedly appears to depart from Kant's notion of the sublime in some fairly significant ways) simply represents what Levinas calls "the beautiful of modern art" (Levinas 1987b, p. 12), and although Levinas has some positive things to say about such beauty (which for my part, I largely understand to be a type of the "terrible beauty" that I discuss in note 21 above), he doesn't believe that it fully overcomes the ethical issues implied by artistic beauty in general. Important as these disputes are, adjudicating them would obviously take us too far afield here. I should note, though, that Levinas's position may appear quite radical insofar as it apparently implies that *all* artwork aims at beauty, even, e.g., a work such as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, which if Umberto Eco is correct (as an anonymous reviewer of this article has helpfully pointed out to me) instead aims to pull back from the world to something like the elemental and simply *remain* there—Eco writes of the "primordial and disordered flow" to which Joyce has "reduced reality" (Eco 1982, p. 65)—which would appear to constitute an expression of what Levinas calls *horror*, not beauty. Now I would double down here and claim that Joyce in fact does aim at a particular sort of "modern beauty," in Levinas's conception of this, but of course one need not concur and could simply claim that there are exceptions to the rule that all art aims to express beauty without having to take this as a rejection of Levinas's account *en toto*. In that case, however, Levinas's critique of art would have little or no bearing on apparent exceptions like *Finnegan's Wake*.
- 26 Levinas makes precisely this point in (Levinas 1987b, p. 7).
- 27 It's no coincidence, for one, that Kant, who of course claims that the judgment of beauty *per se* doesn't make use of any determinate concept, claims also that a beautiful work of art must appear as though it were a product of nature (Kant 2000, pp. 185–86). We may also think of Heidegger's separation of nature from the everyday concepts, or *Vorgriffe*, of a being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962, p. 100) and the role this deconceptualization plays in the manifestation of artwork (Heidegger 1977a, pp. 172–74).
- 28 Levinas, after all, speaks of the sacred as result of the reduction of transcendence to being, so that in this captivation the absolute that commands a given subject (which I'll discuss below in connection with the holy) can only appear to be identical with being itself. A genetic analysis of the experience of beauty (which I discussed in a footnote #64 above) would be able to trace out the very unfolding of this reduction, but there's unfortunately no room for that here. In any event, the similarities with Kant's position again appear to stand out, for Kant, claiming once more that the judgment of beauty employs no determinate concepts, thus insists on a connection between the experience and our sense of the unrepresentable noumenal, as though the ineffable font of reality somehow expressed itself through an object or, rather, were incomprehensibly discovered by the subject in it (Kant 2000,

pp. 215–17). Now as Kant says, we shouldn't think that this provides us with *objective evidence* that some sacred divine *really* expresses itself in the ineffable unity that the object seems to exhibit (it isn't usual, objectivating perceptual consciousness that constitutes itself here, after all), nor should we think that the individual who undergoes the experience even *believes* that the sacred is actually afoot; all that matters is that it *feels* as though it were (i.e., whether or not, or in what way, the given subject might assent or not assent to what that subject feels as though it were encountering).

To speak, after all, of an understanding that isn't *really* an understanding in this regard is just to say that it is *as if* "everything makes sense" to one in the experience of beauty without one ever really being able to say *how*, or what this sense is even supposed to be.

(Levinas 1998e, p. 145 [emphasis mine]). Levinas also writes that it is "as though the invisible that bypasses the present left a trace by the very fact of bypassing the present," and as such, left "a debt contracted before any freedom and before any consciousness and any present" (Levinas 1991a, p. 12).

This is not a "truth of being," given that no unconcealment of being has yet come to pass in it, even though it first enables any such disclosure.

Such a conception of the good is absolutely inconceivable, that is, given the impossibility of conceiving of any project that would allow a finite being to unconditionally take everyone other in turn, without end, into account. See, e.g., (Coate 2020, p. 445).

Levinas adds "and does better than think," (Levinas 1998j, p. 221).

(Levinas 1991a, p. 91). For this reason, Levinas writes that "thus we are responsible beyond our intentions. It is impossible for the attention directing the act to avoid inadvertent action. We get caught up in things; things turn against us. That is to say that our consciousness, and our mastery of reality through consciousness, do not exhaust our relationship with reality, in which we are present with all the density of our being." (Levinas 1998f, p. 4).

Derrida discusses his notion of an "arche-violence" at, e.g., (Derrida 1997, p. 112) and relates it to Freud's notion of primal repression at (Derrida 1973, p. 63). For more, see (Coate 2017, pp. 79, 86).

However much its sense of its own responsibility will always then remain in need of the further rectification that a recurrence of this deliverance might enable it to pursue. See, e.g., (Levinas 1998m, p. 196).

Of course, there is also an intentionality connected with our encounters with others, through which the other is given as this particular individual, possessing various characteristics that precisely determine for a given subject its obligations to the individual in question. In that case, though, we are dealing with the being-with of one's being-in-the-world, rather than the encounter with the other *as such*, which our being-in-the-world, and its particular forms of *Mitsein*, always presupposes.

See, e.g., (Levinas 1998g, pp. 129–30). It's worth bearing in mind here too that in French (which Levinas obviously was using in this passage) the same word is used for the English "consciousness" and "conscience."

Levinas speaks of its significance as a nonsense in *Otherwise than Being* in particular: see, e.g., (Levinas 1991a, pp. 64, 79, and especially pp. 163–64 (for in the latter, Levinas compares the different ways in which the "there is" and the other's revelation can each be considered a kind of "nonsense")).

Levinas writes, e.g., that the Infinite is non-thematizable, gloriously exceeds every capacity, and manifests, as it were in reverse, its exorbitance in the approach of a neighbor, obedient to its measure (Levinas 1998a, p. 12).

(Levinas 1991a, p. 12). Thus, as the subject assumes its responsibility more it only ever finds itself called to account for itself *further* and to *more* fully take into account everyone other in turn.

For more on Levinas's understanding of the difference between the holy and the sacred, see (Caruana 2006, pp. 571–80).

Levinas thus writes, for example, that "the artist moves in a universe that precedes... the world of creation, a universe that the artist has already gone beyond by his thought and his everyday actions." (Levinas 1987b, p. 7).

(Levinas 1991a, p. 199 note 21). To put it otherwise, beauty is the *appearance* of *God*, one that we ultimately can't live with or without. See also: (Levinas 1991a, p. 40). Given its ambivalence, in fact, beauty must always in some sense express the infinitude of moral responsibility at the same time that it gives us over to the sacred that always comes to limit this—a complexity that an artist looking to push our concrete moral conceptions further, even perhaps towards the absolute, can always exploit. This accounts for Levinas's claim that art can sometimes express the ethical, which I explore in (Coate 2013). Yet this possibility can never obviate the concerns about artwork that I examine here, given that they are rooted, once more, in the very essence of art and beauty.

Levinas's notion of idolatry seems similar to Marion's notion of the same (see, e.g., Marion 2012, pp. 7–24) and could easily be fleshed out by recourse to Marion's work, since according to both the idol reduces the divine to our sense of being (One might wonder, however, whether art, on Levinas's reckoning, could constitute an "icon" in Marion's sense, and this—perhaps surprisingly—should be answered in the affirmative, although only to some extent, limited by art's idolatrous significance, for reasons I briefly discuss in note 44 just above).

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