The Ethical Role of Aesthetic Experience in Levinas

by

James Vander Zaag

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ABSTRACT
THE ETHICAL ROLE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN LEVINAS

James Vander Zaag
University of Guelph, 2019

Advisor(s):
John Hacker-Wright
Karen Houle

Emmanuel Levinas concedes an ethical role for art to play in its secondary, discursive and conceptual form but denies that the primary, immersive and essential experience of art has any ethical significance whatsoever. This thesis seeks to find an ethical sense in the first hand experience of the work of art, an ethical sense that would satisfy Levinas’ own ethical thinking. I begin by formulating what would count as an ethical resource in Levinas’ own terms, and then reconstruct Levinas’ aesthetic account to locate its disengagement. Then I use Maurice Blanchot’s account of aesthetic experience, which is also a phenomenology of the work, to respond to Levinas. Blanchot describes a moment in aesthetic experience, what he calls the original experience, that is a genuine encounter with alterity, that calls me into question and displaces the ego from its sovereignty within subjectivity. This moment must be accepted as part of Levinas’ aesthetic account because it describes a prior condition to the aesthetic experience that Levinas describes. The original experience then provides a way of seeing an ethical role in the experience of the work of art, that of pushing back my tendency for totalization and opening me up to an encounter with alterity.
DEDICATION

To Theo who gave me space for creativity and to Ashley who keeps open the alterity of objects.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

In 1948, in Reality and its Shadow, Levinas argues that the experience of art has no ethical role to play because art is essentially disengaged from the world and can be used to evade one’s personal responsibility. And yet, just a few years later, Levinas reopens this question. On the last page of Is Ontology Fundamental? (1951), Levinas briefly muses about the possibility of some sort of relation, whether substitutive or analogous, between art and ethics. He asks:

Can things take on a face? Is not art an activity that lends faces to things? Does not the facade of a house regard us? The analysis thus far does not suffice for an answer. We ask ourselves all the same if the impersonal but fascinating and magical march of rhythm does not, in art, substitute itself for sociality, for the face, for speech (BPW 10).

In the works following this question Levinas reaffirms his former position, that aesthetics and ethics are completely separate, admitting of no possible overlap or positive relation between the two.\(^\text{1}\) Perhaps he is answering this question directly when, in 1964, he claims: “[t]hings have no face”, they have “no identity; convertible into another thing, it can become money” (TI 140), nor can aesthetics give faces to things, because in art “the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image” (TI 140). Aesthetics leads to contentment with our finite enjoyment, and can’t play a role in the transcendence or relation to alterity that ethics requires. The beautiful face in a painting substitutes the “troubling depth” (TI 263) of the speaking face I encounter with a

\(^\text{1}\) Such as Totality and Infinity (1961) and Otherwise than Being (1974).
“weightless” image. He even goes so far as to suggest that our aesthetic mode of engagement can be a “ludic gratuity in which the gravity of alterity goes off in smoke in cheerfulness and ecstasy” (OB 164). This is a harsh pronouncement from one who frequently makes reference to literary works and whose son became a piano player and composer.²

In this paper, I want to return to Levinas’ 1951 musings on the relation between art and ethics, and respond to the position that thinks of art has having absolutely no ethical role to play whatsoever. I will respond to Levinas on his own terms. For art to be an ethical resource for Levinas it needs to 1) interrupt totality, 2) initiate some movement before which I am passive and yet 3) I am called to respond, which constitutes me as an ‘I’. These three criteria will be called exteriority, heteronomy and responsibility. Levinas’ aesthetics plays ambiguously with all three criteria, leading him to think that aesthetic experience can either be unethical or non-ethical, but never a positive ethical resource of any kind.

Chapter One of this thesis consists of explicating Levinas’ ethical criteria; it seeks to answer “under what conditions would Levinas himself have to admit that something is an ethical resource?” Chapter Two consolidates and summarizes Levinas’ core thinking on aesthetics, where he situates the aesthetic moment, and runs this account through the ethical criteria outlined in Chapter One. Chapter three will use Maurice Blanchot’s account of aesthetic experience to respond to Levinas. I will argue that the genuine aesthetic experience is one that fully displaces the ego in the subject which can play the role of pushing back totality and opening one up to a relation with alterity, and that this can be seen as satisfying Levinas’ ethical criteria.

² “Levinas is in fact the only philosopher of modernity who did not share in the general enthusiasm for the arts, and in particular, for painting” (Crignon, 101).
Note on Not Capitalizing ‘other’

Although Levinas translators capitalize the human other in most works, I will follow the usage of most Levinas commentators in not capitalizing the word. Mensch’s reason for not capitalizing is that “the face of the other is the speaking face. It is not simply totally Other as some critics have suggested, the way that a bat’s face is other” (Mensch 32). I think this is right and important. The human other speaks to me and I am able to respond to her speech. Even when simply looking at her face, I am affected by her suffering and vulnerability, so she is not the totally Other.

Chapter One: Levinas’ Ethical Criteria

To answer the question of the ethical role of art for Levinas, we must first sketch out Levinas’ account of the ethical so as to understand what is required for something to count as ethical. I will reconstruct the key moves in Levinas’ ethics, drawing from Is Ontology Fundamental? (1951) Totality and Infinity (1961) and Transcendence and Height (1962). These works are cohesive in that they develop similar themes and are mutually illuminating in that they summarize, expand or clarify each other. The three main requirements for a Levinasian ethics include exteriority, heteronomy and response on the part of the subject. But before examining these, we will take a quick detour to contextualize Levinas’ ethical project.

Contrary to this thought, Crignon suggests that an animal’s face wouldn’t be other at all but more like a sign, transparently signifying its inner contents such as fear, hunger or aggressiveness (Crignon, 103).
Levinasian Ethics and Other Types of Ethics

Since childhood we have both a notion of and a practical use of moral concepts. We understand what someone means when they tell us that a certain action is right and others are wrong, and we understand what behaviours follow from these claims. When we praise a friend for being a good person or blame another for failing at some expectation, we grasp what is meant by these statements and can find them compelling and motivating. In everyday life we are quite fluent at applying such concepts in our evaluations of people, actions and consequences, and we rarely find ourselves in a position where we need to clarify or explain such evaluations in a theoretical manner. The institutional disciplines and social situations that make moral thinking explicit are the minority cases. The majority of ethical life is implicit (Dreyfus 231).

Levinas’ ethical goal isn’t to clarify our moral concepts, give us tools to assist our moral judgments or to help us decide what actions are right. If it is true that the majority of moral life is implicit, as opposed to explicit or theoretical, then Levinas is situated closer to everyday life. To illustrate how phenomenology could make such a contribution to ethics, here is an analogy using time. Let’s say we ask a philosopher what ‘time’ is. We would get an answer like: ‘time is a measure of motion’. Notice how this answer is abstract, universal and theoretical; how can such an answer be intelligible to any listener? The phenomenologist will say that in order to create any theory of time, that person must first have had some originary experience of the passage of time; some sense of time’s movement. We can point to this original experience to say what makes it possible to form such a theory and also what makes such a theory intelligible to anyone who hears it. Switching now to ethics, we can see how a general phenomenological project would seek to find an originary ethical experience, on the basis of which we are able to construct and understand abstract ethical theories. Levinas’ project overlaps with this one I just described. His goal is to identify the aspect of everyday human life that provides the basis for morality of any kind. He does this by using phenomenology to describe the event through which the ethical enters into experience, but in doing this,
we also bump into another dimension that can’t be uncovered, and this is going to be genuine otherness. His project consists of the difficult and subtle attempt to describe how genuine otherness interrupts me as I am brought into a relation to it, and how this is the basis for human ethical life.4

He identifies the basis of ethical social life, the difficult and subtle site described above, as the face of the other person. Waldenfels describes the face as a highly ambiguous phenomenon because “[i]t arises here and now without finding its place within the world” (Waldenfels 63). This phenomenon can be divided into the common face, which is how we ordinarily understand the word, ie, the zone of personal features on the front of the head, the locus of expression and much of sensation, the front of a building etc., and the speaking face, which brings me into a relation with something transcendent. This duality has a bewildering effect on us because it ambiguously straddles the line between the real and the sublime, or the normal and anomalous. It has this duel quality because the face “can be understood as the turning point between the own and the alien where a certain dispossession takes place” (Waldenfels 65). Waldenfels is talking about the way that my world is full of objects that I’m familiar with in that I know what they are for and how to use them. I even know how to use a sunset; it is there for my enjoyment. The face stands out from all of these as unique, and in this sense it is unfamiliar, alien and even uncanny. This effects a dispossession both in the appearing face and the whole person it belongs to, since their alterity precludes my grasp and ownership of them, and also a dispossession of things in the world, for now these worldly things don’t belong to me so clearly or incontestably.

This brings us to why the face is the source or origin of ethics: it is this interruption and speaking that has the power to get me out of a state of egoism and to act for the sake of another person. This egoism is neither an ethical nor an anthropological state, but a phenomenological condition, one that describes the features

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4 Morality consists of universal principles whereas “Ethics,” by contrast, connotes the more personalized, less universal and consequently less rigorously rationalizable aspects of our moral interaction with others in the world” (Mcdonald, 19). In these terms, ‘ethics’, which is something personal and particular, is a prior condition of morality, which is rational and universal.
of experience as having reference to the experiencer. The given, or what ‘shows up’, in experience, gets its meaning and comprehensibility in a way that is fundamentally adjusted to my situatedness. Levinas’ problem with this type of egoism isn’t that it is unethical, rather, it is fundamentally non-ethical because it is a state that, phenomenologically, comes before the possibility of any ethics. There is “[a] calling into question of the Same […] [which] is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ‘ethics’” (TI 43). The speaking other calls me into question, which occurs, partly, as a phenomena within experience. This is how the ethical dimension enters into experience, but not fully within my world; it is initiated by the other. I now have to justify my choices and what I do with my freedom. This gives me the possibility of limiting my (finite) freedom, for ethics shows up as a limit at first. But then it allows me to act for the sake of another (which is infinite freedom), and this opens up the possibility of becoming an “I” and of living a meaningful life. It is only because of this encounter that I am able to get out of my state of egoism and respond to the needs of a particular other person according to their unique situation and my unique ability to respond. This is how the ethical enters my world.

Levinas’ central thesis is that ethics (or the way he is doing it) is primary to any other human discipline, including ontology. He says that “[t]he establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man - signification, teaching, and justice - a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest […], is one of the objectives of the present work” (TI 79). The fact that “all other structures rest” on the face leads me to interpret the face as some sort of transcendental condition that constitutes and is determinative for the rest of human life. The face is “the condition for every opinion as also for every objective truth” (TI 25) and even “[t]he condition of time lies in the relationship between humans” (TO 79). The faces that I encounter and how they affect me and how I respond definitely constitutes the meaning of human social life, which in turn shapes everything from the nature of my interactions with others, the possibility of living a meaningful life in general to the
meaning of objects I encounter. That is, human life and the things I encounter in my world wouldn’t be the way they are if it weren’t for the face.\(^5\)

Levinas’ philosophical concept of the face designates a realm of human encounter that is pre-conceptual, pre-theoretical and prelinguistic.\(^6\) We certainly have concepts and words for faces and ethics, but Levinas’ point is that these happen later, or that these concepts are grounded in a pre-reflective encounter that belongs more to the order of affectivity and desire. These terms are important because they point to the subjective side of the encounter with the face, which is an encounter with the other’s vulnerability and dependence on me, which are features that can’t be separated from the other. This provides the basis for my ethical response. Levinas’ main goal is to draw our attention to this dimension of life that we all encounter, and to tell of the origin of ethics from this perspective.

There are a number of points of comparison that we can draw between what Levinas is doing and between everyday ethics and the ethics of philosophers or normative ethical theories. Unlike ordinary people in ordinary situations, Levinas isn’t trying to answer the question ‘what ought I to do?’, either in terms of general rules or in a given specific situation. People ask this question and answer it daily in everyday life. Levinas’ focus, on the other hand, is ‘underneath’ this one, it is to ask what makes a moral question possible, or what makes it meaningful to me.

Levinas differs from other philosophical accounts of ethics both in origin and in the picture of human life that emerges. He has chosen an origin that is below the level of conception, as if it were too originary to conceive. This is sort of like those species of particles that are smaller than a wavelength of light; they are so fundamental that they slip between the light and lack the ability to reflect. This makes them without the quality

\(^5\) “Levinas is not primarily interested in offering moral guidance but is attempting to ground normativity—in fact, the very meaning of human life—in the face-to-face encounter. What is new in Levinas is not a new ethics, but the idea that subjectivity itself is “ethical” in a foundational sense we normally do not notice” (Reed, 26).

\(^6\) “Unlike much contemporary writing on ethics, Levinas does not assume or even expect rationality and morality to be in agreement. Nor does he conceive his project as an attempt to elucidate the way we actually think about morality” (CC, Bernasconi, 237).
of colour or even of being seen and yet they are constitutive of all that is seen. Levinas’ moral concepts attempt to bring our attention to these aspects of life that are ‘too small’ or primordial, as opposed to other ethical starting points that are immediately accessible to comprehension, such as ‘virtue’, pain or what can be ‘willed with consistency’.

Levinas also departs from other attempts to use phenomenology to contribute to philosophical ethical discussions, such as Dreyfus’ use of his phenomenology of skill uptake to describe the progress made by the ethical learner. Dreyfus describes the ethical novice as a stage that is preoccupied with rules, maxims and conscious rational deliberation, while the ethical expert is able to use immersive, intuitive ethical coping (Dreyfus 237). Although Levinas could be thought of as a phenomenological philosopher who places ethics in the later category (as immersive, intuitive, contextual etc.), his focus is more accurately beneath this type of project; he is asking what makes it possible for me to engage in ethics of any sort, whether it is detached deliberation or immersive coping.

Finally, Levinas’ end point isn’t an ethical theory, a theory of right actions, good persons or an account of moral development. In what amounts to a thesis statement in Totality and Infinity, he says that “ethics is an optics. But it is a ‘vision’ without image [...] a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type - which this work seeks to describe” (TI 23). His intended result is to draw our attention to the face, which takes place in a dimension of life that we all encounter but often ‘forget’, and to tell an account of the origin of ethics from this perspective. From this, we get a view of human life that is inherently or fundamentally ethical; that we are ethical before we are anything else. Such a view was his response to 20th century atrocities, and is no less relevant as we face different forms of ethical relativism today.
Section 1: Exteriority

a) Totality and Thought

Levinas’ ethical thinking was motivated by 20th century atrocities. “Hitler, Auschwitz, and Nazi fascism meant a great deal to Levinas - to his life, of course, and also to his philosophical thinking and to his thinking about Judaism. Yet at times Levinas talks about Nazism and Auschwitz in particular, at times about this event as part of or characteristic of a larger phenomenon” (Morgan 16). Levinas thinks that this larger phenomenon constitutes a crisis in modernity which is characterized by the western world’s tendency for totalization. Neither politics, nor western philosophy nor even phenomenology are able to resist or respond to totalization, since they are themselves totalizing disciplines, as they attempt to form systematic wholes that fail to leave room for an ‘other’ or an outside. This makes them perpetrators of what is characteristic of the problem. Levinas spends much of his time talking about and comparing ethics with comprehension and thought, which, through their tendency to assimilate and make completed wholes, are the root of totalization. Sometimes he refers to this as ‘idealism’. Levinas’ use of this word can be thought of as a way of illustrating his thinking about totality. When the thinking person is at home in the world and has some comprehension of it, they comprehend it from their perspective as a thinking person, using their concepts, ideas, principles and theories to make sense of the world as a systematic whole. Levinas’ use of ‘ideal’ points to the fact that the form of understanding originates from the Same and this process initiates an absorption or homogenization of my world that blurs the distinction between the Same and the other.

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7 The Same can be thought of as constituted by both sensation and thought which are made possible through my bodily separation from the world. Later in this chapter I will distinguish between Levinas’ more fine grained parts of the subject such as the self, ego and “I”. For now, the Same is some generalized combination of the self and the ego which are united through separation.
In *Transcendence and Height*, he reaffirms this notion of totality as including all forms of western philosophy. He says that “[t]he ontological event accomplished by philosophy consists in suppressing or transmuting the alterity of all that is Other, in universalizing the immanence of the Same or of Freedom, in effacing the boundaries, and in expelling the violence of Being” (BPW 11). It is the Same who performs this transmutation. This is an ontological event because it is the Same’s effort to comprehend things that transforms them into comprehensible things. The light of comprehension does this by making everything that is outside appear in my light, conform to my categories and interpretation etc., and thus making it seem as though it came from me. In Heideggerian terms, things in the world are manifest to me according to my moods of disclosure, that is, in a way that fits my human being. This act universalizes my freedom in the sense that I am free to comprehend and interpret anything I come across, and this interpreting fixes any object with meaning, purpose or intended use. I am now free to use the object in a way that reflects me, that suits me, and is based in me. For Levinas, being is naturally in a state of violence because it is plural; it consists of different entities, with different interpretations and meanings, and these often conflict, are at dissonance or are simply incommensurable. The comprehension of the Same effects a homogenization in being where all entities are rendered commensurate, getting their interpretation from a single source, thus ‘expelling the violence of Being’.

In Levinas’ terms, idealism and the way it perpetuates a totality, isn’t just a theory argued by philosophers, “[i]t rests upon solid reasons which found the privilege of the Same in comparison with the Other” (BPW 12). This idealism isn’t merely theoretical, but a deep part of the nature of comprehension and knowledge which always privilege the Same by both originating in the Same and construing the rest of being relative to the Same. In other words, these ‘solid reasons’ are structural reason that come from the nature of knowledge.

This idealism or tendency to totalize, is so pervasive that even theoretical attempts to be free from it still tacitly assume it. This is why Levinas asserts that we can’t use realism to affirm the transcendence of the other either, because it defines the
other in terms of being, “but the idea of being is fundamentally adequate to and adjusted
to the Same” (BPW 12). What Levinas is trying to say is that even though realism
asserts that the being of things is independent from my consciousness, the idea of the
being of any specific thing originates from and conforms to the structure of my
consciousness. Thus, realism asserts being, which comes from me, which makes
realism just another form of idealism. This is sufficient to show Levinas’ point: any act of
thinking and comprehension whatsoever effects a totality.⁸

It should come as no surprise that theories within philosophy can’t lead us to the
primordial experience that founds ethics, because such a task is outside of the scope of
philosophy itself. In Totality and Infinity, philosophy is seen as a discipline that can only
deal with evidence, and since the evidence that we get from being and existence is that
war is its natural state and an ongoing inevitable state, philosophy is unable to defend
the truth of morality (TI, 24). Simply going beyond evidence also can’t establish the truth
of morality, for that will only get us subjective opinions. Levinas’ solution to this problem
lays through transcendental phenomenology, which he sees as a way of remaining on
“this side of objective certitude”, while encountering a situation that “gleam[s] of
exteriority” (TI, 25-4). In other words, phenomenology is used by Levinas to describe the
encounter with something that refuses to be totalized, and both this encounter and the
non-totalizable relation with the other is the origin of ethics.

b) Freedom and Desire

Levinas uses his notions of freedom and desire to describe, from the Same’s
point of view, our anticipation of and attraction to a breach in our totality. He thinks of
the domain of comprehension (the categories, meaning and use given to the world by

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⁸ Derrida argues in Violence and Metaphysics that any thinking about otherness will incorporate
the other into a totality. This is because “the other is other only as other than myself. The other cannot be
absolved of a relation to an ego from which it is other; it cannot be absolutely other” (CC, Bernasconi,
243). Levinas attempts to avoid this problem in later works by switching to the term ‘otherwise than
being’. For now, we can view this account as drawing our attention towards alterity, not as containing it.
the Same) as identical with that of freedom. And it is the freedom that is upheld by the Same that finds itself imprisoned by the Same (BPW 12). The Same is free because it is separate from being, a separation which constitutes its comprehension and ultimately its powerful use over being. But this freedom is also a form of imprisonment because the Same can’t get outside of itself or its perspective and so its options in life are limited. As Mensch notes, others provide the genuine alternatives that are necessary for freedom (Mensch 126). Other people give us a chance to see the world differently, to learn something new and pick a different path.

The Same must have some sense of this, even if it is not featured in discursive thought, which leads it to “therefore seek […] itself in the relation with the wholly other, which is not convertible into the already known” (BPW 12). Although freedom comes from and tries to support the interests of the Same, it “cannot repress the Desire for the absolutely Other” (BPW 12).

Levinas’ notion of desire is supposed to be a metaphysical hypothesis, and is important for his account because it describes, from my side of the face-to-face, what motivates my relation to the other while maintaining her alterity. The same way that metaphysics is turned towards what is absent, elsewhere or other, so metaphysical desire is likewise oriented towards an other, to what I can’t possess or absorb (TI 33-34). In contrast, Levinas reserves the word ‘need’ for when we find ourselves in some sort of deficit, whether psychological, physiological or even ontological, and seek to return to a satisfied state (TI 103-4). Desire is not based in a need and is conditioned by no prior lack for it is a part of the “life of beings that have arrived at self-possession” (TI 103). In other words, even after the Same has achieved every fulfillment or mode of completion possible within its world, this completed being will still desire. And since desire doesn’t seek to return to a base line of satisfaction, it has no satisfaction criteria. Indeed, instead of satisfying or lessening itself, desire engenders itself, it increases itself, gets more intense the more it relates to what it seeks. But since it seeks alterity, or what is other, it has no hope of reaching the desired as a content that it would grasp.
or be filled by. Mensch notes that needs correspond to a specific content, so they can be satisfied through a matching of contents, such as the way my hunger seeks foods. In this way, needs and their satisfactions make up totalities. But desire seeks alterity as its content; it seeks what is infinitely remote and impossible to totalize (Mensch 28).

One result of this has to do with reversibility: “The reversibility of the relation [...] would couple them the one to the other; they would complete one another in a system visible from the outside. The intended transcendence would thus be reabsorbed into the unity of the system, [thereby] destroying the radical alterity of the other” (TI 35-36).

Levinas thinks that if this relation could be thought of as reversible, as the other desiring me the same as I desire the other, then I would be able to think the relation starting from the other side. But this starting or comprehending from the other’s side would annul his alterity. Such comprehension would make the relation into a symmetry or a unity that would be visible or graspable from the outside, thus totalizing the relation as a system. Levinas says that it is impossible to get an outside perspective or view on this relation as “[t]he radical separation between the same and the other means precisely that it is impossible to place oneself outside of the correlation between the same and the other so as to record the correspondence or non-correspondence of this going with this return” (TI 36). I can neither get into the other’s perspective, see it from his side, nor, since the relation is infinitely far apart, can I get far enough away to see both sides or triangulate the distance.

Desire is one way of explaining my relation to the other that isn’t one of cognition and that doesn’t seek to possess, impose or assimilate. Instead, desire is articulated as a positive propulsion, a seeking, and a striving to respond. The effect the other has on me is disinterested desire, which aims at goodness (TI 50).

Desire shows up in my experience since I have some attunement to the good of the other. And yet, the other is essentially situated outside of my sphere of experience, so my desire of him is properly metaphysical, so it aims at the good that is outside. Since this isn’t a good that I can absorb or encapsulate, I respond instead; I seek to become good myself in response to the other. My desire turns into generosity, where I seek to give, or to avoid approaching the other empty handed. I can’t speak of the other,
but I can testify to his goodness through my good actions, which simultaneously are aware that they are never good enough. The term ‘desire’ tries to show that I am unsatisfied, and am continually striving and aspiring to relieve the other’s suffering. It is an expression of my awareness of the imperative of the face.

c) Face and Otherness

It is through freedom and desire that I seek the Other, but I actually encounter the Other in the event of the face. I made some opening remarks on the face and its place in Levinas’ thinking, but since it appears at this part in our story, I will give it a more in-depth treatment here. The face, or the presence of the face, is how the other breeches my totality. This is the heart of Levinas’ ethics. He gives his most detailed account of this in *Totality and Infinity* where he says that “[t]he face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompasses” (TI, 194). The other doesn’t resist me as an object that is too complex or a theory that is too advanced for me to grasp; the other resists me as a refusal to enter fully into my grasp. The face is a rupture of knowledge because it offers more than what can be known, and it is a resistance to phenomenology because it is a phenomena that overflows its own phenomenality. In short, it is a given that gives itself as not able to be fully given.

Levinas refers to this as the *other’s infinity*. “The presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing, the sphere of the same determines its ‘status’ as infinite” (TI 195). Mensch attempts to clarify this remark like this: “I see the eyes as features of the face. I do not see *what makes them eyes* - that is, their seeing. Both what they *have seen* and *will see* escape me” (Mensch, 114). There are many features of the Other that aren't public objects, or able to enter into my world, nor available to my sight and sensibility. But to explain otherness in terms of ‘unavailable features’ has already cast the other in terms of the Same. Morgan attempts to explain otherness as a brute fact: “You are exterior, other, and outside, and your sheer otherness is not a function of or constituted by spatial difference, nonidentity of features or properties, or any other such things”
The brute fact of otherness can only be asserted and can not be characterized positively. Waldenfels notes this as well: “If the other’s face transcends the ontological reign of more or less defined entities we are able only to say what it is not, or more precisely: we can only show that it is not something at all. The list of negations is long and sometimes tiresome” (Waldenfels, 66-7). However, if otherness were conceived merely in terms of opposition, then genuine otherness would disappear under that concept (TI, 38). Both saying what it is and saying what it is not are both forms of assimilation.

In order to remain intact, otherness can’t be converted into a concept or explained, but must remain an event that the Same encounters from outside of its world. While on the other hand, there are a few things that can be said to help us clarify the meaning of this encounter so as to be better acquainted with it or to draw our attention to it in our own lives. I have already mentioned how otherness indicates the other’s intrusion from outside, and its escape from my predictability, my grasping, freedom and control. Morgan assists his negative descriptions with some positive ones: otherness is constituted by “dependence”, “vulnerability” and “nudity”, or by his suffering and my capacity to respond (Morgan 60). What this means is that otherness shows up as vulnerability, or when I encounter it, it means vulnerability to me. In the second chapter we will see that art is unable to take on this meaning.9

**d) Horizon and Depth**

To fully grasp what makes the relation to the other the source of ethics, this relation will require some further characterization. I will start with an interesting distinction that Levinas makes between a horizon and a depth. If the face was present to me in a horizon, then it would be true that “Levinas conlates the descriptive and the

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9 I use the word ‘means’ here in its affective sense, ie, how it makes a change or pull in the subject. In other contexts, ‘meaning’ can refer to my cognitive sense of things, as in their dictionary definition. This dual use of the term is a product of the problem of conveying the experience of otherness in written form.
normative" (EFP, 59). However, In *Is Ontology Fundamental?*, he describes our relation to the other as the ‘invocation of a face’ and as ‘speech’ and further characterizes these as a “relation with a certain depth rather than with a horizon - a breach in the horizon” (BPW 10). A horizon may be described as a background or peripheral referential totality in which individual things get their context, their reference and their meaning. That is, objects are what they are, or get their their means, ends and possibilities, with reference to a horizon. We can begin to see how a horizon might belong to the realm of totality. I will briefly explain Husserl’s use of the word, from whom Levinas gets the notion, so as to be in a better position to compare it with Levinas’ use of the term ‘depth’.¹⁰

Husserl introduces the notion of horizon to “express the interplay between presence and absence at the heart of intentionality” (Smith 75). Moreover, horizons can be divided into inner and outer ones. Inner horizons are “the further parts and aspects of an object itself that are not exhibited in a particular experience of an object” (Smith 75), but that could be experienced if I were to, say, walk around and look at it from a different angle. Outer Horizons are those “things that are not parts or aspects of that very thing at all, but which are yet implicated in any consciousness of it” (Smith 75). Each thing makes reference beyond itself to numerous other absent things which also play a role in constituting its identity. Any explicit intentional grasp of an object will also contain an implicit co-giving of a background field of other objects. These co-given objects include those things that currently surround the object I am looking at but lay in my peripheral vision.¹¹ These are sensorily registered but not explicitly attended to. The co-given also include those objects that aren’t currently in my field of perception at all but are linked meaningfully to the thing that I am currently intending. If I am in my kitchen looking at my (closed) fridge, its crisper drawers and other interior features are given to me as inner horizontal aspects. The stove beside it and the pans on the wall are

¹⁰ Husserl uses ‘depth’ to describe the temporal nature of our horizons (Smith 88), while Levinas is going to use the term to show a reality that doesn’t appear spread out before me horizontally. For Levinas, a depth cannot be thought of in temporal terms because time is already a structural aspect of my totality.

¹¹ I will attempt to illustrate horizons using visual and spatial examples but these do not exhaust our horizontal experience of the world.
outer horizontal aspects of my intending as they are included in my sensory field but not attended to. Likewise, the fish and eggs in the grocery store that I have yet to buy are included as absent outer horizontal features that are co-given with the meaning of my fridge.

Levinas doesn’t explicitly say what type of horizon he is thinking of when he says that ‘the face doesn’t appear within a horizon’ (unlike the broccoli in my crisper). It is clear that no further investigation of the features within the face, nor of what peripherally surrounds its appearing, nor of what is absent can further elucidate its meaning. There is nothing in implicit consciousness or that is potentially available to consciousness that constitutes the meaning of the face. On the one hand, the face simply signifies itself, but on the other hand, and paradoxically, calling the face a depth is a way of saying that its co-given parts, or its context, simply is alterity. If we were to speak of the face’s absent parts that are alluded to in any consciousness of the face, then we would have to say that this is the face’s alterity, or, the fact that it refers to its own exteriority. Thus, a ‘depth’ is a suitable play on the term ‘horizon’, because it refers to what is absent and yet part of the meaning of the face, but also points to how this absent part can’t be or become intended.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas uses the term ‘depth’ to convey a sense of distance. “A relation whose terms do not form a totality can [...] be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the I to the other, as a face-to-face, [produced] as delineating a distance in depth - [the distance] of conversation, of goodness, of desire” (TI 39). Depth is used to denote distance because the other is only ever infinitely far from me. I can’t possess, grasp or see things from his point of view which is out of the reach of my perspective. Depth contrasts with horizon, where each point on a horizon is equally far from me, and all within my view, where ‘view’ is a capacity to perceive and perception is a form of power. It is as if my horizon delineates the scope of my reach both cognitively and with regard to my freedom and power. If it is on my horizon, I can go there; If I can go there, I can manipulate it.

We are now in a position to see how previously discussed terms like goodness and desire benefit from being thought of as a depth. I will mention that ‘conversation’
belongs among these as well since genuine conversing requires that I don’t know what the other person is going to say, and I just might learn something new. Levinas calls this teaching, and distinguishes it from learning, which I can achieve by myself, just through experiencing and grasping what I find in my world (TI 79). Thus, in conversation and teaching, I get access to the genuinely new, to something that comes, not from my horizon, but from far away. This is ethical because I can only get this from my relation to other people, and I inevitably learn about ‘justice’. When speaking with other people, or relating to their depth, I am no longer a part of a drama “whose outcome another would know before me” or that “would make a game of me” (TI 79). When relating to others I enter into a drama that is unpredictable, yet gives the possibility for genuine freedom and the genuinely new. These are possibilities that horizons can’t offer.

We can see why Levinas would equate ‘speech’ with a depth in Is Ontology Fundamental?, for both are ways of explaining how the face is grounded in a different dimension, one that is outside of my referential horizon. I have no need to speak to (nor am I spoken to by) things in my world, for there is nothing they can teach me that I couldn’t figure out for myself. They are dependent on me for their meaning, so I merely need to look to myself in order to ‘learn’ something. This is why he claims that “my neighbour is the being par excellence” (BPW 10), because he is not a dependent being, nor does he derive his being from within my horizon. A depth doesn’t satisfy the conditions for comprehension or being, and instead indicates the condition for ethics. This condition is its nonsignifyingness, or independence, or its being par excellence, because it doesn’t belong to me or my world. The face and its affects are independent of me. Any breech in my horizon is the epiphany of the face: it is ethical because it can’t ever be construed in terms of the horizons or general economy of my world.

Another way of putting this horizon/depth distinction is Levinas’ use of the terms signification, non-signifying and self-signifying. Within a horizon, and “in relation to beings in the opening of being, comprehension finds a signification for them on the basis of being” (BPW 9). To assign a signification is to say what a thing means, what it does and what it is for. A thing gets its meaning within a referential totality, or through how it points or relates to other things I am familiar with (like my refrigerator). In this
way, a thing can either come to designate a certain means, with reference to certain other ends or come to show up as an end in itself. Levinas notes that these ends are also things that belong within the horizon, they are seen as something consumable for my nourishment or for my enjoyment where “it offers itself, it gives itself, it belongs to me” (BPW 9).

For a thing to show up in a horizon is to possess it in some form. To view a thing horizonaly is a partial negation because it denies the independence of that thing and makes it seem like it came from me. “In this sense, [comprehension] does not invoke these beings but only names them” (BPW 9). Comprehension doesn’t call out to things to ask them what they are, or ask ‘who are are you?’, or to let them speak. Comprehension gives things a label based on its useful or familiar role within its referential totality.

In contrast to this, the face is non-signifying; it doesn’t signify within my horizon. It appears as something that can’t be contained, and defies stable reference within my totality due to its ambiguity; it shows up as something from another world and remains there. The face stands alone, or stands out as something unique which means that its meaning can’t be wholly derived contextually. Within a totality, language is split into signifier and signified and communication consists in exchanging messages. But because it stands alone, unable to enter into this sort of referential relation the face departs from this structure. And yet, Levinas repurposes some of these linguistic terms to explain what is going on. “The face, expression simpliciter, forms the first word, the face is the signifier which appears on the top of his sign, like eyes looking at you” (TI 153). The speaking face functions as the primordial signifier, it forms the basis for any signifier/signified relation whatsoever (TI 92). This is to say that the non-signifyingness of the face leads to my realization of its self-signifyingness. To say that the face is self-signifying is to say that “[t]he face means what it is - imploring, a plea of the weak to the powerful, of the poor to the rich” (Morgan 64). I can’t ‘name’ or define the face, it doesn’t give itself in the indicative, but as we shall see, it affects me in the imperative.

Non-signifyingness is his way of saying that it doesn’t get its meaning within a semiotic horizon (or any other type of horizon), and self-signifyingness points to the fact
that it simply means what it is or it gets its meaning intrinsically. This joint concept constitutes a depth. Since I can’t relate to the other by way of labeling (or defining) her, my only recourse is to invoke her, to have her call to me and tell me her name. This is why the other as a depth is an invocation or authority, because only she can tell me her name. This authority that the other has with respect to me is ethical because it gives me a chance to accept, acknowledge and even respond (ethical verbs!) to something from outside of the sphere of my egoism.

**e) Acknowledgement**

In addition to invocation, Levinas intimates a sort of first-person address as essential to my relation to the other. He says that “[w]hat distinguishes thought aiming at an object from the tie with a person is that the latter is articulated in the vocative: what is named is at the same time that which is called” (BPW 7-8). The name I give to the other is different from the names I give to entities within being. I address, or name the other in the vocative; I call to him. This relation isn’t preceded by a comprehension or a representation and is therefore not a part of ontology. Levinas chooses to characterize this relation as ‘religion’ and discourse with the other as ‘prayer’, because I am in relation with or being called by and addressing and responding to, what is beyond my world and comprehension (BPW 7). Morgan uses the word ‘acknowledgement’ for this.\(^\text{12}\) Thus, in addressing the other, I acknowledge her.

Although Levinas doesn’t use the term acknowledgement, I think it is a significant term because it is more fundamental than terms like address or invocation which are subtypes of acknowledgement. This makes acknowledgement the more fundamental interpersonal term. Acknowledgement, has two parts: It is made up of a recognition, where, from the subject’s point of view, something is ‘understood’ or noticed. Its other part is an admission which admits or conveys this recognition to the one who is

\(^\text{12}\) Morgan borrows the term ‘acknowledgement’ from Stanley Cavell (Morgan 77).
recognized. In terms of knowledge it is a way of letting the other person ‘know’ something, and the content of this is that I ‘know’ something about her, namely, that she lives from a subjective experience that I can’t directly access. In this Levinasian context, it is used as some sort of inversion or play on the term ‘knowledge’. It shows that I know that you are an other and not merely an object or idea, and this very knowing speaks of its own inability to know or grasp the thing it communicates this to. A term like ‘address’, already includes the acknowledgement structure but also waits for something more, a response. And the term ‘invocation’ adds the notion or content of the other’s authority and freedom.

My acknowledgement of the other simultaneously includes my expressing this acknowledgement to him. When I encounter objects, they first appear to me as beings, which is a general fact about them, and this conditions my ability to know them and relate to them as a specific particular object. This not only implies a world but also constitutes my possession and consumption of the object. When I relate to another person, when I call him a being, I can only do this by calling to him. In recognizing his being I speak to him, I address him. As an object, he ought to only have been made present to me, but as a person, he is also my partner in this relation. We don’t have the option of merely viewing other people as inert filing cabinets with whom we exchange data, contents or words without having to become aware of the nature of our exchange. Which is to say that in relating to another person, we are both aware that there is a relation, that it has a certain character, and that the other person has some awareness and participation in this very relation. “The first content of expression is this expression itself” (T 51). Thus, “[a] human being is the sole being I am unable to encounter without expressing this encounter to him” (BPW 7). My attitude and approach to another human is one of greeting, where even if I refuse to greet him, I have still acknowledged him as an independent being to whom I can only address and express.

13 Levinas refers to this as ‘philosophy of the neuter’, where it doesn’t matter who is speaking (TI 51).
Section 2: Heteronomy

a) Summary: Relation to Objects vs Relation to the Other

Levinas is contrasting an ethical story, the relation with the other, with our relation to objects in general. In the objective relation, the being of the object is freely given, it is captured by intentional consciousness and it fully conforms to my concepts and categories. Objects appear in context with other objects which in turn, even though they aren’t explicitly or currently being intended, make for the background conditions that give the currently intended object its specific meaning. The meaning of a thing here relates to its usability, either as a means, ends or enjoyment. Although objects partly constitute the meaning they have, they certainly don’t actively contest their meaning, so there is nothing to limit my power and freedom to use them as I please. Thus, objects belong to my general economy of being, the sphere of things I understand, use and enjoy for my ends, and this can be referred to generally as my ‘autonomous realm’.

The relation with other people certainly has this objective dimension, but Levinas is trying to point out that there is also a dimension beneath this. On this primordial level, the other person isn’t freely or completely given, not fully intended or comprehended. “He does not enter entirely into the opening of being where I already stand, as in the field of my freedom” (BPW, 9). They appear to me as something that doesn’t fully appear, as something outside of the realm of my world, comprehension, power and freedom. Levinas makes many attempts to characterize how I relate to such a being. Instead of a cognitive or semiotic relation, I relate to the other in the form of desire, acknowledgement, address and expression. The other relates to me as a form of interruption, anomaly, and also in non-cognitive linguistic forms such as command, greeting or plea. “[T]he face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge” (TI 198).

14 Enjoyment is some sort of power but it is phenomenologically distinct from means and ends because it occurs through sensation, not cognition (TI 110).
Speaking is incommensurate with my powers because I cannot control what the other says or know what she will say ahead of time, nor curate her choice in words to make them enjoyable to me. This amounts to a certain resistance.

b) Resistance

Through this resistance, the other opens up a new dimension, not another dimension of objects, but of the human other, of personal address. Once acknowledged, this relation puts the Same in question (TI 195). The mere realization that there is a dimension outside my world, another perspective etc., leads me to realize that what I choose to do with my freedom isn’t the only option. The other questions what I do with my freedom, how I interpret the world, how I enjoy it, how I put my own needs first and what right I have to my food and shelter. The other is manifest to me as posing a challenge and demanding a response. This forces the Same to suffer an affect with regard to the needs and vulnerability of the other, for they, needs and vulnerability, have a certain pull that doesn’t resemble the power that I have with respect to objects. This is the basis for Levinasian heteronomy, which is for the Same to find itself already under the ‘law’ of, or passively suffering an affective pull from the other.

To show how acknowledgement is intrinsically ethical, that is, law-like and binding, Levinas links the relation to the other with the impossibility of murder. Or, more precisely, stronger than just a linkage, “[t]o be in this relation with the other (autrui) face to face is to be unable to kill” (BPW, 9). The presence of the face simply is the ethical impossibility of murder. It is true that I am capable of killing, for it is within my ability to cut down trees and slaughter animals, as these things appear within the domain of being. The action of killing can only be performed on objects or things, because it is an action that stems from my freedom and powers, and so can only fully target the being of things within their reach, that is, objects within the world. Killing also has the power to transform or constitute its target into an object; it is an objectifying act. Now, when I kill the other, as I would cattle or trees, the other as other has escaped me. When I see him and act upon him as an element in my world, as a thing in the opening of being, I have
not looked him in the face. Killing the other completely resolves his ambiguity, withdrawal and alterity, and places him under my powers, which is precisely to let him escape. Thus, I can’t annihilate the other, because his alterity was never within my reach. It is an ontological impossibility; I can’t kill the other qua other. Notice how, even when I do kill the other, for I am causally able to do this, there is still some acceptance of the other, some acknowledgement of his vulnerability, capacity to suffer and his facing me. I express this killing to him, and acknowledge that he is a part of this relation, and that his being forbids it. Thus, the act of murder must contain an acknowledgement that it is ethically wrong. Or, murdering itself manifests its own wrongness.

The other, when I face him, always expresses and imposes himself and “does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity - its hunger - without my being able to be deaf to that appeal” (TI 200). ‘Deafness’ is used here to illustrate my passivity, or inability to block out or ignore the reality of suffering. I can choose to close my eyes if I see something disturbing, but I can’t close my ears, so I am passive, and even held captive, before audible stimuli. Phenomenologically, I can avert my intending, but the suffering of the other will continue to manifest as a something that necessitates my engagement (and plea for its removal!), even if peripherally, and this is not something I have the power to ‘switch off’. This strikingly illustrates heteronomy, what it means to be held by the law of an other. Furthermore, there is something about the acknowledgement of vulnerability and suffering that is fundamentally different from the cognition of some property of an object. The suffering of the other makes a claim on me that is intrinsic to that suffering; one cannot acknowledge suffering without feeling a certain pull, a call to respond to that suffering. Its acknowledgement is identical with its command for removal.

Since the face isn’t fully a content for consciousness, neither is this impossibility. Levinas explains that “[i]f the resistance to murder were not ethical but real, we would have a perception of it, with all that reverts to the subjective in perception” (TI 199). If this resistance were a part of the given, then I would be conscious of a struggle, which would situate it within my totality and not in the genuine relation to the other. The ethical doesn’t come from perception, or the world or a horizon, nor does it come from the
Same. And yet, this resistance is manifest to me as the meaning of the face. Here again, Levinas is showing that ethics is a depth. Or, the appeal, imposition, invocation etc. of the other, and the impossibility of murder, the necessary acknowledgement that is part of the relation to the other, is a depth. This is important because things within my horizon get their meaning and purpose from me, and thus are open to my interpretation and are, to a certain extent, constituted subjectively. Levinas explicitly denies that any such thing could be the source of ethics. The ethical resistance to murder is an absolute, and so, needs to be situated outside my world. This is the only way for it to be utterly independent from me, and thus have the power to govern me.

The other calls into question my freedom with regard to him. He forbids my murdering him “through the original language of his defenseless eyes”. This means that the other isn’t related to me in the indicative, but affects me in the imperative. This “‘putting into question’ of the I is not a special case of self-knowledge, for it opens the infinite process of scrupulousness which causes the I to coincide less and less with itself. The situation so little resembles war that it is ethical” (BPW 12). When I respond to such a call, I use my freedom to choose a path that doesn’t coincide with my self-interest or my isolated and ambivalent world of enjoyment. This ‘infinite process of scrupulousness’ is a process of self reflection that takes the needs of others into account and is never completed or satisfied. Only the other could have initiated this. Acting for the sake of the other is the achievement of ethics.

Section 3: Responsibility

a) Resistance has Positive Structure

Earlier, it seemed as though plurality in being was something violent, or inherently unstable and destructive, and the Same’s attempt to homogenize being results in a certain stability or comfort. On the one hand, my relations with other people open up the possibility of disagreement and other forms of instability. But Levinas addresses this thought and reverses it by claiming that “the relation [with the other] is
maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The ‘resistance’ of the Other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical” (TI 197). What is the positive structure of resistance, when resistance, as a type of ‘no’ or limit, is obviously negative? We have already considered how the other, who is a source of resistance, also increases my freedom by giving me the chance to expand my perspective, options or even escape my world. This resistance also has a positive ethical structure because it provides the condition necessary for ethical choice. The resistance that limits me also gives me a chance at an ethical response. This is positive because it feeds my desire for the other, and makes goodness, which is to count the other as more than myself, possible (TI 247). My resistance to an impersonal force like gravity would merely limit me, but with the other, “I do not struggle with a faceless god, but I respond to his expression, to his revelation” (TI 197). My response to the other’s limiting is edifying. Lastly, from the Same’s perspective, the other is the condition for me to become a unique particular “I”, which is the completion of what it set out to do. The constitution of the “I” through its responsibility, which the next section will examine, is the third important ethical criteria.

b) Selfhood

Before explaining the central ethical importance of becoming an “I”, we need to clarify Levinas’ distinctions between the subject, Same, self, ego and the “I”. To start off, subjectivity can’t be “pinned down and identified” (Bernasconi 238), we can’t provide a definition for what it is because we are subjects, and yet we can give definitions to its structural parts or aspects. Even Levinas isn’t sure how to parse out these terms. In a parenthetical remark about the subject he adds “whatever be the name one gives it” (OB 66).
intentions. It is encountered phenomenologically as it senses itself as independent from the reality that it senses, which forms the the basis for its receptivity, its capacity to passively bear reality. The sensibility that constitutes the self is "beyond instinct" and "beneath reason" (TI 138), which is to say that it is my unreflective sense of myself as being my body, while not reducible to biology. It isn't representational but performs an alternative type of intentionality, that of enjoyment and the "contentment of existence" (TI 135) from which the self lives from. The self is encountered as receiving reality, while it is the ego that shapes it into a world through relating to it cognitively (Batnitzky 16). It is on the basis of the self's separation that the ego is able to partake in representations and intentions. The ego can be defined as the unifying principle behind consciousness, its experience and intentions etc.

For Levinas, neither the Same, self nor the ego are given the personal pronoun of the 'I', they are not the locus of personal identity because they are general structures of the subject. The 'I' of personal identity is reserved for a more distinguishing characteristic, which for Levinas, is one's responsibility, situated uniquely where the call of others intersect for me. I don't own my unique set of responsibilities, I am my responsibilities.

Levinas says that “[t]o be I and not only an incarnation of a reason is precisely to be capable of seeing the offence of the offended, or the face” (TI 247). It is from my particular standpoint, at a particular time and particular place, that I encounter the particular face of the other, and my response is situated at this intersection. My responsibility and the judgement that is upon me are not of the order of a universal, and neither is the particular calling out of the other. When I am judged under a universal law, I am treated under a category, as a 'murderer' or 'careless driver' and so on. When I respond to the particular other person, I am affirmed in and act from my uniqueness.

16 In Meaning and Sense, Levinas agrees with Merleau-Ponty that the self is a feeling felt (BPW 18).

17 This account of the structures of the subject are a rejection of Husserl's self, which is also separated, but identifies the 'I' with the ego, and a rejection of Heidegger's self, which isn't separated, but immersed in the world relationaly. See Batnitzky.
This is why “[t]o utter ‘I’, to affirm the irreducible singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I” (TI 245). The personal character of an apology illustrates the radical particularity of our intersection of circumstances under which I am responsible and how this constitutes the utter uniqueness of the “I”. The accomplishment of the I and morality are actually the same process. This is due to the fact that morality is not a product of equality, or universal reason, but the “fact that infinite exigencies, that of serving the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, converge at one point of the universe” (TI 245). The ethical “I” is elected by its particular set of summons; the circumstances and the other person converge as if to say “you are chosen”. The Same submits to this imperative, not as an ‘incarnation of reason’ or by conforming to a general rule, but by responding uniquely.

The “I” is capable of a “morality called inward and subjective” which is a function that “universal and objective law cannot exercise, but which it calls for” (TI 247). Levinas goes so far as to claim that such universal ethical laws are dependent on this particular encounter, as justice isn’t possible without this singularity or unicity in subjectivity (TI 247).18

18 Justice is the expression of the ethical within being: “Justice, which must become a synchronic consciousness of being, is present in a theme in which the intentionality of consciousness itself shows itself” (OB 71).
Conclusion

The key features of this account of Levinas’ ethics begin with the breech in totality or the way that the face doesn’t signify within my horizon. This encounter with otherness introduces the possibility for heteronomy, for the Same to be passive before, and governed by a law that comes from outside. Lastly, this heteronomy makes it possible for the Same to respond uniquely, to become responsible, and this constitutes it as a proper “I”. These three criteria, exteriority, heteronomy and responsibility, comprise the necessary conditions for a Levinasian ethics. Next, we will turn to Levinas’ aesthetic account to see how the experience of the work of art fails to meet this criteria.
Chapter 2: Levinas’ Aesthetics of Disengagement

Introduction

Broadly speaking, Levinas situates his aesthetic account among other views of expression but unlike other views, he denies that the essence of art is to convey a cognitive or affective content. Instead, artworks speak “[w]here common language abdicates” and of what “common perception trivializes” (LR 130). Artworks thus go beyond common perception and language to convey something ineffable. Levinas’ account of aesthetics doesn’t focus or limit itself to a particular medium. He says there is an “inexhaustible diversity of works”, they can be “colors, forms, sounds, words, buildings” (OB 40). I will use the word ‘art’ to refer to an open ended list including painting, sculpture, music, poetry and architecture. For Levinas, a thing is an artwork if it “recommence[s] being” (OB 40), which is to make a ‘shadow’ of it. This chapter seeks to elucidate what this means by tracing Levinas’ phenomenological descriptions that get us acquainted with the ineffable domain that art expresses. By now we should be familiar with Levinas’ thinking about being and ethical otherness and how the subject relates to each in a distinct manner. Levinas’ aesthetics is best situated in a third realm that is seen as an alternative to both of these. Much of my (and Levinas’) attempts to explain his aesthetic account will be by way of contrast to these other domains. For now, I will introduce art as expressing what is non-conceptual and non-ethical, as I think this is essential to his view and later on I will consider the ways that art can be ‘for’ or ‘against’ its alternatives.

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19 By ‘essence of art’ I am thinking of the meaning of art, what its value and function is in human life, what it is to me.
Since “Levinas never completed anything approximating a 'system of aesthetics'” (Mcdonald 16), the first part of this chapter will be devoted to reconstructing an internally and textually consistent Levinasian aesthetics. For this, I will draw from *Existence and Existents* (1947), which is foundational to Levinas’ thought on art, as well as *Reality and Its Shadow* (1948), which is his most sustained and complete reflection on art. This aesthetic account will be divided into three sections, with each section contrasting a Heideggerian or general phenomenological term with Levinas’ contribution. Firstly, I will explain Levinas’ account of the *il y a*, how it contrasts with his notion of being and how this makes up the materiality of art.\(^{20}\) Secondly, I will explain how the *il y a* is taken up as the image and how this contrasts with concepts. Thirdly, the *il y a* and images achieve a temporal counterpart, the *meanwhile*, which is contrasted with the time of the world. Each section will refer back to Henry Moore’s sculpture, *Large Two Forms* (1966), as a case study and means of illustration.\(^{21}\)

Lastly, this chapter will conclude by running the present aesthetic account through Levinas’ ethical criteria from chapter one, that of exteriority, heteronomy and response, showing how art fails to satisfy any of these.

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**Table 1. Heideggerian Term and its Levinasian Counterpart**

\(^{20}\) Levinas exploits the way that the phrase ‘*il y a*’ expresses existence without being, that is without any existing thing. The usual translation of ‘there is’ does not convey this (Toumayan 148).

\(^{21}\) This sculpture is significant to me as it was a familiar site at Dundas and McCaul St. (from 1974-2016) while working as a bike courier from 2015-2016, where it stood out uniquely from other points of navigation in Toronto. Around this time I was also involved in an art performance that took place in the AGO’s Henry Moore exhibit room. Between performances I wasn’t really allowed to leave the room so I had no choice but to engage with and be engaged by the statues there for longer than I wanted to.
<table>
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<th>Heideggerian Terms from <em>Being and Time</em> (1927)</th>
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**Figure 1. Henry Moore’s Large Two Forms (1966)**
Section 1: Levinas’ Aesthetics

a) Being and the ‘Il y a’

Levinas thinks that artworks are expressive, so we must look to what art expresses to see where it is situated. The problem with asking ‘what’ art expresses is that art doesn’t express any ‘what’ or ‘thing’; art shows something that is a part of the real but not a part of being. This real non-being is going to be called the il y a in general and, in reference to art, materiality. To understand this, we will turn to Existence and Existent (1947), where Levinas attempts to show that sheer existing can occur by itself, without the existing of a specific thing. This is relevant for our purposes here because in making this thesis, he lays the groundwork for his thinking on art. Things become an existent (being) from their composition of matter and space, ie, from their form, and at the point when they become functional or defined. This compositional theory of identity means that the material of a thing can precede its existence. “The discovery of the materiality of being is not a discovery of a new quality, but of its formless proliferation. Behind the luminosity of forms, by which beings already relate to our ‘inside,’ matter is the very fact of the there is” (EE 51). Levinas thinks that the luminosity of consciousness, of our ‘inside’, links to the form and function of a thing, and applies a general category or definition to it in virtue of its form. Artworks exist, they are real, but they don’t have a useful form or something that can be defined, so I can’t use some general mental category to understand this work of art. They express existence, but don’t have a definable identity, and so are not an existent, they are not proper definable ‘things’. Since a form is required for a thing to become a content for cognition, artworks leave thought empty. When I say “this chair”, the notion of a chair, its form, fills up thought. Now, if I take the content out of that sentence, we are left with simply “this…”. Notice how this second sentence doesn’t give us anything to think about. Levinas conveys this same notion, existing without any content, with the ‘there is’ of the Il y a, and applies it to what is happening in a work of art.

This seems to be the case in abstract art, when looking at its vague contours and hues no specific content comes easily to mind, so it expresses its unique materiality.
Yet, Levinas applies this even to the “most realistic art” which also “presents [objects] to us in nakedness, that real nakedness which is not the absence of clothing, but we might say the absence of forms, that is, the nontransmutation of our exteriority into inwardness, which forms realize” (EE 46). It might seem odd to say that art is essentially formless, after all, doesn’t everything have a de facto form? And isn’t art precisely concerned with forms? Levinas is using the word ‘form’ to designate a definition or a function. For forms to effect a transmutation of exteriority into inwardness is to say that they are intelligible and enter into thought. The form of an object is what conforms to my concepts and categories, and I am able to ‘cloth’ it with these and welcome it into cognition where it can become a content (“no shirt, no shoes, no service”). Art expresses existence without any form, function, content or definition. It is true that when I look at a painting of a bicycle, I can identify it as such based on its features. But since I can’t actually use it to bike to a coffee shop, I am not able to engage with or relate to its form. I have to relate to its inert presence, its bare existing, which is key to aesthetic experience.

The materiality of art means that “[a]rt does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow” (LR 132). Art doesn’t express its materiality as knowledge because it is not the sort of thing that conforms to the light of knowledge. Levinas expresses this by calling it the obscure, the dimension of the real that is “left over after understanding”. Art shows this event but maintains it in its darkness. Light is a significant metaphor. In *Time and the Other* (1979), Levinas says that “[t]he illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us. It does not have a fundamental strangeness” (TO 64). To be present as a shadow is a way of restoring things to their fundamental strangeness.22 When maintained as something strange, it is resistant to familiarity, use or knowledge; it is an

22 Levinas maintains this line of thinking in *Otherwise than Being*. Artworks appear “in isolation: every work of art is in this sense exotic, without a world, essence in dissimulation” (OB 41). This is what leads any object that is foreign to my world such as foreign artifacts or ruins, to also partly produce the aesthetic experience (LR 133).
event whose categories are independent of those of cognition. Art expresses this aspect of reality that is extra-ontic, that isn’t organized or made familiar to me, and it does this by setting up an encounter with the materiality that overflows being.

Since the light of perception and cognition can’t be attuned to the strangeness of the obscure, I must relate to art in an alternative way. This will happen in sensation, where “Instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost in the sensation itself, and it is this wandering about in sensation, in aisthesis, that produces the esthetic effect” (EE 45). Sensation doesn’t lead us to an object, as is the case with knowledge, but is an obstacle that keeps one from the object. And yet, “it is not of the subjective order either: it is not the material of perception. In art, sensation figures as a new element. Or better, it returns to the impersonality of elements” (EE 45). Sensation touches or is touched by the nameless materiality of the Il y a and preserves its strangeness because it doesn’t define, use or become familiar with it in a practical way. Sensation isn’t a “residue of perception, but has a function of its own” (LR, 134); its function is to make non-conceptualizable realities present to me, and to preserve them as something strange. “Sensibility is not muddled thought but gives access to a reality that reason cannot attain. A reality that serves no theoretical or practical purpose” of which “contentment and enjoyment” are examples (Batnitzky 16). When I use my knowledge categories on a thing, it makes sense to me and is no longer strange, which amounts to a certain betrayal of its actual character. Sensation doesn’t attempt to fully capture the object which has the effect of preserving its strange existence. This poses a limit to the object because it resists constituting its identity objectively. On the other side, sensation also fails to extend the subject’s knowledge, freedom or power the way perception does. Thus, the aesthetic moment, the sensing encounter with materiality, is a limit to both objects and subjects. This act of sensing existence is a return to a position before the options of subject and object have come into view.

23 Levinas echos this early text again in 1974: “Poetry is productive of song, of resonance and sonority, which are the verbalness of verbs or essence” (OB 40). I think he means to say that art has no quiddity, only quality. This is why the aesthetic event happens through sensation, not cognition.

24 Much like a limit experience (Clark 47)
At this point we can apply the notion of the *il y a* to our case study, Henry Moore’s *Large Two Forms*, to see if this is better suited to the sculpture than an account of its being. Although the title prompts us to engage with its form, it is the very fact that it lacks a Levinasian form that adds to the sculpture’s intrigue. I can’t catalogue the sculpture among the things I already know because it doesn’t actually fit any of the closest candidates such as a vertebrae, hip bone or naturally eroded rock formation. I also can’t easily assign a new function to it, such as a place to lean my bike or place to sit, although it might be able to do these things, it seems to do so accidentally and it would be very bad at them. Since I can’t use it, I can’t become familiar with it. And since I can’t gain a practical conception of it or give it a definition, I can’t say that I know it. Despite this absence of uptake into knowledge, it certainly exists or expresses existence, it is present to me, so my only option is to let this presencing of the work remain strange.

b. Concept and Image

If the materiality of art doesn’t easily give rise to knowledge, what is the non-objective and non-subjective result of sensation; what does sensation yield? Levinas’ answer to this is the image, which is the mode in which the obscure is presented to me. The image is directly opposed to the concept, which for Levinas is the way objects are grasped or made intelligible, but this is not to be thought of in an abstract or representational way. He says that “by action we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it” (LR, 132). It is our ongoing relating to objects, our using, feeling, and manipulating them that constitutes our grasp and conception of them. This Levinasian (or Heideggerian) ‘concept’ belongs more to the realm of our performative ‘knowing *how*’ as opposed to the order of the propositional, such as ‘knowing *that*’, but includes both. In Heideggerian terms, the concept encapsulates the

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25 In relation to the clarity of science, art is a shadow, and in relation to ethics, art is irresponsible: “remains that in relation to scientific intelligibility, art is a shadow, image, and caricature. And in relation to ethics, art is irresponsible” (Cohen 180)
readiness-to-hand of equipment, such as the ‘swing’, ‘weight’ and ‘recoil’ of my squash racket in action, or one’s practical familiarity with an object in general.\textsuperscript{26} In this way, concepts belong to the order of our freedom, as it is through our familiarity with objects that we get the results we want from them. In contrast to this, an image can’t be handled or used, and I can’t become familiar with it through use or practice. Even though I could pick up and ‘handle’ one of Warhol’s Brillo Boxes, it would appear to me in a way very much opposed to when I buy a box full of Brillo Pads with the intent to scour some pans.\textsuperscript{27} An image is presented to me in a way that is utterly different from the immersive and practical experience of riding a bike or using a pan and spatula to make an omelette. An image is “not a piece of consciousness but a piece of the il y a: it is a materialization of being, the way a cadaver is the image of the deceased, a remainder or material excess of being: ‘the remains’” (Bruns 215). The image is the contentless encounter with the il y a which is what spills out from being, the world and knowledge.\textsuperscript{28} It is not a reproduction of a thing nor a residue of being. It is, however, a residue of a nameless part of reality and a withdrawal from things and the world.

It might sound strange to say that the image isn’t representational because an image is usually thought to represent some reality, where representation is like a window that leads us to its object. This is typically how symbols, signs and words function, and it can be expressed by saying they are transparent. The image in art however, is opaque, it doesn’t lead thought to any object external to itself.\textsuperscript{29} Levinas calls this strange relationship between object and image one of resemblance. Instead of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Heidegger insists that we can’t discover the hammer’s readiness-to-hand by just looking at it, we need to pick it up and use it. “The less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is - as equipment” (BT 98). Interestingly, these phenomenal characteristics, ‘swing’, ‘weight’ and ‘recoil’ are coupled with thematized terms or ‘objective properties’ of the squash racquet such as ‘recoil weight’, ‘twist weight’ and ‘plowthrough’.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Cohen adds that Brillo Boxes are the same, and sums this play of same and difference as the ‘magic’ of art: “Art is an enchanted world, even if it is nothing more than a Brillo box. The artwork Brillo Box is radically different than the Brillo box sold in the supermarket, and at the same time they are the same.24 The same and different, the image — such is the “magic” of art” (Cohen 176)
\item \textsuperscript{28} Bataille’s ‘excess’, Derrida’s ‘differance’ and Blanchot’s ‘void’ are also attempts to represent the unmeasurable.
\item \textsuperscript{29} “The finger that points, rather than that to which it points, becomes the point” (Cohen 178)
\end{itemize}
maintaining a constant referential relation between object and image, resemblance is “the very moment that engenders the image” (LR 135), and then after this birth, the image ceases to refer back to its origin. To make sense of this, lets keep Levinas’ practical version of a concept in mind. I can’t, starting with the image, follow its resemblance to its object and thus achieve a concept of the object. If I had never ridden a bike before, I couldn’t get a sense of its actual balance, the resistance of the pedals or the wobble of the handle bars from looking at a painting of one. Even having been familiar with riding bikes, looking at the image of one is unlikely to conjure the feel of or lead me to its actual performance. Even when I go to that equipment storage yard in The Arboretum and find the shed full of old rusty bikes that don’t work, these cadaverous bikes become their image, they can’t lead me to the immersive act of biking. This is how the image neutralizes its relation to its object; it refuses to lead us to a practical experience of its object, and thus can’t be conceptualized.

Sensation gives its sensory material to the imagination, which gazes out at the word. “In imagination our gaze then always goes outward, but imagination modifies or neutralizes this gaze: the real world appears in as it were between parentheses or quotation marks” (LR 134), or “[t]he imaginary world is said to present itself as unreal” (LR 135). The use/mention distinction might be helpful here to show what the imagination is doing. When I simply write about dogs, my words are meant to lead you to think of actual furry canines. When I write about ‘dogs’ in quotation marks, I seek to bring your attention to the word and no further. I want your thought to end there and not extend to its referent. The imagination presents things to us as not being an actual part of being or the world; in normal uses of perception and imagination we can tell which is actual and which is play. The image refers to itself and acknowledges the way that it doesn’t lead to concrete things or a practical engagement with things.

At this point we can make a distinction between art and aesthetic experience. The practice of art consists in substituting images for being. Aesthetic experience consists in using sensation as one’s mode of attunement. Although sensation is especially received by artworks, it can engage with any part of the real, that is, all of reality can be an occasion for aesthetic experience.
This account of the imagination helps to expand our notion of resemblance. Recall that resemblance is not like representation, it doesn’t give us a basis for comparing itself, the image, with its object. Recall that resemblance is “the very moment that engenders the image” (LR 135), so it is to be thought of as a beginning. The stars in Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* (1889), aren’t meant to lead or refer us to actual stars in the sky. Ideas do this by representing the thing to me in a functional way where I can match my star-idea to other ideas such as distance, heat and galaxies. Images are something new and thought is meant to dwell on them, be filled by them and go no further. Since thought stops at the image, it attains an independent reality, no longer getting its status as derivative. The Van Gogh stars are certainly presented to me as something unreal, but because they independently fill up thought, they are granted an alternative reality.  

This is why Levinas can say that reality doubles itself in art. “Reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also it’s double, its shadow, it’s image” (LR 135). With imagination and sensation we relate to a second aspect of reality composed of images, where Van Gogh’s stars have as much ontological independence as the concrete ones in the sky.

At this point we can say that reality is present in at least two distinct phenomenal modes: Perception of the form of a thing leads to a concept, while sensation of materiality leads to an image. This second pathway is the aesthetic experience. I want to add that these two pathways, or modes or relation or uptake, are not mutually exclusive in that a single object can lead to my conception of it and also to my image of it, and these can occur to different degrees at the same time. Another way of putting this is that a single picture can both represent and resemble either at different times or at the same time. And, sensation need not apply only to artworks, but, as a basic attunement, I can relate to any part of reality this way, giving rise to the aesthetic event, such as with cadavers and ruins.

30 Perhaps the object gives rise to an infinite number of independent realities similar to Deleuze’s folding (Deleuze 228).
As a way of characterizing aesthetic experience, Levinas employs some musical terms, which he finds useful for expressing this non-conceptualized relationship. He says that in sensation, the artwork reaches me musically (LR 134). It certainly touches me, affects me, but I can’t trace this relationship back to the object to gain a concept of it. “Its relation with the substance from which it emanates is not inscribed in its quality. It resounds impersonally” (LR, 133). When having an aesthetic experience of music we don’t hear ‘things’ such as the cellos and the flutes, we are without concepts, having a pure non-conceptualized relation with a sensuous reality. This is how the image affects us.

Levinas expands on the musicality of the image by saying that entering into aesthetic experience takes the form of a rhythm. Aesthetic experience and its pull towards non-conceptualization gives rise to a pulse between different states. The work is captivating and interesting which pulls me in, but I can find no use for it as it doesn’t assist me in my projects or my own becoming. The work is obscure and shadow, which can’t be organized or understood, and yet there is a part of consciousness that seeks to organize these. These two opposing tendencies make for swaying between the subject as an agent and a more anonymous subjectivity.

Rhythm gives rise to a particular type of anonymity. In rhythm, “[t]he subject is part of its own representation. It is so not even despite itself, for in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity” (LR 133). These features of the work impose themselves on me and I begin to descend into anonymity, where we have an “exteriority of the inward” (LR 133), where I watch the work from outside of myself, from outside of my embodied history and perspective. The interest I have in the work pulls me in and I become “among things as a thing, as a part of the spectacle” (LR, 133), and watch myself do this.\(^3\) There is a pulse or instability between the states of being the watcher and the actor; the watcher is fascinated, pulled in and anonymous as it watches itself, and yet consciousness seeks to return to the

\(^3\) Levinas uses this phrase in contrast to being-in-the-world, it is a state where I am interested but can find no use for things, as in the “imaginary world of dreams” (LR 133).
state of the agent, of the one who acts. This anonymity is to lose one’s worldly identity and embodied perspective, but one still takes their ego, their “I”, into the aesthetic experience in order to watch and become ‘among things’. This is not to use them, but to enjoy the sensation of pure watching, looking at everything but from nowhere.

The type of ego that is present in this experience is significant. Although the sensations of art don’t belong to the order of thought, they still belong to the order of sentiment “wherein the egoism of the I pulsates” (TI 135). This isn’t the aspect of the ego that constitutes a totality of being, but is content with its enjoyment of finite existence (TI 135), ie, this is the pre-ethical self, in that it doesn’t seek a relation to transcendence, but also a pre-totalizing self, because it doesn’t yet seek to unify or take control of its world. Aesthetic enjoyment returns the subject to the “navietye of the unreflected I, beyond instinct, beneath reason” (TI 138), but returns the subject to this state such that it is on a “higher plane” (TI 140). This naive and sentimental ego which is ‘anonymous’ to the world, will come up again in the third chapter when Blanchot challenges this conception of anonymity and gives it an ethical sense.

Since Images impose themselves on us without our assuming them “our consenting to them is inverted into a participation. Their entry into us is one with our entry into them” (LR 132). Since the form of the subject is destabilized, we can’t be said to consent to aesthetic experience. Participation is a way of being given over to the captivation of art and our becoming immersed in the experience. Participating in this rhythm has a distinct consequence because “[r]hythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it” (LR 132). The rhythm of images in artistic life begin to enter into me as I enter into the rhythm. Participating in rhythm “is a mode of being to which applies neither the form of consciousness, since the I is there stripped of its prerogative to assume, it's power, nor the form of unconsciousness, since the whole situation and all its articulations are in a dark light, present” (LR 133). Levinas compares this state to a waking dream where all is present to me but I’m unable to
effect any change, and also to the automatic movements of dancing where I am in full awareness of the music and my body but aren’t making deliberate choices.\footnote{Crignon describes rhythm as a suspense, temporalization and caricature of life: “That suspense is also a rhythm (that is, a tempo, a temporalization) should not be surprising. Rhythm is the image of life; it is neither life nor time but their imitation, their caricature” (Crignon 114).} Without the usual form of consciousness and its freedom to grasp or appropriate, the I is stripped of its usual character, entering instead into pure awareness as it joins in the rhythm.\footnote{Kant says something similar about the sublime (Kant 115).}

Passivity is to be thought of as an alternative to freedom and bondage, because freedom requires that I can grasp and \textit{use} a thing, and bondage presupposes freedom and negates it. Passivity is in a separate category from these other two because it is a relation that occurs outside of the structure of the consciousness relation. Passivity is to be thought of as a relation that belongs to non-consciousness, but includes an aspect of reality that is present to me. The image is experienced as having some sort of hold over us, not in the sense that it initiates something undesirable for me as in bondage, but since it evades my initiative and freedom it appears as resistant to me.

Let’s return to Moore’s \textit{Large Two Forms} to see if it is best described as an image. I can’t become familiar with it through practical use. Even if I were to walk past it every day and recognize every nuance of its shape, I still wouldn’t be able to be familiar with it in the way I am familiar with riding my bike, cooking an egg or brushing my teeth. The work seems to be an instance of resemblance. My thought seeks at first to find a familiar referent, such as a vertebrae, but eventually finds that the sculpture doesn’t lead thought beyond itself; it stops and fills up thought. The work seems to initiate the rhythm that results in anonymity. When walking by I find it fascinating, it catches my eye, I stop and touch it as it pulls me in. Thought is interested in it and yet it is resistant to my organization and categorization. Since I can’t act upon it or use it, or incorporate it as a part of my self structure, my goals and projects, I lose view of the fact that I am the type of being that acts. I get an anonymous sense that there is hunger… no wait, \textit{I am...}
hungry and there is something I can do about it. I begin to consider my options for food, and the aesthetic moment has come to a close.

c. Time and the Meanwhile

Now that we have characterized the materiality of art and its consequent image, we are in a position to understand how time is added to this account. To see how the image temporalizes, we must understand where images are situated or what kind of disengagement they have. There are two ‘directions’ in which one can disengage from being, a near side and a far side. “The painting then does not lead us beyond the given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it. It is a symbol in reverse” (LR 136). The hither or near side of being indicates that the image is situated close to me, which we could have anticipated, seeing as it is constituted in the imagination. Bruns says that “the gaze of the spectator stops at the surface of the painting and is, so to speak, held there, on the hither side of being, suddenly passive, no longer seeing but gripped by what it sees in an ecstasy of fascination” (Bruns 216). This fascination doesn’t lead into the world of being like a symbol, and is not to be thought of as the disengagement of contemplating platonic ideals, for that would be a disengagement on the far side of being. I think it might be helpful to think of those things on the far side of being as those that are general or universal. This is because, for Levinas, ideas are abstracted from being in such a way that they depart from me and my lived life which takes the form of an utterly particular immersion. The near side of being can be seen as that domain appropriate for the departures that are unique or particular. This domain is situated close to me because it shares in the particularity of my existence, experience and in my unique imagination which constitutes it. The hither side is an ambiguous non-generalizable place between me and being.

Now we can give this ‘hither side’ of being its temporal dimension, which will be called the ‘meanwhile’. Art disengages itself from the world and effects “an interruption of time by a movement going on in the hither side of time, in its ‘interstices’” (LR 131). Normally (for Heidegger), time temporalizes itself in the world, it is ecstatic, it overflows
itself as it reaches forward to death and back to birth, and outwards to other simultaneous but connected events. The time of the world is connected to the power to effect a future, to make a difference and have genuine possibilities.\textsuperscript{34} The near side of time has no such connections nor is it some reproduction or representation of the way humans live time, “it has its own time, it is a unique way for time to temporalize” (LR 139). It doesn’t reach outside of itself to the future or past or to other referents and so is unable to flow or move on, it is a duration without flux. It is contained or occurs inside a gap or interstice, like a bubble of air caught in the wall paper. Levinas calls this the ‘meanwhile’. It is an eternal instant that runs parallel with the duration of the living.\textsuperscript{35} It is a doubling of the time of life, an independent time that is both eternal and fixed, a ‘now’ that is unable to pass into the future.\textsuperscript{36}

The the participant experiences this meanwhile time as an interruption of the time of the world. Although we traverse the sphere of the world, we can get caught up in the shadow realm of the \textit{there is}, a place that is “never finished, still enduring - [is] something inhuman and monstrous” (LR 141). When I am working on a project, such as cleaning the kitchen, my time temporalizes in a worldly way, connected to my sponge, broom, fridge and future projects etc. But when I happen to look at the weird picture on the wall, my worldly time has been interrupted and I am now caught in a bubble where my imagination gazes at the image as it touches me musically. Eventually, the bubble pops and the time of my project returns to me as I resume sweeping.

The meanwhile of the image gets further complicated by the statue, because it is three dimensional, its space and time begin to resemble existence. With a statue, “the work of being itself, the very \textit{existing} of a being, is doubled up with a semblance of

\textsuperscript{34} Dasein’s authentic temporality involves incorporating one’s ‘futural’ and ‘having been’ into a ‘moment of vision’ before death (BT 437).

\textsuperscript{35} Reminiscent of Deleuze’s ‘Aion’, a time where the past, present and future don’t exist (Johnson 278)

\textsuperscript{36} Cohen distinguishes the meanwhile from Husserl’s ‘inner time consciousness’, a continual flow of impressions, retentions and protentions, and also distinguishes it from the ‘specious present’, which is a concept and not a phenomenon. “the instant or suspended instant of art remains part of the temporal flow of duration but frozen, like a snapshot. It verges on a future but one that never arrives. It is always only on the threshold, poised, on the brink, like an immobile statue of mobility.” (Cohen 177).
existing” (LR 137). Levinas reserves the term ‘semblance’ for this quasi-existing, where its time and space are not worldly or connected, so it doesn’t fully exist. For this reason, every statue is an idol, a ‘false god’, because it leads me away from those things that actually exist. It occupies space and time, but not in a practical or worldly way. The time of the statue is like a ‘now’ in that it is in the present, but lacks both the evanescence and the impending future of the worldly ‘now’. This complication is then applied to all images, “every artwork is in the end a statue - a stoppage of time” (LR 137). This insight is meant to convey the way that all art leads the participant away from the time and space of the world, from the ‘work’ of being.

Levinas wants to show that the time of the meanwhile that art achieves is to be associated with the time of death. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas describes death as what makes “possibility impossible” (TO 71), whereas the world and concepts “initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic” (LR 139). In the work of art “[t]he artist has given the statue a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life” (LR 138). The life of a statue only resembles actual life which amounts to a mockery because all the aspects that make life good, free and meaningful, a relation with existence, are missing. Art is opposed to the possibility of life, and thus doubles it as some sort of death. The characters in a novel share in this in that they are doomed to forever repeat the same acts and the same thoughts. Because of this, they are prisoners and can have no history, no way out of their patterns, or to look back on their actions and make adjustments for the future. They can have no future which they can take up as *theirs*. The participant of art joins in this deathly stagnation when they enter into or are taken up by the meanwhile.37

In the photo of Moore’s work, the walls and ceiling light manifest as worldly and connected. The work pops out and sits on the hither side of being, not because it is

37 The time of art is opposed to the type of time required for justice: “The time of art is repetition, the time of destiny, fate, torn away from the temporal flow of the lived world where the future is unknown and unpredictable, and where, for Levinas, the greatest task of humanity is to strive for justice, always future, always exigent. Quite otherwise than a world driven by justice is the world of fate, caught within an unending and unmoving meanwhile, according to the artistry of the artwork, into which art draws its adherents” (Cohen 178).
centered in the photo, but because it doesn’t dissolve into everyday practical use like the objects in the background. Since it is situated on the near side of being, the work expresses the time of the meanwhile. Perhaps the curator of the work is aware of how long the exhibit is open to the public, what hours the gallery operates and when in the month a guest speaker will come and mention the work. But this is to temporalize it as an object, as is required by the one who manages the gallery. When it remains a site of aesthetic experience, it is preserved as a bubble in time. The work is like a corpse in that nothing is possible for it, it has no future. It can’t be involved in the possibility, renewal and redemption of the living. It will sit there in Grange Park and other locations like the fossilized bones of an extinct creature, unchanging and never able to change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aesthetics Term:</th>
<th>Being Term:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>There is</em></td>
<td>Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materiality</td>
<td>Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obscure</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
d. Aesthetic conclusions

At this point I will summarize the metaphysics put forward (sometimes implicitly) in Levinas’ account before moving on to consider its broader significance. We have seen that in art, “[t]he whole of reality bears on its face its own allegory, outside of its revelation and its truth” (LR 137). The real can be expressed to me in image, truth and perhaps also in ideas and revelation, and Levinas takes these to be indicative of distinct dimensions that are encountered in human life. Art and the image is an event within being that takes one out of being. Levinas expresses this by calling both being and shadow a part of the real. They are real partly because they are independent and make sense to me. Shadows take place within the real, on the near side of being, and this ‘near side’ can be seen as a contrast to the other side of being, that of ideas (which “tower[...] above the world” (LR 131)), and to what is fully exterior to being, as in otherness. Otherness is still a part of the real due to its independence and the fact that it is in some way.

Below is a chart that summarizes and contrasts these distinct dimensions of encounter, just to help keep track of our terms at this point. Perhaps not surprisingly, such a chart begins to look precisely like the western metaphysical tradition that Levinas
seeks to leave behind. The terms that are situated under ‘otherness’ are supported by
the first chapter of this paper, the terms ‘shadow’ and ‘being’ are supported by the
present chapter. The ‘ideas’ column is alluded to in this chapter and in Reality and its
Shadow, but are more speculative than complete, yet, I present them here for potential
contrast. In Cohen’s analysis of Reality and its Shadow, being and ideas are collapsed
into the single category of science and is left with the classic triadic structure of science,
art and ethics or the true, the beautiful and the good (Cohen, 164). While I like the
elegance of these terms, I think it is clear that ideas have their own type of
disengagement from being, towering above the world on the far side of being (LR, 131).

Table 3. Levinas’ Metaphysics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of reality:</th>
<th>Being</th>
<th>Shadow</th>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Otherness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situated:</td>
<td>In the world</td>
<td>Near side of being</td>
<td>Far side of being, or “towers above”</td>
<td>Outside of being (or otherwise than)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of Relation:</td>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>Sensation</td>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>Revelation/Epiphany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of uptake:</td>
<td>Cognition</td>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of content:</td>
<td>Truth/concept</td>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Ideas</td>
<td>The Good/Desire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**e. Beautiful Works**

Now that I have reconstructed Levinas’ aesthetic account I will turn to two additional points that Levinas makes as a result of this, one will be about beautiful works of art and the other will be about the role of art criticism.

At this point, we would think that the beautiful works of classical art would pose an objection to this account as they don’t seem to express the obscure and are better associated with the beauty of life as opposed to the inhumanity of death. Levinas’ view is more readily suited for what he calls ‘difficult’ or modern art, but he also thinks it can explain what is going on in classical or beautiful works. On one level, it seems as though classical art is opposed to his theory of the shadow because classical aesthetics is “the art of ideal forms [which] corrects the caricature of being” (LR 137). In addition to correcting a thing’s being, “[b]eauty is being dissimulating it's caricature, covering over or absorbing it's shadow” (LR 137). Beauty seeks to exclude a thing’s shadow and only showcase its corrected essence or form. This is to be seen as an attempt to make the object coincide with itself and to be rid of the doubling that poses a challenge to the the unity in being (or totality) that beauty seeks to establish. Although this seems like an
exception to his theory, Levinas treats it like an 'exception that proves the rule' for even this corrected essence is only a phantom essence or shadow that gives us no practical concept of its existing object. According to Toumayan, it “imposes a logic of totalization on a movement whose principle is difference. Classical art thus appears to be a ruse, a strategy which secures and manipulates the image, annexing it to the service of meaning or aesthetic appreciation” (Toumayan 137). The true relation between an object and its image in art is that of resemblance, which effects the object’s excess over itself. Classical art seeks to impose a totality on this relation by employing the concepts of original and copy, which can be understood cognitively in terms of reference. This of course is to forget how the image originally appears to me, which is to be essentially opposed to the application of any concept.

f. Art Criticism

If all art effects a disengagement, even beautiful, inspiring and edifying art, then what use can art have for the general public, or more generally, what is its social role? Levinas thinks that the discipline of art criticism (and philosophy) are needed to interpret and explain art in such a way as to render it useful, ie. conceptual, in order for it to play an engaged part in human life. “[W]e cannot blindly claim for art [...] a disengagement that is absolute” (Cohen, 180), there are conditions for its engagement.

The role of art criticism is essentially opposed to the essence of aesthetic experience because the critic analyses the aesthetic event as if she were a scientist examining a specimen under a microscope. When this method is applied to “difficult art” a “depth of reality inaccessible to conceptual intelligence becomes its prey” (LR 130). Criticism tries to say clearly what is obscure and tries to make explicit what is evasive. This amounts to some sort of betrayal of what the work expresses, effectively suppresses what art is trying to say, or speaks on the work’s behalf which is to substitute itself for the speaking of the work. The critic prevents the participator of the work from “being absorbed in aesthetic enjoyment” (LR 130), which essentially pulls them out of participation; now it is the subject of some sort of enjoyment. Since art is
essentially outside of language and knowledge, outside of being-in-the-world, the role of criticism is to effect the “intervention of the understanding necessary for integrating the inhumanity and inversion of art into human life and into the mind” (LR 130).

For Cohen, it is not just criticism that engages art with the world; there is something about the way that the experience of art affects us that connects us to the world: “For Levinas, that art is an image, a shadow world, that its human faces are caricatures…this cannot be the final word about art, because art is not only disengaged from life, set up in its own artificial world, but also always and essentially engaged in and part of the larger world” (Cohen 182). Our affective response in art is deeply connected to our affective responses in the world, making for a sort of bridge between the two. There are two limitations to this line of thinking. One is that by the time I reflect on such an affect, it has already entered the discursive realm of criticism, even if I am the only one involved, leaving the primary experience disengaged. The other problem is that these affects don’t carry the exigency that affects in the world carry; they are fundamentally different because aesthetic affects are there for my enjoyment.

When you think of the last art opening you went to, did you spend more time being ‘absorbed in aesthetic enjoyment’ or listening, learning and asking questions about the meaning of the work, why it is important, and the methods used? The later activities belong broadly to criticism. The way that this amounts to the viewer’s integration of some meaningful content or lesson learnt or inspiring motivation back into life is what justifies our critical, discursive and theoretical attitudes to the work. Besides, the public prefers to engage with art this way because it makes the art accessible, puts it in a meaningful context and one can have the feeling that they ‘get’ the art. Even artists themselves engage with their own work and other works this way, which also justifies the project of art criticism in general.

Despite the need for art criticism, Levinas looks pessimistically on its potential to succeed. One of the most promising ways to effect an engagement of art is for the critic to link the artist or the work to real history, speaking of its social or political relevance and of the impact it has or will have on the course of the human world. Levinas dismisses this notion as overly hopeful and, especially claims about historical relevance,
almost always premature. He is probably thinking that it is more likely that a scenario like this will occur: An artwork might make some buzz in a community but whether it gets bought or not, it eventually gets taken down from the wall, stored in a basement for years, and eventually gets thrown out when moving to a new house, and ultimately have lived out its life making almost no difference to the practical course or composition of the art owner’s world, let alone the shared world of a community. In other words, a work of art that changes a world is the rare case, and its power to effect change would have been the result of it becoming meaningful through a critical discourse, not by the power of its direct experience.

Section 2: Does Art Pass the Ethical Criteria?

Now it is time to connect my re-constructed account of Levinasian aesthetics to Levinas’ ethical criteria: exteriority, heteronomy and response, as drawn out in chapter one. Drawing on both the reasons that Levinas provides explicitly, and from the features from within this aesthetic account I will construct a Levinasian argument for why art has no ethical role to play whatsoever. In the next chapter, I will assess the strength of these objections.

a) Exteriority

Recall that the ‘first’ requirement is that ethics interrupts the totality, being or egoism of the Same from the outside, which I have called exteriority. Art shows some promise in this criteria as the image initiates a departure from being and a resistance to totalization.

Since images double reality, perhaps they can also double or form their own totalities, thus substituting one totality with another. Although we have some reasons for thinking that the shadow tends towards forming a totality (LR 137, 142) it can never succeed at achieving one in a lasting or stable way. The first reason for this will have to do with the rhythm of aesthetic engagement. Each image is a unified whole, which
bears some totality traits, but relates to other images ambiguously by calling to each other the way that one line in a verse calls for the next. The sum of the shadow world clings together via a set of bonds alternative to those supplied by cognition, such as necessity, inference, contiguity or means. Hence, there is no unifying or guiding criteria to unite all instances of shadow, only a vague calling to one another in rhythm. Since they are ambiguously associated, the absence of one image or another makes no difference to the whole. They are a group that tend towards each other but make no completed or exhaustive whole, and this is too unstable and incomplete to qualify as a totality.

One other reason why images can’t form a totality is because they will always get interrupted by the necessity of worldly concerns. The vast fictional worlds of *Lord of the Rings* or *Game of Thrones* may attempt to construct fictional totalities, where the origin of fictional artifacts or the motives of characters can all be explained within the fictional narrative, but these will always, and quite easily, get interrupted and disappear from my gaze when I have to go to the bathroom or make dinner. My escape from the image can be quite easy as the very notion of an image contains some sort of indication of a reality independent from it. The image presents itself as if in brackets, or suspended, which contains an implicit indication of a world without such brackets. It can’t comprise a totality because its very presentation for me indicates an ‘outside’.

The fact that art is a disengagement from the world by residing on the hither side of being is central to Levinas’ reasoning about why art has no positive ethical role to play. What happens in being matters, that’s why you can’t approach the other empty handed, or keep your home closed (TI 172). The hither side of being effects an escape from being where my imagination constitutes the reality of the image. This is barred from being ethical because it is a reality that is still essentially based in me. Although it isn’t constituted by the ego, or consciousness, it still has me as its primary builder for I am it’s occasion or its condition, and so has this in common with the realm of being. Although the language of the ego isn’t suited for describing the constitution of shadow, the ego’s constitution of being is formally the same as the imagination’s constitution of the shadow, and this subject centered form cannot initiate the ethical.
Although art is constituted independently from being, it was still born within the realm of being. Since the image can only double being, it shares in one important feature that being has, which is to be an experience that can be described by me. Images are inherently descriptive things, not normative ones. It simply is, but in a new way.

Since Art departs from being, it might be able to lead me outside of the egoism of being, but it also can’t lead me completely away from it either. It is ambiguously related to being, the notion of shadow “enables us to situate the economy of resemblance within the general economy of being” (LR, 137). Since the image resembles its object and resemblance is partly in being, the whole of art remains attached to being even while it leaves it. This of course is its ambiguity, but the point is that art can’t effect a completed motion away from being.

This may at first seem to be a hopeful resource for a Levinasian-style ethics, but resisting totality isn’t sufficient for an ethics, because art replaces totality with ambiguity. The ambiguity of art can’t be the source of any ethical call, plea or imperative because it presents itself in brackets, which sets me free to leave it aside or reimagine it. Art can’t be the source of the ethical because it need not be taken seriously and can’t make a real claim on me. The mechanism of a claim on me belong to the calling or invocation of the other (and perhaps to reason too but in a different way). This notion anticipates the final ethical criteria: Art lays no claim because it can’t call me by name, can’t address me. Since I am anonymous, it can call over or through me but I won’t hear it, or I can always pretend I didn’t hear, or that the call really means something else.

b. Heteronomy

The second ethical criteria is that of heteronomy. Levinas explicitly claims that it is “false” to situate “art above reality and recognize [...] no master for it” (LR 142), which can lead us to think that aesthetics can’t initiate or ‘govern’ us in any way. Art isn’t above reality or above me in some sense, and yet I still become passive before it. It appears to conform to half of our notion of heteronomy.
To help make sense of how heteronomy applies to aesthetics we will turn to a passage from *Transcendence and Height*, published four years after *Reality and its Shadow*, where Levinas characterizes a mode of relation that isn't philosophy or otherness, but that of opinion.

Nonphilosophy is the tyranny of Opinion where the Same submits to, but does not rediscover in itself, the law of the Other; it is the obscurity of the imagination where the knowing subject goes astray and loses itself - the for-itself, the Same, the I; it is the heteronomy of inclination, where the person follows a law that it has not given to itself; it is the alienation where the person loses itself without noticing it; it is the inauthenticity where beings flee from their identity toward anonymity (BPW 14).

It looks as though aesthetics belongs to the realm of opinion, both of which are alternatives to philosophy. They share the elements of obscurity, imagination and anonymity, but opinion adds the notions of heteronomy, inclination and inauthenticity. Heteronomy belongs to opinion because it is a mode of engagement that lacks reason and so the Same is unable to legislate or coincide with a law that it would make for itself. For this reason we can say that the aesthetic experience is heteronomous because it is a domain where the Same isn’t lead by its own reason. This fits with how the viewer of art lets the rhythm of art overtake their engagement with the world. The viewer neither initiates nor consents to the aesthetic experience for these require the use of the subject’s reason. Entering into participation is a relation that leaves the self behind, and dissolves the participant under external factors. The heteronomy of opinion doesn’t give an external law for the subject to conform to, it is some external affect or principle that undoes the structure of selfhood, preventing a return to the self.

Although heteronomy is usually thought of as submitting to a law or command of another, it also contains the ability to be taught or to learn something new because learning requires that we submit to the teaching, reasons or perspective of an other. In human life, we are able to speak to other people, to be engaged in genuine teaching, to
learn and grow. Since life is open to this becoming, we can have a history, a time of change and growth for the better. The time of art doesn’t allow for any type of growth or learning. The fixity of art “is wholly different from that of concepts, which initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic. By its reflection in a narrative, being has a non-dialectical fixity, stops dialectics and time” (LR 139). The time of art makes history into a frozen narrative. There can also be no teaching because there is no genuine conversation. We can see that the characters in a novel are merely caricatures and not capable *themselves* of becoming ethical. When we read about such characters we are unable to have a genuine dialogue because what they say has already been determined. And when we join in their fixed time when we read about them, the reader too is unable to speak and can only listen to what they have said, not to what the character is continually saying, and this is insufficient for true learning.

**c. Response**

This brings us to the third ethical criteria, that of response. The inability to speak, learn and grow, as discussed above, is a symptom of the time of art, but also a symptom of the way that art can cover the face of real people. When I turn the gaze of my imagination onto real people, I create shadows out of them. “Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness” (LR 135). The face as caricature is an image, not the face of ethical encounter, this is to cover up or run parallel to the revelation of the face. This, as mentioned earlier, is to make their ethical call to me into something ambiguous, something that I can’t quite discern but also something that I am free to reinterpret. When the ethical call of another person is converted into an image it no longer leads me back to them due to resemblance, it fills up thought with its opacity, and I am free to remain transfixed on this image, to enjoy it, and not to have it lead me back to the person who engendered it. The caricatures of people we see on the street can be amusing. In live theatre and movies we can watch the suffering of people and feel moved by it, called even, but we dwell in this experience for our enjoyment, we are not
actually called to respond to real suffering, but invited to enjoy or contemplate the experience of such a call and go no further. This does not count as a response; it can touch our thoughts and our feelings but has no exigency.

Even if the revelation of the face could somehow enter into art, either via the image or by interrupting its rhythm, would the participant be able to respond? In the Levinasian account, the individual exists as an ego or the Same in a state of uninterrupted interaction with being, but then becomes the individualized “I” when given a chance to respond ethically to other people. How does the anonymity of participation fit with this story? The Same who participates in art loses their status as a conscious individual, and so lacks the precondition for being called and for being able to become an “I”. There needs to be a minimal amount of being present, embodied and experiencing in order for such an encounter to show up. The aesthetic experience robs one of these traits, plunging them into utter anonymity, and deaf to the plea of ethics because they are unable to hear that they themselves are called; there is calling, but it doesn’t pick me out. A person needs to recognize that they are the bearer of their own embodied identity in order to be properly commanded, pleaded or summoned.

There is another reason why art can’t initiate or lead me to any type of response. In resemblance, there is no return motion to the world of things, the world I share with people, so there is nothing in art that can act as a conduit that leads me back to the world. My efforts and attention slip into the meanwhile where I can get stuck, and there is nothing within art that can awaken me from this fixed eternity. Aesthetic experience itself, like the totality of being, requires an interruption from the outside in order to free the viewer from its trap.

This leads to a potential problem in communities of artists or participants where “[t]he world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility” (LR 142). It is rare for Levinas to mention the world in an ethical context like this. But perhaps this is consistent with ethical imperatives originating outside the world while the world itself is subject to ethical imperatives, hence there is an imperative to ‘build’ the world, ie, to make it a better place. Artists and art appreciators can be busy building the shadow,
constantly creating and imagining and participating in art, none of which touches the world. This is to shirk the task, the responsibility, of making the world a better place.

d) Additional Reasons

Levinas explicitly provides two more reasons for why art isn’t ethical and although they don’t fit neatly into the categories of ‘his’ ethical criteria, they are worth noting. The first has to do with pleasure and happiness and the second has to do with continuing to practice art in dire contexts. Since there is nothing about art that motivates its commitment, “art is not the supreme value of civilization, and it is not forbidden to conceive a stage in which it will be reduced to a source of pleasure […] having its place, but only a place, in man’s happiness” (LR 142). Perhaps Levinas is conceding that there are examples of art motivating societal change in the past, but his point here is that this is an accidental feature of art. It is perfectly conceivable (for Levinas) for art’s only role in society to be to assist with human happiness, and this is not to say that it is capable of completing human happiness. Levinas’ prediction rings true in our current time, where the majority of art is presented on platforms, such as Instagram, iTunes and Netflix, that are designed to present art for the pleasurable consumption of the viewer. The result of such platforms is that art is reduced to assist in that aspect of human happiness that consists of taking a break, relaxing and ‘zoning out’. Moreover, present day platforms are designed precisely for our consumption, attention and diversion, and the artforms they present evolve to compete for our pleasurable attention. This sounds like the ‘completion of the shadow’ that is the focus of some artists. Present technology has made it prevalent for a more wide-spread audience to participate in the aesthetic enjoyment of the economy of resemblance.

Of course, grassroots art movements abound in balance to the mass consumption of artforms just mentioned, but even these can still fall prey to contributing only to an aspect of happiness. Aren’t art gallery openings mainly an occasion for socializing? For stopping in, saying ‘hi’, being seen, and having a snack? Don’t they
serve alcohol to increase the pleasurable effect of the aesthetic experience and to entice attendance?

So far, Levinas thinks that art can have no positive contribution to make to ethics and world building, and he also adds two scenarios where art can be immoral. Where there is a particularly celebrated artist, his community can be immoral when it “liberates the artist from his duties as a man and assures him of a pretentious and facile nobility” (LR 131). Communities can recognize that art is separated from the world and take this formula and apply it to the artist herself, and free her from the duties of the world. Such a community works against the person to person calling of ethics.

There can also be extrinsic circumstances that render artistic activity, which under normal conditions would simply be non-moral, into a downright immoral endeavor. When the world is in crisis and the need for engagement is particularly acute, “[t]here is something wicked and egoist and worldly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague” (LR 142). Since art is essentially ambiguous and escaping, which are not in themselves good or bad qualities but can become praiseworthy or blameworthy depending on the extrinsic circumstances. The passivity that art inflicts on its participants is also inflicted on itself in this respect; it can’t initiate its own ethical valence, and this makes it ethically inert.

**Conclusion**

We can see how aesthetic experience can be construed so as to fail to meet the ethical requirements of exteriority, heteronomy and response. I have tried to show that art doesn’t fit these criteria in any essential way, but due to art’s essential ambiguity, it can be interpreted to at least partly satisfy this criteria. This ambiguity should give us

38 Levinas echos this attribution of shame again in 1974: “Art is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to an absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined” (OB 40). This is reminiscent of Adorno’s “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”. 

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reason to pause. Doesn’t Levinas rely on the ambiguity of the face and of erotic love as ethical resources? Why should the ambiguity of art be treated differently? In the next chapter I will consider some reasons for why Levinas’ judgement on art was too hasty, and how aesthetic experience can come to be seen as an ethical resource.

Chapter 3: Blanchot’s Ethical Aesthetics

Introduction
So far, in chapter one, we saw what is required for something to fall within the domain of the ethical for Levinas: it must confront us with something irreducibly other, challenge our assumption of autonomy and call for a response. In chapter two, we have

39 (TI 254)
seen that his account of aesthetics comes ambiguously close to, but ultimately fails this criteria. At this point, I would like to bring in Maurice Blanchot’s account of the experience of the work of art as a means of responding to Levinas on his own terms. Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* (1955) can be used to respond to Levinas because it’s subject matter is aesthetic experience and “is influenced by the phenomenological method in its return to the phenomenon itself (in this case literature)” (Haase 70).

Although Blanchot focuses on the experience of poetry and literature, his account can be situated within Levinas’ broader account of aesthetics. Indeed, Blanchot’s efforts in *The Space of Literature*, where we will now turn, can be seen as a deepening and an exploration of the notions first put forth in *Reality and its Shadow* (1948), although more broadly, these two thinkers mutually inspire and borrow from each other (Toumayan 2). And yet, despite this significant overlap, Blanchot seems to come to an opposite conclusion about the ethical status of art. Instead of being conceived as a potentially dangerous non-ethical disengagement from the world, Blanchot gives an account of art as opening up an original experience, one that founds and undermines our world and our worldly identities. He conceives this experience as being the source of human authenticity and one way to open us up to an ethical relation.

In this chapter, I will start by comparing the parts of these two thinker’s accounts that are congruent. The second part will trace their divergences, and how Blanchot begins to think of the experience of literature as constituting human authenticity. The third section will find a significant difference between the constitution of Levinas’ image, which is constituted in the imagination, and Blanchot’s image, which is a sensuous relation to the imaginary. Using Levinas’ notion of sensibility, I will explain how Blanchot’s image is a relation that precedes the thematicization of being and the involvement of the ego, making it prior to the possibility of Levinas’ image. After accepting Blanchot’s account of art as capturing a prior moment that Levinas’ account misses, I will show its ethical sense in the fourth section. The fifth section will argue for a qualified ethical significance for this egoless aesthetic experience, ethical enough to pass Levinas’ criteria, but still not a complete ethical relation like face to face encounters. The displacement of the ego in genuine aesthetic experience is ethical in
form and can be seen as an encounter that opens us up to alterity in general and the other person in particular, but may not be the sort of experience in which one responds to the hunger, suffering or destitution of the other.

**Section 1: Blanchot’s Aesthetics**

*The Space of Literature* isn’t about the nature of art itself, but a detailed account of the experience of reading and writing poetry and literature. It is not merely a “detailed account of inspiration” (Clark 46) but also describes the unique experience that is common to readers and writers of a work, the experience of the empty existence that precedes our worldly existence. This experience is essential to the work and both creators and enjoyers of works experience this: “Author and reader are equals with respect to the work and in it. Neither has any existence except through this work and based upon it” and the experience of the work is such that the “reader is no less ‘unique’ than the author” (SL 227). Blanchot’s work focuses on the experience of the work of art, neither prioritizing the author or the reader because the effects of aesthetic experience are the same for both; that of receiving their existence as something radically particular through the work.

This experience of uniqueness (and experience that makes one unique) is the experience of the ‘work’ of the work of art, which is to be understood in contrast with the work as a cultural object. We understand that books are things in the world, they are reviewed by magazines, are put on ‘best sellers’ lists and are sold in bookstores. Aesthetics is the discipline that elaborates on this cultural object: “Esthetics talks about art, makes of it an object of reflection and of knowledge” (SL 234). But “[i]t is the singular experience of the work as it slips away from my grasp and from which side there is no general experience of literature, since there are no concepts which would translate the impervious nature of the work without immediately placing it on the other side; that is to say, the side of culture” (Haase 34). When I think about the first-hand, immersive experience of reading fiction, I recall an experience that is irreducible, unique and radically particular. Such an experience can’t be represented by a general concept
or explained by reference to some other term, so this experience can neither become a
cultural object nor an object for theoretical study. I will have more to say about this later,
but for now it is enough to say that an experience of the ‘work’ is Blanchot’s subject
matter.  

I will argue that although Blanchot only “interrogates the impossibility underlying
a certain strand of modern art and literature” (Krimper 105), that his account of the
‘work’ and the ‘space’ it opens up is applicable to all art. The experience of the ‘work’ is
the experience of the image, and like Levinas, the image is what is common to all art
forms and mediums such as painting, music, sculpture and writing. It is true that
Blanchot’s aesthetic account fits most easily on those modern works that make no
attempt to be beautiful (although may incidentally be beautiful!), what Levinas calls
‘difficult’ art (LR 130) and what Bruns calls an ‘aesthetics of materiality’ (Bruns 207) and
what Blanchot describes as a thing becoming “its appearance, it’s image - what it was
before being a useful thing or a significant value” (SL 222). Works by Jackson Pollock,
which show the viscosity, drip, splatter and colour of the paint show the materiality of
the paint in a more literal way, while the photographs from Edward Burtynsky’s

Anthropocene project showing the exposed rock of quarry mining or piles of landfill,
(Anthropocene. Sep. 28th - Dec. 8 2017, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.) vividly
representing sheer material as its subject matter, irrespective of whether that material is
pleasing or disgusting. These difficult works are easier to interrogate because they
already question their own identity as works of art and so are closer to their own
encounter with the impossible and ungraspable source of their existence. Compare
these difficult works with the classically beautiful works of Michelangelo’s David or any
of Caravaggio’s angels, capable of being beautiful even in an ominous context. Blanchot

40 From this point on I will typically only be talking about this experience, using the terms ‘work’,
‘work of art’, ‘work of the work of art’ and just ‘art’ to refer to it.
41 Although Burtynsky’s work is meant to evoke an environmental message and perhaps supply
some motivating emotions (as evinced by the environmental statistics and reaction polling station at the
end of the AGO exhibit), my experience of textures, swirls and vague forms of the displayed substances
were essential to my first hand aesthetic experience. But perhaps, in addition to the secondary theoretical
ethical dimension of the work, maybe there is a primary sense of ethical obligation manifest in the
experience of the work....
calls beautiful works “objects of contemplation [...] sufficient to itself” (SL 212). These works don’t display themselves as a problem or a complication, but as objects of contemplation, they can lead thought to ideals, a sense of meaningfulness and perform other edifying and uplifting roles.\textsuperscript{42} But the ideals and meaning of the beautiful image already betray this image because these features are not found in the first hand experience of these works but are added a ‘moment’ later. Thus, even the beautiful image reveals that underneath its meaning is an essential experience of opaque sensation, showing that the obscure image underlays the beautiful one. I will have more to say about the image, both beautiful and obscure, but for now I will continue to characterize Blanchot’s project.

“This experience is the experience of art. Art - as images, as words, and as rhythm - indicates the menacing proximity of a vague and vacant outside, a neutral existence, nil and limitless; art points into a sordid absence, a suffocating condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothingness” (SL 242-3). The aesthetic experience in general is the presence of the absence of being, or the experience of the empty existence that lays around or behind any world. It is what can’t be made into a useful tool or easily categorized by the understanding and is made apparent in the image. For our purposes I will refer to this emptiness as the void, a term he often uses, but not consistently.\textsuperscript{43}

Much like Levinas’ notion of shadow, the void is mainly resistant to straightforward characterization, so Blanchot often juxtaposes it with ordinary worldly life. “And always it is in excess: it is the superfluidity of what always lacks. We have called this excess poverty the superabundance of refusal” (SL 228). The void can be thought of as a poverty because it isn’t a proper thing, its sheer emptiness is what prevents it from being featured as a concept or from being totalized in a straightforward way. We have see how Levinas describes “such an impersonal flow of being and nonbeing as the il y a (“there is”), Blanchot registers it under the sign of “the Outside” (le

\textsuperscript{42} Levinas notes one of these uplifting roles as ‘correcting the caricature of being’ (LR 133)

\textsuperscript{43} Although he doesn’t use Levinas’ term, he is inspired by and has appropriated Levinas’ \textit{il y a} (Toumayan 157-6).
Dehors), an ungraspable and unlocatable dimension of existence extending prior to and
further than the temporal boundaries of my ownmost relation to death” (Krimper 111).
Despite being empty, it is also an excess because it overflows my domain of possibility,
or even my possibility of possibility. The void refuses any attempts to become a part of
my useful world totality, and in this refusal I am aware of its presence. Blanchot
captures this with a tongue-twister: “this presence as absence, to absence as its own
affirmation [,] an affirmation in which nothing is affirmed, in which nothing never ceases
to affirm itself with the exhausting insistence of the indefinite” (SL 30). This empty
presence shows up as the materiality of existing that simply is before a world that suits
me, the world of knowledge and action. Since this existing extends further than thought
it can’t be subsumed under a general concept and so shows up as radically particular
and singular. This sense of singularity “is approached by literature and the experience
of Dying” (Haase 57). The experience of the ‘work’ of art brings us close to this singular
and contentless space, but it does so by making it show up or appear. Blanchot calls
this the ‘original experience’, a notion I will continue to develop we go along.

The mode of empty appearing is that of the image, which I mentioned briefly
earlier when introducing the distinction between the material and beautiful image. An
aesthetic experience in general is one that “makes [an object’s] nature and its matter
visible or present, it is the glorification of its reality: verbal rhythm in the poem, sound in
the music, light become color in painting, space become stone in the house” (SL 223).
An image makes the quality, character or appearing of a thing stand in for the use and
function of the existing thing itself. The image is its very appearing in the absence of any
use, value or truth. A tool, for instance, becomes its image when it breaks, no longer
disappearing into its use, it appears as resemblance when it becomes the useful
object’s double (SL 259).44 “The category of art is linked to this possibility for objects to
‘appear’, to surrender, that is, to the pure and simple resemblance behind which there is

44 This is a twist on Heidegger’s analysis of broken tools where the busted hammer appears in its
being-present-to-hand, that mode where I consciously analyze its properties and categorize its features in
order to fix it. Or, in its un-readiness-to-hand, “the ready-to-hand is thus encountered under modifications
in which its presence-at-hand is revealed” (BT, 104).
nothing - but being” (SL 259). Any type of thing can get doubled in its image, where the image is “[a]bsorbing it, identifying substantively with it by moving it from its use value and from its truth value to something incredible - something neutral which there is no getting used to” (SL 258). Images will always be foreign to me because, as qualities, they don’t conform to my categories of rational thought or of pragmatic use, they are “without negation, without decision, when here is nowhere as well” (SL 30).

Now that I have covered the image in general, we can return to Blanchot’s distinction between the beautiful image of classical art and the obscure and uncomfortable image of modern art. Our experience of beauty is made possible when we “recapture the image and make it serve the world’s truth”, this is to make the image into a “life-giving negation” which is an “ideal operation” by which we raise nature to “to a higher meaning, either in order to know it or to enjoy it admiringly” (SL 260). The image of classical art, of beauty, is to make an image out of the ‘object’s aftermath’, it comes later, and lets us have the object at our command by helping us to grasp the object ideally, which is a life-giving negation of the thing (the metaphor of whether the image occurs ‘before’ or ‘after’ the object will be important later). In the absence of the thing, this image gives us ideal forms, or as Levinas says “corrects the caricature of being” (LR 137). But Blanchot insists that when the classical image becomes meaningful, or makes sense to us, “we reverse the relation which is proper to [the image]” (SL 260). What he is saying is that the reason of the ego is so powerful that it can undo the relation proper to the image; it can always find a way to reinterpret the image so that it becomes meaningful or makes sense. But such an operation isn’t original to the image.

Although it is possible to make the negation of the image into something ideal and meaningful, Blanchot thinks of art’s more original and essential role as making apparent that empty meaninglessness that precedes the world, implying that the obscure image is the one most proper for art. The image that Blanchot focuses on and is evoked in writing is the “neutral double of the object in which all belonging to the world is dissipated” (SL 262), which aligns closely (but not completely!) with Levinas’ notion of image as shadow and fundamentally opposed to the concept. Instead of
providing a life-giving ideal, such as in the classical image, this image is a deathly absence.

Now that we have covered the image we are in a place to better understand Blanchot’s specific project in *The Space of Literature* which is to bring us into and characterize the experience of reading and writing literature. Here, language becomes image to make the void perceptible: “I make perceptible, by my silent mediation, the uninterrupted affirmation, the giant murmuring upon which language opens and thus becomes image, becomes imaginary, becomes speaking depth, an indistinct plentitude which is empty” (SL 27). Normally, when we are in the world, we use language as if it were the ‘house of being’, which is to use it referentially to describe and explain but also to act in the world such as when we greet each other, promise or make a request. But, in writing fiction, language touches on the world’s limit and spills past it into nothingness. When it opens onto this space it can’t work referentially because there are no distinct mental contents to convey, nor can it be used as a form of action, because there is no worldly time in which to act, and nor, as we shall see, is there a sense of one’s own identity or agency from which to act. The language of poetry and literature conveys this vast emptiness by taking in thought and not leading it to any definable content. Blanchot uses the metaphor of a ‘murmur’ and Levinas will call it a ‘rustling’, a way of conveying a sensation without meaning or content.

Gregory Betts’ collection of poems from his book *If Language*, is an example of poetry displaying the materiality of language and thus becoming its image. Betts takes an epigram by Steve McCaffery consisting of 525 letters, and proceeds to make 56 poems that are perfect anagrams of the original quote. Each poem has to contain 42 A’s, 8 B’s, 23 C’s and so on. The number of poems, 56, was chosen because the most common letter, ‘i’, occurred 56 times in the original epigram (Betts 9). The apparent content of the poems includes silly rants, mythic prophecies, observations about anagrams and lists of cities, but the reader is starkly aware that the real content of each poem is the fact that the number of times each letter occurs was chosen at the start, and the apparent coherence of the sentences is a marvel of how the material of language can be strung together. Here is one of his poems quoted in full:
A basement leak, the rodents bristle, insects  
surge compass wire, old men thru puddles  
passing cautious candle-like glisten. Refractory  
the incantatory pass thru puddles difficult  
hallway, Lascaullion etchings shift in motion  
cave history, filthier gloom. Threatening to  
catch bare moon divide the finer flames and  
sanctuary as that of hell. Strange bohemian figures  
wait among ochre outlines, signal the whole  
chamber music in doubting plea. Fighting its  
fiery feet, guide gaze: it is written violence; it is for  
poems. Fifty ill felines echo utopia, out in photoic  
jails, as if this flash against biblical caves spoilt  
philosophical tact. (Betts, p. 57)

When reading one of Betts’ poems I can’t help but to keep an eye out for where  
that single ‘z’ will occur. My experience of this poem resists categorization or any  
attempts to summarize it. Calling it some sort of ‘murmur’ comes close. “[T]he language  
of literature is estranged from its ordinary usage and no general description could  
capture the uniqueness of a text’s expression” (Haase 23). What is left of language after  
the concept or referent is removed? The materiality of language is to become its sound,  
shape and rhythm. The texture, style and colour of the words themselves can’t be  
reduced to a parcel of information, but present themselves as a presence of an absence  
of being.

Blanchot claims that this empty experience of the image is one that takes place  
outside of the the meaningful and powerful time and world of a person. In contrast to  
this, he is aware of the public and historical significance of artworks. They have a  
history, are studied by historians of art, they are bought and sold as things in the world,  
and often, have their publication date printed on them. When an aesthetic theory
interprets the cultural meaning of a work, the date of the work certainly weighs in. Blanchot wants to show that the radically particular experience of reading and writing, their essence, is distinct from and can’t ever be approached by any of these worldly modes of temporalization. He calls this experience the ‘original experience’, and despite appearing outside of the world and history, it still has a unique mode of temporalization:

In the world where it emerges to proclaim that now there is a work - in the usual time, that is, of current truths - it emerges as the unaccustomed, the unwonted, that which has no relation to this world or with this time. Never is it affirmed on the basis of familiar, present reality. It takes away what is most familiar to us. And always it is in excess: it is the superfluidity of what always lacks. We have called this excess poverty the superabundance of refusal (SL 228)

This empty abundance is what constitutes the original experience as one of utter alterity: “[T]hrough the work there takes place in time another time, and in the world of beings that exist and of things which subsist there comes, as presence, not another world, but the other of all worlds, that which is always other than the world” (SL 228). For Levinas too, the experience of art is something distinct from worldly or historical experience, and temporalizes uniquely as a stuck and empty eternity or ‘meanwhile’ (LR 141). Here Levinas contrasts the work as a thing in the world with the otherworldly experience of an art work:

We are not thinking just of the duration of an artwork itself as an object, of the permanence of writings in libraries and of statues in museums. Within the life, or rather the death, of a statue, an instant endurs infinitely [...] The imminence of the future lasts before an instant stripped of the essential characteristic of the present, its evanescence. It will never have completed its task as a present, as though reality withdrew from its own reality and left it powerless. In this situation the present can assume nothing, can take on nothing, and thus is an impersonal and anonymous instant (LR 138).
Blanchot even borrows Levinas’ trope about an art work being like a set of ruins from another time, saying that art “comes already and forever past, so that my relation to it is not one of cognition, but of recognition, and this recognition ruins in me the power of knowing, the right to grasp” (SL 31).45 If art produces an alternate sense of time, then we would expect that an object that is actually from another time could produce an aesthetic experience. Saying that art comes from another time is a Levinasian way of conveying a relation to something not found in my world. If something is in my time, either my past or future, then I am connected to it causally, or can interpret its meaning and use it for my purposes, or incorporate it into the unity of my care structure. A time that comes from an immemorial past is placed outside of my memory and other functions of the ego, but is nonetheless constitutive of my present situation.46 Another way of looking at this is that objects that appear but don’t belong to my world, such as past or foreign artifacts, also produce the aesthetic effect (Toumayan 146). This is because they can only appear to sensation as being their qualities and not as being for any useful purpose.

My own experience can confirm this. When I navigate my home city of Hamilton, I almost always have some goal, a route and an order of operations to meet this goal, and the city is manifest as a place to get these done, such as when I bike to a coffee shop to get some work done and pick up groceries on my way home. My experience of Machu Picchu was in no way like this. Exploring the ancient city, I had no such goal, plan our route, except perhaps to see and be struck by as much as possible. Wandering the ancient city brings on a state of awareness that is wide and dream-like, where my walking and turning corners isn’t directed by some knowledge of the fasted route, but where walking is simply walking. The ancient city doesn’t appear to me as buildings whose function I can name; I am left to touch the quality of the stone, take in the way

45 “[F]orever bygone past of ruins” (LR 131).
46 This radical past “is in no way a beginning, an arche, it does not have the status of a principle, but comes from the dimension of the ‘an-archic’ […], [it] produces itself as the deconstruction of origin, as its destruction and interruption” (Ciaramelli 88).
the ruined walls negotiate the contour of the slope and be firmly silenced by the vastness of the mountain landscape. Although parts of my awareness periodically return to concerns such as remembering the way out and the time that the bus leaves, my awareness was largely engulfed in a fascinated aesthetic wandering.

Blanchot characterizes the time of the original experience as impossible but still an affirmation: “Time’s absence is not a purely negative mode. It is the time when nothing begins, when initiative is not possible, when, before the affirmation, there is already a return of the affirmation” (SL 30). It’s impossibility is due to the lack of life in which there can be any future projects at all, and the lack of the type of death that would make these projects valuable. And yet, despite its emptiness, this time has a sort of presence which betrays or is an affirmation of the brute fact of existence, and that existence itself outstrips my goals, my time and my world.

Now that we have covered the image and its temporalization, we can describe what’s going on in the subject in this encounter. My passivity before the image is such that this whole situation becomes that of my being touched or gripped by the image. “What happens when what is seen imposes itself upon the gaze, as if the gaze were seized, put in touch with the appearance?”, where seeing is a “gripping [...] contact at a distance” (SL, 32). There is something about the experience of qualities such as timbre, redness and roughness that are completely out of my control, in that I play no active role in their constitution within experience. They merely appear to me as they do, and this appearing always takes place just before I can avert my eyes, plug my ears or come up with a meaning for what I see. Qualities always touch me before I can respond. This passive interval between being touched and returning to a rational or active frame of mind is the aesthetic moment. The appearing makes a space where I can’t touch, as if it were already in some other’s grasp. My usual comportment as a knowing agent is paused by a grip that I didn’t initiate. This is to be seen as an other initiated change of state in the subject.

Blanchot and Levinas both describe a sense of fascination experienced by the subject during this moment of being gripped by the emptiness of aesthetic experience. We have a fascination for the space, centre or origin of literature. “This infinite chain of
words freed from the function of designation or referentiality, that emerges when the word turns back upon itself, rather than outwards to the thing, is literature’s centre” (Haase 33). Words have the power to go beyond concepts, to appear as the empty negation of a thing, giving them their duplicity and dissimulation. But this origin, centre or space pulls on me: “‘Origin’, then, in Blanchot’s study, carries an affective dimension not prominent in Heidegger: it is the source of the work as the pull of a point to which the work is tending. It is this passion, more than technical skill, that marks the writer as a writer” (Clark 53). Perhaps the origin of literature fascinates because it is always just out of reach for the ego and our concepts, and it is the ego’s desire to know that motivates this pull. But I will reject that the ego is the source of fascination because this fascination occurs in the absence of the ego. I can’t relate to the alterity of the image through my usual modes of engagement, cognition or appropriation. To encounter something outside of my usual cognitive modes is to be spellbound. I can’t terminate the experience of something for which I don’t relate to cognitively because I am not there as an agent to turn the experience off. This is articulated as a passion, which is not something that I choose, rather, it is an enthralling propulsion that I discover. Blanchot describes fascination as a non-cognitive but affective experience:

What fascinates us robs us of our power to give sense. It abandons its "sensory" nature, abandons the world, draws back from the world, and draws us along. It no longer reveals itself to us, and yet it affirms itself in a presence foreign to the temporal present and to presence in space. Separation, which was the possibility of seeing, coagulates at the very center of the gaze into impossibility. The look thus finds, in what makes it possible, the power that neutralizes it, neither suspending nor arresting it, but on the contrary preventing it from ever finishing, cutting it off from any beginning, making of it a neutral, directionless gleam which will not go out, yet does not clarify -- the gaze turned back upon itself and closed in a circle. (SL 31)
Levinas uses the term ‘fascination’ but describes this experience more fully with his term ‘participation’:

But they impose themselves on us without our assuming them. Or rather, our consenting to them is inverted into a participation. Their entry into us is one without our entry into them. Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it. The subject is part of its own representation [...] Here we shall use the terms rhythm and musical while thinking of this reversal of power into participation (LR 132-3).

Levinas and Blanchot articulate a sense of being drawn in, not being in control and of one becoming a part of their own perception. I think this means that fascination is an affective state that can’t be explained in terms of subject and object, which means that it is a relationship that the subject is entangled in before it is an “I”. This is what leads them both to assert a sense of anonymity for the one engaged with the work. For the writer, “what speaks in him is the fact that, in one way or another, he is no longer himself; he isn’t anyone any more” (SL 28). Writing is also my no longer being able “to address myself and the inability of whoever addresses me to say “I”; it is [my] not being [my]self” (SL 28). When writing fiction I enter into a mode of being that is speaking to no one, or addressing an alien and empty interlocutor, and from a position that isn’t able to be addressed in return. When writing like this, I no longer occupy a place and a time from which I would be able to locate myself, nor do I take the character of an ‘I can’ that would manipulate its surroundings and recognize itself doing so. Blanchot adds that anyone whose life depends on the work, and not the world, such as the reader, also undertakes this movement towards anonymity (SL 21). This is his way of showing that the aesthetic situation is so removed from being that one loses their world constituted identity in the genuine aesthetic experience.

Levinas agrees that the experience of a work is one of becoming anonymous because they depart from their defining features as seen from the world’s perspective.
But these two thinkers give this anonymity opposing ethical valances. Levinas thinks of this anonymity, which is a non-localized watching and being among what it watches, as a flight from ethical responsibilities, whereas Blanchot conceives anonymity as an openness to involvement. I will dig more deeply into the ethical significance of anonymity as I trace their divergences in the next section, but first I want to sum up this section with two examples.

The first is a long quote from Blanchot where he describes getting ambushed by an aesthetic experience when looking at a wall. I want to highlight the fact that every object is a candidate for sinking into its image and inducing the aesthetic experience, but that art works do this especially.

But when we are face to face with things themselves - if we fix upon a face, the corner of a wall - does it not also sometimes happen that we abandon ourselves to what we see? Bereft of power before this presence suddenly strangely mute and passive, are we not at its mercy? Indeed, this can happen, but it happens because the thing we stare at has foundered, sunk into its image, and the image has returned into that deep fund of impotence to which everything reverts (SL 255).

I want to sum up this section with an example. Sometimes, when I read poetry, only the quality of the words and their conjunction fill my experience, and when I’m done, I can’t articulate or really remember what I have read. I usually read it a second time, much more slowly, filling out each word and then each sentence with possible meanings, whether literal, metaphorical or psychoanalytical, to gain a feeling of a narrative or to make the poem into something relatable.

*Ash Ode*

*When I saw you ahead I ran two blocks*

*shouting your name then realizing it wasn’t*
you but some alarmed pretender, I went on running, shouting now into the sky, continuing your fame and luster. Since I've been incinerated, I've oft returned to this thought, that all things loved are pursued and never caught, even as you slept beside me you were flying off. at least what's never had can't be lost, the sieve of self struck with just some larger chunks, jawbone, wedding ring, a single repeated dream, a lullaby in every elegy, descriptions of the sea written in the desert, your broken umbrella, me claiming I could fix it. (Young, p52)

My first read through left me in an empty space with the presence of a quality that I couldn't name and this is what Blanchot will call the original experience, and where both authors locate the aesthetic experience. There is something about the pre or extra-ontological domain in which art works are situated that make this experience simply what it is to experience a work and not a mere contingent psychological fact about me. My second read through gave me time to interpret the author's words and gain the sense that this is a window into his life events and ruminations and it also gave me a chance to project and fantasize and see myself in these events. This second reading belongs to the order of reflection, meaning, beauty and discursive reason, and this is where Blanchot and Levinas situate the discipline of aesthetics and art criticism. If Blanchot and Levinas are correct, then maybe you have had a similar experience, whether with this poem or one like it. Blanchot says that this 'first reading' constitutes human authenticity and has ethical significance, while for Levinas, the 'first reading' is irresponsible and it is only the 'second reading' that has any possible ethical role to play. The next section will examine just how the original experience of the 'first reading' makes us authentic.
Section 2: Blanchot’s Departure from Levinas, Aesthetics of Authenticity

While Blanchot and Levinas’ accounts share some near identical overall features, that of undertaking a phenomenology of the work and nearly the same characterizations of the image, time, fascination and resulting in anonymity, these two thinkers conceive of their accounts as producing different results. Blanchot lays the ground for thinking of aesthetic experience as an ethical resource, and does this by linking aesthetic experience closer to alterity and effecting a more complete displacement of the ego. In this section I will begin by tracing their divergences in order to bring to light the sense of authenticity in Blanchot’s aesthetics.

At this point I will reopen the discussion of the image to show that although both thinkers constitute the image as something opaque and within sensation, as opposed to the transparent and cognitive concept, Levinas positions his image ‘after’ the object while Blanchot tends to position his image ‘before’ the object. Levinas’ notion of resemblance plays out either temporally as a delay or spatially as a double of the object (LR 135). This image is animated in the imagination, which makes it a pseudo activity of the ego. For Levinas, “[n]on-truth is not an obscure residue of being, but is its sensible character itself, by which there is resemblance and images in the world” (LR 136). And again, “[t]he sensible is being insofar as it resembles itself [...] it casts a shadow, emits that obscure and elusive essence, that phantom essence which cannot be identified with the essence revealed in truth” (LR 137). The image peels the sensible quality off of objects and displays it. In other writings he refers to this as the ‘pelt’ or ‘skin’ of being (OB 71). For Levinas, the sensation of things are epiphenomenal in that they play no functional, instrumental or pragmatic role in being whatsoever. Recall that his notion of a concept is entirely pragmatic, so sensation, or qualia in general, due to their lack of use, cannot be conceptualized. The whole totality of being has such a sensible quality that doesn’t function as an intrinsic part of its totalization. And yet, sensation is tied to being as a counterpart, such that the identity of being is to be itself and its shadow.
totalizing or incorporating its shadow ecstatically. Thus, Levinas’ shadow is a complication in being, but not a departure. Likewise, we can think of the subject in aesthetic experience as undergoing a corresponding change, albeit in the direction of a simplification, because the ego is stripped of the power and freedom that make human life so complex.

For Blanchot, the image is a sensation of the materiality that comes ‘before’ objects, and due to its preceding and exceeding nature, is manifest primarily as something affective. He agrees with Levinas that the purely imaginary is gratuitous (SL 262). For Blanchot, “[t]he work might be called an emergent affect, without (as yet) determinacy in any subject or material” (Clark 48). Calling the work, and its image, an ‘emergent affect’ is a way of describing its influence or the difference it makes on me and without my being able define or analyze its source; I am left to accept it as a pure arising or engulfing. The affective power of the image is due to the way that Blanchot thinks it as making alterity appear. It is not that images resemble objects and so appear after the object as a double; images mark a pre-object state, that of their material before they have a form or function. Blanchot’s image gets us in touch with what precedes the world of objects, and this is where they get their affective power: to encounter what is other and prior to my world isn’t the type of experience that leaves me unchanged. The take-aware here is that Levinas propounds a late sensory/imaginative image, while Blanchot’s is an early sensory/affective image.

By situating art further into alterity, the question about how humans are able to make or enjoy art in the first place arises for Blanchot. This isn’t a problem for Levinas because the fact that humans are able to use their imaginations to engage with the sensation of objects can be explained in straightforward psychological and ontological terms. Blanchot, on the other hand is in a position to ask a deeper and more interesting question, namely, “[h]ow, if he is altogether possibility, can man allow himself anything resembling art?” (SL 240). Since we do have art, and it is a form of otherness or impossibility, we need a radical reversal that is “contrary to his apparently authentic definition” (SL 240). In other words, the impossibility of the work of art challenges our
definition of the human subject as something constituted by its possibilities. Next, we will look at the role art plays in reversing our authentic definition.

Blanchot’s investigation into the alterity of art can’t be separated from the situation of the one who relates to art. Blanchot is going to draw a link between the particular nothingness in the work and the radical particularity and nothingness that founds human being. Recall that “[e]very individual literary text, whether we are speaking of a novel or a poem, has its own autonomy and no general description could capture the uniqueness of its expression. Indeed, for Blanchot, the criterion of being literary is this singularity or separateness, which he calls in The Space of Literature the ‘solitude’ of the work of art” (Haase 23-24). Solitude denotes how the work is *sui generis*: it is in solitude because it doesn’t share the company of other particulars in its type, nor even to have a type because it stands radically by itself. Blanchot sees this very same notion in the subject: “solitude may disclose the nothingness that founds the ‘I am’. Then the solitary ‘I’ sees that it is separated, but is no longer able to recognize in this separation the source of its power” (SL 252). Blanchot recognizes that other accounts of subjectivity can be expressed as a dialectical tension between being and nothingness, where our nothingness takes the form of a future possibility that leaves us open to further becoming. He wants to point to a different sort of nothingness, one that precedes this dialectic: a relation to the enigma of our existence that can’t be said without being turned into something universal. It is the particular, contentless existing that we all feel ourselves to be before we are even ourselves… and it is useless! Other accounts of human being leave the experience of solitude out, precisely because it is not an aspect of our being or our possibilities. To include solitude, a nothingness that can’t become a possibility, is to rupture the boundary of the subject and include an impossibility that is contrary to the function of the ego. The experience of solitude is also called the original experience, for it is the fundamental beginning point (SL 229) from which the rest of the person and work of art emerge.

My most memorable experiences of solitude have happened during times of extreme sickness, such as getting food poisoning or a bacterial infection. When incapacitated for over twenty four hours I begin to experience myself as an emptiness
that keeps existing. This is enough time to have become acclimatized to whatever discomfort I was suffering, so the experience can’t even be said to be one of sickness anymore. I have the sense that I am not me anymore and that there is nothing to want and nothing to do, and yet the experience keeps happening.\(^{47}\) In such an experience there is no sense of use or possibility: I obviously can’t work towards any goals or improve myself by meditating or something, and nor can I enjoy myself by watching movies or listening to audio books. The objects around me such as my alarm clock or lamp begin to lose their meaning as functioning objects, having no need to know the time, and it making no difference whether the light is on or off, it’s as if I forget what they are for. When I’m healthy again, I always forget to include this type of experience as a part of the type of being that I am and as a part of my particular self identity. This forgetfulness or omission is a mistake and I think Blanchot is right to include the original experience in our notion of the subject. Blanchot’s insight into solitude is twofold: the original experience is essential to who we are and aesthetic experience is a way of getting us in touch with this part of ourselves.

Since it is a state of empty solitude that founds the ‘I am’, our authenticity must depend on a relation to this founding state. This can be seen in Blanchot’s notion of the poet who “entertains with death a relation which is not that of possibility, which does not lead to mastery or to understanding or to the progressive achievements of time, but exposes him to a radical reversal” (SL 241). “Perpetuating being in the form of nothingness, this reversal changes light into fascination, the object into the image, and it makes us into the empty center of eternal repetition” (SL 246). This radical reversal makes an inversion on the terms by which Heidegger claims we are authentic.\(^{48}\)

“Authenticity that is not truth: this is perhaps the proposition to which Blanchot’s critical reflection leads us” (Krimper 106). This is because the disclosure of truth is a mode of totalization: “Levinas demonstrates that the categories of being and time are not

\(^{47}\) Levinas displays these experiences with his accounts of insomnia (61-64) and indolence (EE 12-17)

\(^{48}\) Namely, anticipating my own death in a way that makes my finite life show up as meaningful, and myself as the one who has the power to make something of my life. This is ‘death as possibility’, where a relation with my own death makes my own life show up as something which is possible for me (BT 311)
adequate to the work of art and essentially reverses the relation that Heidegger has established between truth and art” (Toumayan 116). They remove the artwork from the sphere of the concept: art isn’t a clearing or illumination, nor a revelation or creation; it is an event of obscuring. Instead of constituting subjectivity as the ego’s freedom and possibility, it draws us into relation with the passive, impossible, empty subjectivity that precedes the ego. Blanchot notes that both art and death are avenues by which we can get in touch with the original experience for they are sheer impossibilities that limit and displace the totalizing tendency of the ego. “The promise of literature thus does not consist in broadening our knowledge and in contributing to our mastery over the world but, on the contrary, in counteracting the alienation of human existence in a world of utility” (Haase 58). For Blanchot, to constitute oneself only as a freedom can’t be what makes humans authentic because it leaves out the more fundamental and essential aspect of the human subject, that of impossibility. The original experience is such that human ‘things’ or tools don’t usually open it up, whereas art’s (and death’s) essence is precisely to open upon this void. In sum, the original experience is necessary for human authenticity and art is one way to get there. And yet, this last propositional claim can’t be made in such a straightforward way.

At this point it would seem as though we could make an argument for the original experience of the void opened by art as being the condition for human authenticity. Blanchot asks this very thesis question like this: “So then, is the work really the marvel of the beginning, in which error’s indefiniteness would preserve us from inauthenticity’s fraud? And is the nontrue an essential form of authenticity?” (SL 247). And replies that “[t]o this question there can be no response. The poem is the answer’s absence. The poet is the one who, through his sacrifice, keeps the question open in his work.” (SL 247). We can’t make any propositional claim about authenticity because it is of a realm where our propositions, concepts and truth can’t apply. “Such an experience (or rather non-experience) introduces a relation to what excludes all relation—a relation to the unknown that would suspend the fixed distinction between self and other, the proper and improper, authentic and inauthentic. For to undergo such an experience would carry the self outside itself, consigning you to the self-dispossession and dis-
appropriation of déseoeuvrement [inoperability]" (Krimper 111). If we could make such a positive assertion about art’s constituting role in authenticity, then that would amount to totalizing it into the human world; to utter the statement ‘art makes us authentic’ is to assimilate this situation into the economy of human life and being and would betray that very experience.⁴⁹

And yet, even though we can’t speak propositionally about authenticity (which is entangled in a pre-propositional state) the artist has a mission to keep this question open. To keep a question open, without filling it up with an answer, is a way of being permanently open to alterity. The more that history, culture, science and technology move toward a future where everything is in the daylight of truth, “the more it seems that art must descend toward that point where nothing has meaning yet, the more it matters that art maintain the movement, the insecurity and the grief of that which escapes every grasp and all ends” (SL, footnote 244). Art must be the counterbalance to the process of history and human progress, and part of this counterbalance is for art to refuse to tell us exactly what its job is. The true artist is one who has or is tied up in a mission to call us back to error, insignificance and the nontrue which is our origin. The artist must call us “as if perhaps thence sprang the source of all authenticity” (SL, footnote 244, My emphasis), not as one that is certain, but as one that is open.⁵⁰

For Levinas, there are at least three options for self constitution; one can be the enjoying and possessing ego, one can be in the inauthenticity of anonymity or one can be the ethical ‘I’ of transcendence. He says that “[T]ranscendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face” (TI 305). And continues to assert that “peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism” (TI 306). This is precisely why simply doing away with the ego and becoming

⁴⁹ Peperzak uses the word ‘economy’ to refer to the way that human life is “caught in a web of needs, desires, values, the rational use of means toward ends, exchanges on the basis of calculated equivalence, and so on” (Peperzak 187).

⁵⁰ Levinas avoids speaking of authenticity, perhaps because it sounds too Heideggerian. He has, however, said that avoiding constituting oneself with an ethical identity is inauthentic (BPW 14), which suggests that ethical life, open to alterity, is the authentic life for humans.
anonymous isn’t ethical. We know that Levinas thinks of anonymity as inauthentic because he claims that “the obscurity of the imagination where the knowing subject goes astray and loses itself [...] is the inauthenticity where beings flee from their identity toward anonymity” (BPW 14), so we can infer that he would call the ethical ‘I’ authentic, although he might avoid using this terminology due to its association with Heidegger.

Blanchot also has an account of an authentic identity that results from displacing the ego. The solitude effected by the original experience plays a dual role in the identity of the reader and writer of literature. Recall that the aesthetic situation is one where the participant becomes anonymous. And yet, despite solitude’s robbing the poet of himself as having a worldly identity, the task of writing constitutes the poet as a poet with a different sort of identity. “This dependence [on solitude] is essential. The poet exists only poetically, as the possibility of the poem. And, in this sense, he only exists after it, although he stands uniquely before it. Inspiration is not the gift of the poem to someone existing already, but the gift of existence to someone who does not yet exist” (SL 227). The poet gets her existence as a poet from the poem, but this isn’t the stable existence of a self constituted by its goals. To exist poetically is to be open to the original experience, or leaves space to experience their own sense of solitude, which is to exist in a way that is ‘open’ or ‘outside’. We would would expect that the poet achieves a stable essence as a ‘poet’ once the poem is finished, but he “dispose[s] of this reality [...] in order to make the poem possible. In this sense he does not survive the creation of the work. He lives by dying in it” (SL 227). The poet exists in terms that are contrary to those of worldly life, which can be articulated as an empty, open or deathly existence (or my experience of having food poisoning!). Later, I will develop this further in Blanchot’s notion of poetic exile, but for now, this marks an identity that is contrary to any world constituted identity.

Just as the original experience reveals an ambiguity in the structure of the subject, it also reveals a corresponding ambiguity in the structure of the world. It plays a dual role of undermining and preconditioning any world. Blanchot articulates this dual role like this: “Art is that deep which is sometimes the absence of profundity, of the foundation, the pure void bereft of importance, and sometimes that upon which a
foundation can be given, but it is also always at the same time one and the other [...] the essential ambiguity” (SL 239). On the one hand art shows “the beginning” (SL 244) and the “elemental deep” (SL 34), both of which express a pre-cognitive condition, materiality or particularity that makes for the foundation of any meaningful world. But on the other hand, the abyss is totally other, and so can’t fit into categories such as ‘foundation’, which would link with the world to make a totality. As something totally other, it destabilizes and refuses totality, or “[w]e appeal to art’s sovereignty; it ruins the kingdom” (SL 244). Over and over, the original experience puts us in touch with a non-thematizable reality that founds and undermines thematizable being. The work’s task is to show this essential ambiguity.

We also have a phenomenological description of the stance that is necessary to engage in the work of literary creation. It is a moment where the artist’s identity comes from outside of any worldly structure. Blanchot calls this poetic exile, which means that “he lives outside” (SL 238). The outside is the void, or pre-truth realm of error, where “[e]rror means wandering, the inability to abide and stay” (SL 238). Perhaps more straightforwardly, error means ‘non-foundation’ (Krimper 105). There is no here or now, or truth that could become his or which would become familiar to him. “He remains separated, where the deep of dissimulation reigns, that elemental obscurity through which no way can be made and which because of that makes its awful way through him” (SL 238). He can’t actively pick up his future as a possibility and guide himself with his goals so he is forced, passively, to be the medium of this awful emptiness. Because of this, he loses his world, essence, truth and right to death, the death that would grant his future as possibility. He forgoes “everything connected to results, substantive reality, power” (SL 237). He is foreign, outside, knows no intimacy or limit. These aesthetic moments are such that the whole of the poet’s life is resistant to totalization, so there is a sense in which the rest of their life remains uncomfortably exposed to alterity.

51 Levinas’ corresponding notion to poetic exile is that of mythic existence: “This way of existing [...] outside of being and the world, must be called mythical” (TI 142). The mythic person lives in the elemental night and deals with the insecurity of “[faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, [but] mark the nothingness that bounds the egoism of enjoyment” (TI 142).
We can animate these phenomenological descriptions by sketching some characters to which they might apply. Perhaps Blanchot is thinking of the Romantic era figure of the starving artist, but we can imagine this authentic artist as appearing, realistically, in different ways. We can picture the starving artist as one who sacrifices their material well-being because their disposable income goes into their art. It is possible to imagine such an artist living near poverty on purpose, but it is more likely that the starving artist is one who desires to break into their field to make a living and has yet to do so. Because an artist is defined by their art, they may take less desirable side jobs such as in the service industry, and find cheaper rent with roommates and in less well off neighbourhoods. We can also imagine this authentic artist as a professional writer or artist whose meaning in life comes from their aesthetic experience but who have also managed to maintain an organized professional life. The point here is that their ‘outside’ aspect is the one that grants them their identity, while the security of their world and career are not what defines them. What these two characters have in common is that, whatever their material situation, they all prioritize and are constituted by their relation to the work of art.

Section 3: Responding to Levinas’ Aesthetics

In this section I would like to use Blanchot’s insights into aesthetic experience to respond to Levinas’ account of art. Accepting Blanchot’s account over Levinas will put us in a position to accept its ethical structure in section four. I will show how Levinas’ image of resemblance is a product of sensation and the ego, while Blanchot’s image, what I will call the image of disappearance, is a product of sensation only. I will use Levinas’ notion of sensibility to reconstruct what I think is going on in Blanchot’s account, and situate the image of resemblance ‘after’ objects, while the image of disappearance is a return to the imaginary space that precedes objects. Since Blanchot’s image occurs as an immediate affectivity prior to the ego’s involvement, it must be prior in some sense to any image constituted in the ego’s domain. Using
Levinas’ notion of sensibility has the additional benefit of allowing him to accept Blanchot’s image on his, Levinas’, own terms.

a) Levinas’ Image of resemblance

I will start with Levinas, for whom aesthetic experience takes hold of sensation, is constituted in the imagination of the ego and thus is situated ‘after’ the objects of ontology. For Levinas, the essence of aesthetic experience consists of the sensible quality of things. He says that the non-truth of art “is not an obscure residue of being, but is its sensible character itself, by which there is resemblance and images in the world” (LR 136). And again, “[t]he sensible is being insofar as it resembles itself [...] it casts a shadow, emits that obscure and elusive essence, that phantom essence which cannot be identified with the essence revealed in truth” (LR 137). In other writings he refers to this as the ‘pelt’ or ‘skin’ of being (OB 71). The image peels the sensible quality off of objects and displays them for itself, as its own unique class, and not as something that would refer back to its object. For Levinas, the sensation of things are epiphenomenal in that they play no functional, instrumental or pragmatic role in being whatsoever. Recall that his notion of a concept is entirely pragmatic, so sensation, or qualia in general, cannot be conceptualized due to their lack of use. The whole totality of being has such a sensible quality or shadow that doesn’t function as a straightforward part of its totalization, but maintains itself within totalization as a complication or destabilization.

Levinas thinks of the imagination as receptive to sensations and animates or constitutes them as images. The imagination is taken to be a part of the ego, perhaps a Kantian faculty, and plays a role in cognition, so the imagination lacks the ability to transcend the ego.52 There is an aspect of transcendence in thought, but not a genuine transcendence, “[f]or the transcendence of thought remains closed in itself despite all its

52 Levinas makes a few explicit references to Kant’s transcendental imagination (OB 117, 192, 194), often to reject such faculties as the basis of subjectivity. But even as he challenges Kant’s transcendental psychology we can see it implicitly at play in his notion of imagination.
adventures—which in the last analysis are purely imaginary, or are adventures traversed as by Ulysses: on the way home” (TI 23). As wild as one’s imaginings may be, they, like thought, can’t transcend the one who imagines them. The poet who loses himself in imaginings is actually affirming himself: “The alterity of the I that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same: the negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I” (TI 37). Using the imagination is a power of the I, so using it to negate oneself still affirms the I’s power.

The imagination and its images are usually an intentional activity of the ego; it is the aesthetic non-intentional image that is a unique subsection of this class. Here are two instances of Levinas using an intentional version of the image: “The presence of the Other, or expression, source of all signification, is not contemplated as an intelligible essence, but is heard as language, and thereby is effectuated exteriorly. Expression, or the face, overflows images, which are always immanent to my thought, as though they came from me” (TI 297). The image he refers to here is the interior representation of an intuition and is linked to intelligible essences. Levinas divides the intentional image into at least two types, representing being as presence and as absence: “To knowledge as symbolic aim corresponds being showing itself symbolically, significatively, in Husserl’s sense, on the basis of an other than itself, and to intuition—being in its image as a presence (perception) or as an absence (imagination and memory)” (OB 72). Levinas’ aesthetic image is proposed in contrast to these intentional images. The ego usually uses the imagination and its images in an intentional way; the opaque or non-intentional image of aesthetic experience is unique but not free from this domain.

Lingis, in the translator’s introduction to Otherwise than Being, draws out a lineage of the image that begins with sensuous material, is then posed as an image, which is quickly named, and then becomes a candidate for aesthetic enjoyment: “Levinas depicts, in rather Platonic fashion, the sphere of sensuous material as a continual vibrancy of images, whose scintillation is fixed, or more exactly given direction or sense” (OB, xxxi, Lingis). “But the terms thus nominalized can begin again to function as flows of time, as modalities of essence. They do so in art. In art the terms lose their
opacity and their qualities become vibrant and promote their own presence. In painting red reddens and green greens, forms from contours and gape open with their vacuity. In music sounds resound, in poems the verbal material becomes sonorous, in architecture buildings chant and enchant” (OB xxxi).\(^{53}\) It is after an image has been named with an essence that it can be converted into a ‘modality of essence’, where the verb of being, ‘to be’, gets taken as an adverb, the description of the quality of its being. This adverbalization of the thing, or taking a thing simply as its qualitative experience is the essence of the image of resemblance.

Next I want to characterize what is happening when the ego uses its imagination in a non-intentional way. When the ego is in this state, it has given up its characteristic intellectual ‘possession’ but maintains itself in playful ‘enjoyment’.\(^{54}\) Here is a long quote to this extent:

The aesthetic orientation man gives to the whole of his world represents a return to enjoyment and to the elemental on a higher plane. The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image. All art is plastic tools and implements, which themselves presuppose enjoyment, offer themselves to enjoyment in their turn. They are playthings [jouets]: the fine cigarette lighter, the fine car. They are adorned by the decorative arts; they are immersed in the beautiful, where every going beyond enjoyment reverts to enjoyment (TI 140).

Here, sensation is elevated by the imagination, meaning that it is a way for the ego to make its enjoyment of the world more complex. This should not be surprising,

\(^{53}\) Levinas says that “the sensations in which the sensible qualities are lived resound adverbially, and, more precisely, as adverbs of the verb to be” (OB 35).

\(^{54}\) Westphal notes the triadic structure to Totality and Infinity that tells of a movement from enjoyment to dwelling to transcendence, with the egoism of the Same pulsating in the first two (Westphal 153).
since Levinas sees “all human activity, including art, science, philosophy and religion, as an attempt to enjoy the world’s wealth” (Peperzak 188). Another way to put this, is that Levinas includes art in the class of things that are interested. Enjoyment is an ego affirming state where the Same is present to itself in sensation as the naive “unreflective I, beyond instinct, beneath reason” (TI 138) wherein “the egoism of the I pulsates” (TI 135), content in its finite existence. Aesthetic experience is a disengagement from the world where the ego gives up its possession in order to enjoy sensuous experience all the more, or at least in a unique mode.

Levinas makes a few explicit references to Kant’s transcendental imagination (OB 35, 117, 192, 194), often to reject such faculties as the basis of subjectivity, but also to agree with him in other ways. Levinas agrees with Kant in thinking that the imagination temporalizes the sensible before universal categories are applied (OB 35). From this we can gather that the image of resemblance occurs as sensations given to the imagination but incompletely temporalized, while the beautiful and intentional image occur after a process of idealization.

Now, I want to use this picture of a sensing, imagining and enjoying ego to explain what Levinas means by situating the image on the ‘hither-side’ of time and the world. The later Levinas describes what occurs on the hither-side of being as the adverbs of being. He says that “the sensations in which the sensible qualities are lived resound adverbially, and, more precisely, as adverbs of the verb to be” (OB 35). Art works are the descriptors or qualities of the process of being that have become divorced from being. This is one way of describing the dependency of aesthetics on being, without it remaining beholden to being.

The earlier Levinas articulates the lateness of the image in terms of a complication in being. This plays out either temporally as a delay or spatially as a double of the object (LR 135). In resemblance, objects engender their image, which means that objects, and being in general, are a condition of images or are prior to

55 “But the disinteretedness of the artist scarcely deserves this name. For it excludes freedom, which the notion of disinterestedness implies” (LR 132). I will also note that magic, which Levinas associates with art, is interested (Westphal 158).
images. The priority of objects doesn’t keep the image tied down or answerable to objects; the image is freed from reference and reason and is prone to wander.

This combo of being engendered by but not tied back to objects presents the image as a complication in ontological categories. The image is a complication between the terms of presence and absence: “It is a mode of being to which applies neither the form of consciousness, since the I is there stripped of its prerogative to assume, its power, nor the form of unconsciousness, since the whole situation and all its articulations are in a dark light, present.” (LR, 133). The object itself and its concept remain absent and yet this takes the form of a presencing to sensation, a complication which is labeled a ‘waking dream’ or ‘impersonal vigilance’.

The image is a complication in the terms of subject and object: “the subject is among things as a thing, as part of the spectacle. It is exterior to itself, but with an exteriority which is not that of a body, since the pain of the I-actor is felt by the I-spectator, and not through compassion. Here we have really an exteriority of the inward” (LR 133). Neither subject nor object is present, but a displacement of the terms ‘exteriority’ and ‘inward’ and a mixing of the experience of sensation between the one who feels and the one who watches.

Our relation to reality is not the stability of presence or the stable negation of absence but the presence of instability itself, that of a rhythm. The disincarnation of reality by the image “belongs to an ontological dimension that does not extend between us and a reality to be captured, a dimension where commerce with reality is a rhythm” (LR 134). And lastly, our relation to time is not the flow of temporality or the fixity of a concept but some complication between flow and fixity, that of the ‘meanwhile’.

All these aesthetic terms: ‘waking dream’, ‘exteriority of the inward’, ‘rhythm’ and ‘meanwhile’ are complications or instabilities in being. Since being must be logically prior to the possibility of its complication, these aesthetic categories occur after the thematization of being as a partial de-thematization. It is the ontological dependency of aesthetics that prevents it from completing the movement of transcendence or of being genuinely other. The ego does this through some suspension of its intellectual
possession of being, letting it become equivocal and multivalent, without the stabilizing effect of concepts, and yet maintains itself as enjoyingly present for the ego.

b) Blanchot's Image of Disappearance

Now I will compare Levinas' account with Blanchot’s, whose image is given to sensation but instead of being constituted by the imagination as a cognitive faculty, opens onto the imaginary, a non-ontological space synonymous with the void. Blanchot doesn’t use a philosophical psychology but I think it is possible to interpret his comments about the image as taking hold of sensation but not being constituted in the imagination. This allows him to describe an aesthetic moment as it occurs prior to its uptake by the ego and it being situated with respect to being.

Blanchot describes the encounter with the image as an affective immediacy. Here is a long quote where he develops this moment:

What fascinates us robs us of our power to give sense. It abandons its "sensory" nature, abandons the world, draws back from the world, and draws us along. It no longer reveals itself to us, and yet it affirms itself in a presence foreign to the temporal present and to presence in space. Separation, which was the possibility of seeing, coagulates at the very center of the gaze into impossibility. The look thus finds, in what makes it possible, the power that neutralizes it, neither suspending nor arresting it, but on the contrary preventing it from ever finishing, cutting it off from any beginning, making of it a neutral, directionless gleam which will not go out, yet does not clarify -- the gaze turned back upon itself and closed in a circle. Here we have an immediate expression of that reversal which is the essence of solitude. Fascination is solitude's gaze. (SL 32)

The experience of the image is not a sensory intuition and so doesn’t belong to the ‘gaze’ of perception. Nor is there any distance that would be requisite for perception,
possibility or any other power of the subject. It is a gaze that doesn’t clarify, we are in relation to it, stuck with it, but it doesn’t become clear with concepts or reason.

Blanchot is describing an encounter with alterity that is one of affective immediacy. The later Levinas, around the time of *Otherwise than Being*, begins to think sensibility as a mode of being accessed by otherness in just this way. Although Blanchot doesn’t use the word ‘sensibility’ and avoids such transcendental terms, sensibility can play the role of explaining how the image relates to the subject as an affective immediacy that occurs ‘behind’ the ego.

Sensibility, the ability to sense, is primarily a vulnerability, passive receptivity (more passive than the ego’s receptivity!) or possibility of exposure. It is thus the site of the possibility of suffering and also a way of being affected without the mediation of intentionality. “But there is duality in Levinas’ account of sensibility. Sensation means sense-impression, the imprinting of a sense. There is a signifyingness in sensation. It also means being affected - sensitivity or susceptibility” (OB, Lingis, xxx). Sensibility is not reducible to cognition but has the option of becoming a cognition when sense carries (or is interpreted as having) an intentional signification. What really interests Levinas is how an affective sensation can have a non-intentional signification (OB 66). The significance of Levinasian sensibility for Blanchot is its affective signification, since for Blanchot, “[t]he work might be called an emergent affect, without (as yet) determinacy in any subject or material” (Clark 48).

Sensibility’s being gripped without determinacy is expressed as exposure to the *il y a*. In his early writings, Levinas had thought that matter is sensed and forms are cognized (EE 57), a view he develops into a splitting of the subject where the self is ‘cored out’ by a “murmur in sensibility”, which is a part of the “non-coinciding of the ego with itself, restlessness, insomnia, beyond what is found again in the present” (OB 64). It is through sensibility that the subject remains entangled in the *il y a*. “Behind the finite thematizable essences constituted by the ego is the horrible murmur of the *there is*. The ego can’t itself become an essence in the world and so remains partly caught up in the *there is*” (OB 163). Sensibility is a way for the subject to be contacted ‘behind’ the ego, which can be articulated as a splitting of the subject. Our mode of exposure to material
alterity also becomes the mode of exposure to the human other: “Sensibility is exposedness to the other” (OB 75), and thus also the site of ethical exposure.\textsuperscript{56} Levinas develops the ‘behind’ of sensibility as a diachrony, a time that can’t be recuperated by the ego as a representation.

It brings to a halt the ontological play which, precisely qua play, is consciousness, where being is lost and found again, and thus illuminated. In the form of an ego, anachronously delayed behind its present moment, and unable to recuperate this delay—that is, in the form of an ego unable to conceive what is “touching” it,’ the ascendancy of the other is exercised upon the same to the point of interrupting it, leaving it speechless (OB 101).

The exposure and vulnerability of sensibility is a way of being touched by what can’t be given a name or essence, or occur in memory as an intentionality or in a history as an intelligible part of ontology. This immemorial past is ‘pre-original’ to the ego (OB 10).

Our account of Blanchot’s image can gain some clarity by thinking of it as being exposed to sensual sensibility and occurring in a diachrony that can’t be picked up by the ego, including its imagination. Blanchot doesn’t think that the imagination explains what is going on in all aesthetic experience; he is trying to describe a situation that is outside or before the imagination, making the imagination a conditional part of his aesthetics. One must leave one’s imagination behind in order to leave the world: “It is then that Rimbaud flees into the desert from the responsibilities of the poetic decision. He buries his imagination and his glory [...] He does not come back to the world; he takes refuge in it; and bit by bit his days, devoted henceforth to the aridity of gold, make a shelter for him of protective forgetfulness” (SL 52). In order to reach the exile of the desert, one must leave the

\textsuperscript{56} “Thus Levinas conceives the register upon which the ethical imperative makes its impact on subjectivity not as a cognitive sensibility, but as sensuality, susceptibility to being affected, vulnerability with regard to pleasure and pain” (OB, Lingus, xxiv).
world and their decisions, glory and imagination. Blanchot associates the imagination with the choices for which one can be praised, tying it to the ego.

It is possible for art to be picked up by the imagination, but this ties it too closely with the every-day: "Certainly that literature which is said to be "purely imaginative" has its dangers. First of all, it is not pure imagination. It believes that it stands apart from everyday realities and actual events, but the truth is that it has stepped aside from them; it is that distance, that remove from the everyday which necessarily takes the everyday into consideration and describes it as separateness, as pure strangeness" (WF 316). The experience of literature may involve the imagination, but it is best described as a separateness or a strangeness that even the imagination would tame.

Blanchot doesn’t think that the necessity of writing comes from the domain of the artist’s powers, which includes the artist’s imagination: “Though it has sources in the neo-platonism of the Renaissance, the full flowering of this theory [that the artist’s subjectivity is the source of art] comes with the romantic notion of imagination which flows out of Kant, even as it transforms his ideas. But Blanchot rejects subjective, expressionist theories too” (Marshall 229). This Kantian or romantic notion of imagination makes writing into a willful project of the subject which Blanchot rejects because he is looking to describe the experience of writing as a passive gripping by an empty necessity.

Blanchot rejects or avoids using the term ‘imagination’, preferring instead to situate the experience of reading and writing in the space of the ‘imaginary’. It is a space where “[e]verything is pronounced [...] everything is word, yet the word is itself no longer anything but the appearance of what has disappeared -- the imaginary, the incessant, and the interminable. This point is ambiguity itself” (SL 43). The imaginary is synonymous with terms used to describe the void and provides an alternative point of entry to understanding it as the presence of an absence.

Here is a long quote describing the imaginary as what remains of the world after it has been emptied of entities:
The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but the world as entire, manifold, the world as a whole. That is why it is not in the world, because it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realization of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins, for when literary creation goes back over each thing and each being, it cherishes the illusion that it is creating them, because now it is seeing and naming them from the starting point of everything, from the starting point of the absence of everything, that is, from nothing (WF 316).

The imaginary is a space of nothingness, a space where everything is absent. This seems synonymous with Levinas’ il y a, the sheer existing that remains after the world and objects are gone.\textsuperscript{57} It is the empty starting point of writing and the foundation upon which any world is built, which is why we ‘grasp’ something when we encounter it; we get in touch with the empty existing that precedes the world of objects, and that in some sense, still defines the world. Perhaps he calls this space imaginary because it is an objectless world, and, since objects constitute the real world, in this sense, it is unreal, it is a world we can’t perceive or grasp.

Blanchot’s advantage in preferring the ‘imaginary’ is that it allows him to preserve the first hand experience of writing more authentically. By avoiding the psychological, explanatory or transcendental use of ‘imagination’, he is allowed to describe an egoless situation, one that is unreal or non-ontological, one that is without the “I” and its faculties.

It does not glorify consciousness in someone other than myself or the evolution of a human vitality which, in the imaginary space of the work of art, 

\textsuperscript{57} Critchley discusses “how Levinas’s notion of the il y a can be understood as the origin of the artwork for Blanchot” (Critchley 35).
would retain the freedom to say "I." The third person is myself become no one, my interlocutor turned alien; it is my no longer being able, where I am, to address myself and the inability of whoever addresses me to say "I"; it is his not being himself (SL 27).

The imaginary space of the work of art is a space that envelops those parts of subjectivity that are sensible, passive and receptive, but eludes those parts of subjectivity that are cognitive, rational and autonomous. Hence it is a space that overlaps with me, or that I find myself in, but I am not present as the "I" that would enjoy such an experience, as would be the case with the imagination.

As we might expect, the image is a piece of or the presence of the imaginary, and they are interchangeable to some degree: "...the giant murmuring upon which language opens and thus becomes image, becomes imaginary, becomes a speaking depth…" (SL 26) and "...a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks…" (SL 47). There are other ways to express the relationship between the image and the imaginary (taking the imaginary to be synonymous with ‘void’): Blanchot says that the ‘truth’ of the image is the void (SL 254) and Toumayan suggest that the void is the ‘basis’ or even the ‘telos’ of the image (Toumayan 154). This distinction between the imagination and the imaginary is important because it is going to provide the basis for two distinct encounters with the image, or even of two distinct images.

Before discussing Blanchot’s unique image, I will quickly recap Levinas’ various images and their ontological significance. With Levinas we saw at least three distinct versions of the image, the various intentional images that represent being as either present or absent, the beautiful image that doesn’t represent but clarifies ideals and can be a source of meaning, and the opaque image of shadow which displays the sensible qualities of things. All of Levinas’ images are constituted in the imagination, a function of

58 Cohen also employs the term ‘telos’, claiming that for Levinas, the telos of the work is closure from the world (Cohen 170).
the ego, and all are engendered by or dependent on being, whether they end up referring back to being or not. Levinas uses a spatial metaphor, placing these on the ‘hither side’ of being and I have used a corresponding temporal metaphor, placing these ‘after’ being to denote the priority of being in its engendering role.

### Table 4. Constitution of Various Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Image:</th>
<th>Constitution:</th>
<th>Characteristics:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intentional Image</td>
<td>Ideals (nominalization), Imagination, Sensation</td>
<td>Representations such as memory, present experience, future plans etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful Image</td>
<td>Ideals, Imagination, Sensation</td>
<td>Contemplation, security and meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of Resemblance (Shadow)</td>
<td>Imagination, Sensation</td>
<td>Disengaged enjoyment of qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of Disappearance</td>
<td>Sensation</td>
<td>Affective Immediacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar to Levinas, Blanchot brushes over a number of versions of the image, including the conceptual image that is representational (SL 255) and the beautiful image that is a thing of contemplation (SL 212), the apparent truth of art (SL 229) and a source of security and meaning (SL 64). But Blanchot’s important contribution is to add a distinction within Levinas’ notion of resemblance. There are two distinct ways that a
non-intentional image can resemble: it can be engendered by an object, and thus occur after objects, or it can be engendered by or be a piece of the imaginary, and thus return to a space before objects. This distinction is expressed by Toumayan as two different contexts of the image, that of resemblance (the object’s double) and disappearance (the dissolution of objects):

Blanchot analyzes the economy of resemblance that produces the image in Levinas in a series of examples which range from concrete and empirical to highly abstract in two separate contexts: first, disappearance and second, resemblance. The first is an excess over the categories of being and nothingness, presence and absence. The second is the reflection or doubling of the thing, the object’s noncoincidence with itself (Toumayan 127-8).

I think his use of the word ‘context’ is vague and evades what is significant about this distinction. The image of resemblance is a possibility of objects, it is possible for objects to simply become their sensible qualities, to lose their function, and to be enjoyed for certain excesses over their use (like the ‘fine’ cigarette lighter). The image of resemblance is primarily a departure from objects, and not beholden to reference or reason, are free to be useless or to wander. Here is Blanchot discussing the image that comes ‘after’ the object: “The image, according to the ordinary analysis, is secondary to the object. It is what follows. We see, then we imagine. After the object comes the image. ‘After’ means that the thing must first take itself off a ways in order to be grasped. But this remove is not the simple displacement of a moveable object which would nevertheless remain the same. Here the distance is in the heart of the thing” (SL 255). But this isn’t the proper relationship to the image because it gives us the possibility of possessing the object: “Granted, we can always recapture the image and make it serve the world’s truth. But in that case we reverse the relation which is proper to it. The image becomes the object’s aftermath, that which comes later, which is left over and allows us still to have the object at our command when there is nothing left of it” (SL 260).
The images that occur after an object, whether produced or discovered by the ego, such as the intentional image, the beautiful image and the image of resemblance, can always be manipulated in such a way as to increase the power of the subject. The image of resemblance, which doesn’t at first grant the ego referential or possessive powers can always surrender itself to the ego’s use, because it is constituted in the ego’s domain, the imagination. When we do this, we have inverted our proper, more authentic, relationship to the image.

The image of disappearance shares its non-intentional quality with the image of resemblance, but is nonetheless some sort of inversion of resemblance because instead of being engendered by objects and showing their qualities, it is a return to the space that precedes objects. It is the sinking, collapsing or returning of objects to a pre-objective state, to the existing that precedes the alternatives of subject and object, being and nothingness. The image of resemblance is a complication in these ontological terms, whereas the image of disappearance is present as being grasped by what precedes ontology. The image of disappearance shows up when objects give themselves up and reveal the nothingness that is underneath them, or engulfs the subject in such an experience.

Here are two examples of Blanchot describing the image of disappearance. Sometimes, “the thing we stare at has foundered, sunk into its image, and the image has returned into that deep fund of impotence to which everything reverts” (SL 255). Recall that the image of resemblance has the option of being picked up by the ego, of being enjoyed and even idealized into something beautiful; for the image of disappearance, this is not an option. Here is Blanchot’s attempts to explain the priority of this image:

The very bottom, the bottomless abyss belongs to art. And art is that deep which is sometimes the absence of profundity, of the foundation, the pure void bereft of importance, and sometimes that upon which a foundation can be given, but it is also always at the same time one and the other, the intertwining of the Yes and of the No, the ebb and flow of the essential ambiguity (SL, 239).
Blanchot is not describing an experience of being receptive to the qualities of objects and animating them in the imagination 'after' seeing an object. He is describing a contact with the empty existence that acts as a foundation to the world, since the world emerges from it, and yet can’t be thought of as a foundation because we can’t cognize it as having a causal or determining role. Its essential ambiguity is due to the way that it remains resistant to conceptualization, and even resistant to uptake by those part of the subject that are related to cognition. Levinas' later account of sensibility provides the transcendental ground to being able to think such a relation, an entanglement that is prior to being.

The image of disappearance is an essential contribution to our thinking about images and provides a link to ethics that the other images lack. Some of the images considered so far can be ranked in order of their immediacy. The beautiful image is mediated through the imagination and ideals, whereas the image of resemblance is only mediated through the imagination. It is on this basis that we can situate resemblance as prior to beauty and assign to it our more originary relation to images. Beauty is a ruse that plays out on top of and even betrays the resemblance that underlays it.

I want to extend this line of thinking now to situate disappearance with respect to resemblance. Both take hold of sensibility, but disappearance remains an unmediated affect, there is no separation in the experience, while resemblance is mediated by the imagination. This makes disappearance the prior possibility of the two images. Since it is an experience that is prior to our imaginings, disappearance is an experience that precedes the event of ontology; It is prior to the constitution of objects and their being named by me and it takes up a part of subjectivity that is prior to the ego's involvement. This is explained by the sensibility of the subject. Sensibility is a pre-ego receptivity that opens the subject in such a way that it can get caught up in the void without eliminating its fundamental strangeness. Sensibility is a mode of relation that maintains the alterity, strangeness and recalcitrance of the void by presencing an affectivity prior to enjoyment.
The various images can be arranged in an ascending order of mediation, giving priority to unmediated disappearance. It could also be the case that each image is some sort of modification of the image that precedes it, making for a level of dependency of the ‘later’ images on the ‘earlier’ ones. In which case, disappearance is the prior possibility of resemblance, which is prior to beauty. It is also possible that this order of dependency is the inverse of how accessible these aesthetic images are to thought, which explains why the image of disappearance was overlooked by Levinas. However, it seems that Levinas can accept Blanchot’s image of disappearance, and the aesthetic experience this entails as a deeper possibility of the aesthetic experience that he outlines.

Blanchot’s rejection of the imagination in favour of the imaginary alert us to the idea that he is talking about a unique image, that of disappearance, distinct from the resemblance that occurs in the imagination. Levinas’ account of sensibility explains how the subject can experience the image of disappearance as an immediate affect. The upside of using sensibility to explain this is that it puts Levinas in a position to accept the image of disappearance as a prior possibility to his own image of resemblance.

Section 4: Blanchot’s Ethical Aesthetics

So far, we have seen how Blanchot’s aesthetic account is presupposed by Levinas’, which makes Blanchot’s the deeper and more authentic aesthetic experience. Recall that this experience gives rise to the original experience, a passive egoless state, which constitutes oneself as authentic. At this point, we can ask about the relationship, if any, between the authenticity given by the original experience and its ethical significance. After considering the ethical possibility of the work given by sensibility, I will divide the ethical role of art into the ethical sense of the work, and what the ethical life of the artist and enjoyer of the work looks like.

First, we will look at the ethical role of the work itself and to do so I want to begin by considering a few of the ways in which the work doesn’t contribute to social and political morality. “Levinas [...] is right to point out that Blanchot does not explicitly
attribute an ethical responsibility to literature. Nor does he spell out its political
dimension at this stage of his writing in the postwar period” (Krimper 117). On the
contrary, “it is precisely because literature does not have a message that it is ethical
and political for Blanchot.” (Haase 83). Blanchot’s main thesis asserts the autonomy art
has from our pragmatic world on the one hand, and our moral and meaningful world on
the other: “On one front science, technology, the state; on another, significance, stable
values, the ideal of the Good and the True. Art is ‘the world turned upside down’: insubordination, disproportion, frivolity, ignorance, evil, non-sense” (SL 216). In addition
to being distinct, Blanchot adds that art is in bad faith when it speaks of morality: “But
here we run into trouble: as soon as honesty comes into play in literature, imposture is
already present. Here bad faith is truth, and the greater the pretension to morality and
seriousness, the more surely will mystification and deceit triumph” (WF 308). The work
of art is something fundamentally unworldly, so it isn’t going to play a role in contributing
to the good or meaningful by being itself, nor is it being honest about itself when it seeks
to teach morality didactically.

The work of art is so unworldly that some have said it can’t be ethical for
this reason. Levinas names Blanchot explicitly at the end of Totality and Infinity, saying
that Blanchot’s work contributes to the ‘philosophy of the neuter’ and thus is unable to
break free from ‘impersonal reason’. He says that “[t]he exaltation of the Neuter may
present itself as the anteriority of the We with respect to the I, of the situation with
respect to the beings in situation” and ultimately that Blanchot “exalts the obedience that
no face commands” (TI 298). Bruns also follows Levinas, saying that “for Blanchot
poetry is in excess of ethical alterity; it is a relation of foreignness or strangeness with
what is absolutely singular and irreducible” (Bruns, Art, 227). Levinas’ solution to the
problem presented by this foreignness is to bring art into an engaged relationship with
the world through art criticism and philosophy, which can be seen as a discursive
process that makes art meaningful and engaged.

And yet there is a place, between giving explicit morals and being too ‘outside’,
where we can still find an ethical role for the work of art even as it remains true to itself
as something inoperable, duplicitous and in error. To begin to situate the ethical sense of the image of disappearance, let's look at the ethical possibility given by sensibility.

Sensuous moments affect us before we can represent them, giving both sensibility and affectivity an excessive quality. This pre-original moment that can't be recovered, that can't be represented, poses a problem to the unity of the subject. This is why ethical "subjectivity is structured as the other in the same, but in a way different from that of consciousness" (OB 25). Since the ego doesn't rule the entire subject, the subject takes on "the form of a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity: the same prevented from coinciding with itself, at odds, torn up from its rest, between sleep and insomnia, panting, shivering" (OB 68). Levinas begins to think of this as inherently ethical because this affectivity is not something before which I can be indifferent: Through sensibility we relate to what is other within us and find what is "[n]on-objectifiable, non-contemporaneous, [and what] can only signify non-indifference. An animate body or an incarnate identity is the signifyingness of this non-indifference" (OB 70-1). Sensibility and its affects, like pleasure and pain but also the image of disappearance, can't possibly be received as a neutral experience.

The ethical impulse of the work and its affects can take three forms: it calls us into question, it limits my possibility as a subject, and I must respond to it as an irreducible presence. First, the original experience (or experience of the image of disappearance) calls us into question, a questioning that comes from outside and exceeds any comprehension I might have of it. This ethical questioning undermines the certainty of my projects, my hope that they will succeed, and their place of sovereignty in my life. The original experience challenges the centrality of my projects and reminds me that most projects go unfinished, that human life is too frail and weak to accomplish all its goals, and that we are subject to powers other than our own autonomy. This process leads to a sense of inadequacy in my former (worldly) answers to the question of what my identity consists in and what meaning my life can have. Instead of replacing these former answers with new ones, I find the questions left open, empty and vulnerable.
Secondly, the original experience is a limit to my possibility as a subject, which plays the ethical role of keeping my totalizing tendencies in check. The work will always appear as a gap, a hole or shelter point in my world totalization, leaving me constantly open to the outside as an uncomfortable exposure or as a path that would lead me out. It remains persistent and inexorable and can only be yielded to, such that my sense of myself as a subject must include a feeling of passivity at its foundation.

Thirdly, making art is a response to an irreducible present, which is precisely what constitutes my ethical relations to other people. Since the maintaining of an irreducible presence involves not labeling it as one of a type, or as having a certain set of causes or properties, I am condemned simply to respond without coming to a conclusion about what I am responding to. I can only respond to the unknown as unknown, not as something I could know or use. My response comes primarily in the form of continually leaving space for my exposure to the outside.

Now I will turn to what the ethical life of the artist and enjoyer of the work could look like. Blanchot concedes to Levinas that the artist runs the risk of shirking their worldly responsibilities. Free of life’s burdens, “[t]his errant migration can sometimes lead him to insignificance, to the facile contentment of a life crowned with approval, the platitudes of honorific irresponsibility” (SL 238). But Blanchot is only conceding the irresponsibility of one type of disengagement.

There are at least two possible senses in which an artist can be disengaged, one is ethical, and one is not. Imagine a professional writer who constitutes their world as a writer, they pay the bills through the income of their book sales, they have meetings with their editor and are planning their next book tour for the summer. They immerse themselves in their work and steer clear of responding personally to others, say by pretending to not be home when a neighbour knocks on the door asking for a cup of sugar, or by avoiding becoming socially and politically engaged. This type of disengagement isn’t unique to artists, and can be done by the busy lawyer or cranky shop keeper. This is unethical because this person is constituted in the world and shirks the world’s responsibilities.
Another type of disengagement, that of an artist who resists constituting a phenomenological world, one who doesn’t get their identity from their being-in-the-world or their care structure. For this, we can imagine the trope of the starving artist, the one who prioritizes the work of art and either doesn’t value or remains incompetent with respect to worldly comfort and stability. But we can also imagine someone with a ‘nine to five’ job who prioritizes their relationship to ‘their’ work of art, who sees their identity as coming from their art, without being publically known as an artist. This second sort of disengagement is to be constituted as one in exile. This is to live imagistically. We can see how an artist (whether a public or closet artist) is a candidate for this exilic life, but we might also picture someone terminally ill or an ascetic example such a yogi, saint, sage or witch. This is ethical because this person constitutes themselves outside of the world structure and have chosen this life as a mode of responding to the outside.

The artist is a prime candidate for being able to live life as an image, which isn’t to remain uninvolved in the event of the world, but neither is it to take part freely or decisively. To live imagistically “is to be taken: to pass from the region of the real where we hold ourselves at a distance from things the better to order and use them into that other region where the distance holds us - the distance which then is the lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness which has become something like the sovereign power behind all things” (SL 261). This power is variously articulated as a ‘power’, ‘stillness’, ‘effacement’ and ‘authority’ (SL 27). Blanchot is saying that imagistic life loosens the grip of one’s world totality and releases us into exile. Here, we are left open to a sovereignty that can’t be justified or explained in the world’s terms, but nonetheless asserts its power over the world. Recall that the world totality is constituted by the ego and absorbs the other into the same, finding no limit to my powers, knowledge and options. Ethics is an interruption and ability to respond to something from outside. The work of art is a non-totalizable power that interrupts the world’s

59 The image of classical art may be life-giving and inspiring because it provides an ideal, but it is ultimately serene and disinterested, and so doesn’t make an engaged difference to life as it is actually lived (SL 261).
pragmatism, and it initiates a motion in me that opens me up to the possibility of an ethical response.

Blanchot thus also responds to Levinas’ accusation of the gratuity of art. For Blanchot, to live an event as an image is not the same thing as seeing the image of an event, which would “attribute to the event the gratuitous character of the imaginary” (SL 262). But to live as an image is to have the situation command us, “[t]hat is, it releases us, from it and from ourselves. It keeps us outside; it makes of the outside a presence where ‘I’ does not recognize ‘itself’” (SL 262). Recall that the image is constituted by its refusal or inability to refer, to lead thought to a referent. If one were to live life as a symbol or sign, their life itself would refer to themselves, to their projects. When living life as an image one finds oneself living in a way that doesn’t refer to themselves. Their actions are opaque in that they don’t refer to the goals of the ego. Nor do they situate what they encounter horizonally, or with reference to their life goals. In this life, what is related to is left opaque and encountered as a possible depth, which is to preserve its potential to get its meaning from what doesn’t appear for me. The risk one takes in the image not only loosens one from the world, but also decenters the ego, and opens up subjectivity to be oriented and responsive to an other. It is the ultimate risk because it dethrones me as I know myself.

I would like to illustrate the ethical significance of an exilic life through some thoughts shared by two different artists. The first is Nathan Stretch from the Kitchener based indie band Bass Lions giving an account of what happens to subjectivity when engaged in music.

Well if we live and make music how I’d like to, ‘in between’, then the only constant to our music-making is constant self-subversion. We are constantly burrowing up under our own feet right when we thought we were standing on solid ground. It’s nice to know we’re not on a linear track

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60 Ethical “for-the-other, will not be [...] ludic gratuity in which the gravity of alterity goes off in smoke in cheerfulness and ecstasy (of him who only hides himself) as a ‘nothing at all’ in the equivalence of everything and nothing” (OB 164).
from start to finish, but rather on a circular and expanding journey. Maybe if we keep expanding, we’ll touch both the beginning and the end with our extremities at the same time (Audio Blood, Feb 3, 2008).

It seems to me that Stretch expresses his musical relationship as one that constantly undermines any foundation and the linear or goal oriented functions of human reason. It sounds like a journey that he can’t control or predict, and one that results in a loss of self through the expansion of the subject; one that stays within finite existence but is nonetheless a rupture of his world totality. Later, I will describe this experience as a sort of finite transcendence. Next, I would like to share a quote from Christian Scott, a contemporary jazz trumpet player, in an on-line interview. He is talking about the title of one of his 2017 albums, Diaspora, and the distinct sense that he had in mind when choosing that title:

Part of the idea behind Diaspora is that …You know a lot of the time in black community when we say diaspora we’re talking about the places where enslaved africans are taken before their experiences in the Americas. But I sorta mean this more of the macrocosmic sorta sense in that the diaspora is all of us. The moment that we start seeing everyone’s perspective as being valid, then this is the sooner we can get to the work that makes the world a better place. This is what we’re dealing with with the record. (Paste Magazine, 34:30 - 37:30)

It is possible that Scott is trying to articulate an experience or feeling that is similar to what Blanchot argues for. I hear Scott as saying: we need to come to an awareness of ourselves as dispersed from our ‘homeland’ (the world and being) in order to hear the claims and perspectives of others. It is only after we are able to hear other people that we will be in a position to turn our pragmatic efforts to making the world a better place. Although Scott might be talking about our right to call physical land masses our ‘home’, he might also be referring to our being at home in the world, in the phenomenological sense, and perhaps this distinction matters little.
Far from being a mere gratuity of the imagination, the separateness of the work of art gives rise to the original experience which constitutes oneself as authentic. This authenticity is fundamentally ethical because it is the subject’s honest response to their own exposure to the outside, and to constitute their self identity as someone in exile from the world and being. This is ethical because it is a relation that is prior to the thematization of being, and opens us up to a primordial appeal or power that can’t be explained in terms of being.

**Section 5: Responding to Levinas’ Ethical Criteria.**

Let’s return to Levinas’ ethical criteria, to see how this relation satisfies the Levinasian terms first put forward in chapter one, that of alterity, heteronomy and response.

Firstly, we can see that Blanchot situates the experience of the work as one of alterity. He uses terms like ‘outside’, ‘void’, ‘open’ and ‘abyss’ to convey an experience that is outside of being and outside my ability to achieve a cognition of or familiarity with the experience, and I have articulated this experience as a contact with the image of disappearance. The work itself is entirely inoperable, doing nothing, and saying and meaning nothing, maintaining it as a stranger to any world horizon or totality. Secondly, the aesthetic experience is one of heteronomy as one becomes passively gripped before an unworldly or pre-worldly power. The power or sovereignty of the work comes from the way that it reveals the origin, whether as materiality, particularity or nothingness, upon which any world is founded, and continues to exert its power to keep any world from completion. In both senses, it is another power that no worldly impulse can overcome, which gives it a certain priority or irreducible difference over being-in-the-world. And lastly, the poet or writer responds to this sovereignty by keeping it open through their writing. Such writing brings one into the solitude of exile, away from worldly goals and powers, which dismantles their self-identity as a worldly ego, and
constitutes them as a self that is differentiated by being open and involved in alterity, which is to receive an “I” that is more fundamental than any that could be offered by being. The poet’s response can also be seen as a form of acknowledgement, as outlined in the first chapter. The poet is fascinated and drawn to the void, and then can only express this encounter, as she is unable to remain unchanged by it, and expresses this encounter both back into the void, as is done in the experience of writing by oneself, and expresses this encounter into the world as she releases and publishes her work.

Using Levinasian sensibility to explain Blanchot’s image of disappearance gives us a an alternative way of thinking about the ethical sense of art since disappearance is something that happens to the subject on the level of sensibility, which Levinas accepts as a mode of relating to otherness. I have covered the way that sensibility is a mode of relation to otherness in the previous section but will take the time now to expand on its ethical sense. Recall that sensuous moments affect us before we can represent them which gives both sensibility and affectivity an excessive quality. This pre-original moment that can’t be recovered, that can’t be represented, poses a problem to the unity of the subject. He calls this ‘the other in the same’, an ‘unclamping of identity’ or an experience of ‘non-indifference’. Levinas also calls this splitting effected by sensibility a “defeat of the ego’s identity” (OB 15). This splitting and exposure is thought as laying the possibility of giving (OB 50) and even of personal sacrifice (BPW 90). The sensibility that sensuously relates to the image of disappearance can be seen as ethical in the sense layed out in the first chapter of this work, in terms of a calling into question of my spontaneity: “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics” (TI 43). Sensibility can also pick up non-ethical sensations, the point here is that sensibility lays the the possibility for ethical exposure and this exposure can include aesthetic experience.

So far I have argued that the experience of the work of art is ethical in its structure: that of interrupting totality, introducing a relation to a non-totalizable power, and the displacement of the ego and subsequent constitution of an alternative self; and
that this structure ‘passes’ Levinas’ criteria. But I would say that the ethical role of art isn’t the same as or as complete as face to face encounters. In these last few paragraphs I would like to qualify this ethical structure. For these qualifications, I will briefly discuss the relevance of a handful of Levinasian tropes, that of transcendence, speech, ‘above’ and hospitality to give a fuller characterization of this ethical sense. When language becomes an image, Blanchot says that it is also “a speaking depth [and] an indistinct plentitude which is empty” (SL 27). Is it the sort of speaking that tells of suffering or is it an ethical speaking that says nothing other than to affirm this empty depth?

Krimper argues that the relation we have with the work can’t achieve the transcendence of a relation to alterity because it remains within the materiality of finite existence and can’t overcome the neutrality of being (Krimper 120). The work takes the individual out of historical time so as to open us to the possibility of a new community: “The work, for Blanchot, cannot help but waver in such an interval between the “no longer” and “not yet.” And it is this oscillation, one might venture, which withholds the exigency calling forth, and affirming, the chance of another community.” (Krimper 121). The work can play a disruptive role which can lead to an ethical relation, but can’t provide an ethical relation itself. The work can even give an experience that is ethical in structure without another person involved: “It would seem that the outside hereby carries another demand to which the exilic condition of the work responds and becomes responsive without resolution. It is this impossible demand that obliges the self to become other than itself, to unknowingly err outside being, and by doing so to voice responsiveness to the other as other” (Krimper 119). The work can give one the feeling of an obligation to respond that surpasses anything in your power. An obligation that demands a response, even if it puts everything, the very constitution of the ego, at risk. But this disruptive obligation isn’t the exigency of the suffering other person.

I think Krimper is right to point out that the experience of the work of art won’t be as ethical as the encounter with the face of the other. I can have an experience of the other as a human other, without this claim about their humanity achieving a totalization, because there can be a quality and significance to the encounter that speaks of
humanness. For this reason, the human other and non-human other remain distinct (although fuzzy), with alterity in general being ethical in structure but with the human other as having the ethical exigencies of pain, hunger, destitution etc.

But I disagree with Krimper about the lack of transcendence taking place with my relation to the work of art. Art lacks the type of transcendence that Levinas describes worldly objects as having, that of being outside of me but traversed by intentionality and absorbed by me (AT 3). If a relation to transcendence means a relation with what can’t appear in my world horizon, like one’s relation to infinity (AT 4), then the exteriority of the work is certainly a relation with a transcendence. If a relation of transcendence is one where the subject transcends their own ego and is constituted as something ‘outside’ themselves and their world identity, then the work achieves this. And both senses of transcendence are ethical in their structure.

Since Levinas privileges speech as a mode of transcendence, commentators see this as an opening for the exclusive ability for poetry to achieve a relation with transcendence. In Language and Proximity, Levinas says that “[t]here is in speech a relationship with the singularity located outside the theme of speech, a singularity that is not thematized by the speech but is approached” (CP 115). And in Is Ontology Fundamental he says that the “tie to the other, which does not reduce itself to the representation of the Other […] we call religion. The essence of discourse is prayer” (BPW 7). This special role that is carved out for language is Levinas’ attempt to suspend “a whole tradition that culminates, for him, in Husserl’s account of intentionality and Heidegger’s of disclosure, a tradition dominated by the metaphor of vision” (Westphal 153).

Commentators take Levinas’ side on this issue. For Bruns, it is since poetry and ethical speech are “on the hither side of thematization and are therefore, materializations of language and so, by the same logic, analogous modes of transcendence” (Bruns, Art, 228). Haase also argues for this unique ability in speech: “In the ethical relation I respond to your irreducible presence. This ‘response’ does not occur through vision but speech. In conversation with you, I approach you in your difference from everyone else. In vision, the distance between the object and the
spectator is removed by visibility, whereas in speech, the self and the other remain separate, though still in a relation. Seeing is a relation of unity or fusion, whereas speaking is one of separation or difference.” (Haase 75). And lastly, since writing literature can be seen “as a relation to Levinasian Saying, it is possible to assert that for the later Blanchot, writing is an ethics in Levinas’s sense” (Wyschogrod 144-5). I want to expand this ethical sense past speech alone.

It seems arbitrary to me to say that a relationship of transcendence lines up with some sensory modes and not others. There are certainly examples of ‘listening’ to other people but deciding the meaning, significance and interpretation of their words for oneself, so sound is not immune to the effects of totalization. Nor is vision exclusively a mode of totalization. When I was a child, I visited a potato chip factory. In some sense it was obvious to me that all the machinery worked together as a totality to get the job done. And yet this knowledge featured more as a distant idea that I had trouble applying to what was seen. Even though I had the concepts of ‘cut’, ‘peel’ and ‘fry’, I had difficulty using them to organize what was before my eyes, so the experience took the form of a strange and exciting dream composed of animated images with little gaps of understanding. The experience of using one’s eyes to look around a potato chip factory could easily be the example of totality par excellence, and yet, even it isn’t immune to the possibility of becoming an image.

It seems to me that a claim about transcendence should not be made in virtue of the mode of perception, whether sound, sight or touch, but in virtue of the economy of the image, where the image is a phenomenological concept, and not exclusive to one sensory mode or another. So long as anything becomes its image, disappears or sinks into its existence in an affective way, which especially happens in aesthetic experience, one can relate to some sort of transcendence.

61 Toumayan uses this phrase, ‘economy of the image’, to denote “the leftover or persisting presence of something that has disappeared and the movement of disappearance, the foundering into nothingness of something present” (Toumayan 129), and opposed to the economy of human life, which is based in enjoyment, need and possession (Peperzak 187).
Although the image, including the visual image, can manage a relation of transcendence, we need to qualify this as a finite transcendence. Westphal distinguishes between the unconditional and infinite parts of ethical obligation saying that Levinas’ ethical is the “direct experience of unconditional and infinite obligation that one human being is subject to in the presence of another, independent of any social mediations that may place limits or conditions on that responsibility” (Westphal 158). This is posed in contrast to the laws and customs of a particular social order whose obligation may be unconditional but will never be infinite. This distinction is significant. The aesthetic experience gives an obligation that is unconditional because it has no prior conditions; it remains originary, irreducible or absolute. But the materiality of the original experience and of the work stay within the finitude of existence. Art isn’t infinite, but it can have a similar effect because it is bigger than me as it appears to me as stretching out past both my birth and death. I will call this effect a finite transcendence, and it works in conjunction with the unconditional obligation of the work to characterize its ethical structure.

Levinas registers this distinction as the finite ‘outside’ (as in Blanchot’s image) and the infinite ‘above’ (as in the epiphany of the face): “The Other - absolutely other - paralyzes possession which he contests by his epiphany in the face. He can contest my possession only because he approaches me not from the outside but from above” (TI 171). I think that appearances from the ‘outside’ are completely unable to be owned, used or assimilated, and so contest my ability to possess them. You may have purchased the art in your home but it can still produce experiences that lay outside of your ego constituted world totality, meaning that they can’t be possessed epistemically or pragmatically but also that they produce experiences that can hardly be said to be ‘yours’. And further, when art produces a gap through which I have the original experience, I get in touch with that useless aspect of my existence that is a sheer passive emptiness and unable to possess anything. Also recall that the image of disappearance can’t be a source of enjoyment either because it doesn’t enter into the imagination; it doesn’t enter into a space where it would be ‘for’ an ego. Since this original aesthetic experience displaces my ego, I am not constituted as the sort of thing
that can enjoy or possess; when art reminds me of my authentic ‘identity’, it contests my possessing anything. It seems that the ‘outside’ manages to achieve all that the ‘above’ achieves in the subject.

Lastly, Levinas asserts that ethics is a relation of “hospitality” and not one of “thematization” (TI 299). It seems to me that art shares this rejection of thematization but can’t be said to be hospitable since the experience of the work is the apparent opposite, it is one of being in exile, wondering and unable to stay. But the work of art retains the sense of an ‘opening up’ included in hospitality: art is a way of opening my existence to the other, one expression of which can be to open one’s home to the other.

In sum, it is possible for art to open one to an ethical relation. It can perform this preparatory role or provide this opening because it has an ethical structure which is that of a finite transcendence with an unconditional obligation that displaces my ego and returns me to a state of solitude which reconstitutes my identity and opens me up to what is other.

**Conclusions**

There are a handful of conclusions that I would like to take the time to point out. 1) Firstly, the nature of aesthetic experience differs between the two authors, for Levinas, it is a disengagement of the imagination while for Blanchot, it is a sensing/affective return to the imaginary space of our founding existence. 2) This leads each thinker to a different account of the image: Levinas places his image of resemblance ‘after’ being as a shadow in which the ego gets caught, while Blanchot places his image of disappearance ‘before’ being as an empty affirmation that displaces the ego. 3) This is what leads Levinas to find this experience an interested activity of the ego, while for Blanchot, it is properly disinterested and egoless. 4) Levinas, for whom only our ethically constituted ‘I’ is (probably) authentic, claims that our aesthetic self is inauthentic, whereas Blanchot claims that the original experience constitutes human authenticity, and art is one mode of access to this. 5) This is why Levinas sees the role of art criticism as bringing art into a discursive process so as to engage it with the world,
while Blanchot thinks of art’s social role precisely as remaining unjustified. 6) These differences are in part due to the different constitutions of their respective aesthetic images. Blanchot’s image of disappearance is prior to Levinas’ image of resemblance, making his account of aesthetic experience the more genuine. 7) Accepting Blanchot’s aesthetics as the prior account leads us to accept the ethical structure of his account, leaving room for art to play the ethical role of displacing the ego, opening us up to otherness, constituting us in a non-worldly way and achieving a sort of finite transcendence.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


