

The ethical significance of Levinas's aesthetics

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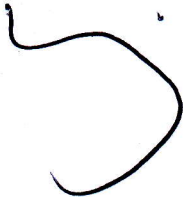
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Statement of Authorship

I hereby certify that the following thesis is my own original work, and has not been submitted in full or in part for a higher degree to any university or educational institution. All sources of information used in this thesis have been indicated, and full acknowledgment has been given to the work of others.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. Hickling', written in a cursive style.

David Hickling, October 2014

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I had the good fortune, as one of my first experiences at Macquarie, to witness Dr. Max Deutscher in full flight. I am sure that this inspired a love for further philosophy at this university. He will never know how much I owe him and how much I admire the example he set.

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Abstract

There is abundant evidence in Levinas's writings to conclude that his idea of aesthetics is incompatible with his ethics. This seems puzzling because after all Levinas admits to being led to philosophy through a love of literature. In later writings when Levinas seems to engage with art more positively he still seems to maintain that art and ethics are incompatible. What is the significance of this tension?

I will examine this question and argue that a close examination of his writings actually reveals a rich and complex relationship between his ethics and aesthetics, and that it is possible, moreover, to interpret his work in such a way that his thought on aesthetics is central to his thoughts on ethics. If this is so, we can perhaps use a 'Levinasian ethical framework' as an ethical approach to aesthetics. I compare several approaches to aesthetics some of which I find, from a Levinasian perspective, to tend to be subjectivist and therefore incompatible with his notion of ethics. As a tentative solution I gesture toward an approach to aesthetics which could be ethical in Levinas's terms by being responsible to the Other.

Introduction

There is abundant evidence in Levinas's writings to conclude that his idea of aesthetics is incompatible with his ethics. In his early works such as *Existence and Existents* (1947) or *Reality and its Shadow* (1948) his attitude is that art is neither revelation nor creation but rather is a descent of the night, (Benso, 2008, p.164) even in later works such as *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas argues that art is an 'irresponsibility' and that it:

"... brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as lightness and as grace. It frees. To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer to have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace - such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. Magic recognized everywhere as the devil's, enjoys an incomprehensible tolerance in poetry". (Levinas, 1989b, p.141)

Why does Levinas dismiss art in such a manner? It would seem that he clearly argues: "there is a lack of proximity between ethics and aesthetics". (Benso, 2008, p.170) And yet this seems puzzling because after all Levinas admits to being led to philosophy through a love of literature. When asked in an interview what led him to philosophy he answers: "I think that it was first of all my reading in Russian, specifically Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky..."¹ Even in later writings when Levinas seems to engage with art more positively, such as in discussions of writers such as Blanchot, Celan and Proust, he still seems to maintain that art and ethics are incompatible. What does this tension in Levinas's thinking reveal?

A close examination of his writings reveals a rich and complex relationship between Levinas's ethics and aesthetics; moreover, this relationship provides a framework which can guide us to an ethical notion of aesthetics. It seems to me that Levinas's dissatisfaction with aesthetics was consistent with the overarching aims of his project to prioritise ethics as 'first philosophy'. Thus, he is not opposed to art as such but the way it came to be conceived in what he sees as overly subjectivist philosophical or conceptual frameworks. He saw that two

¹ Quoted in (Robbins, 2005, p.XiX) He also co-authored two texts dealing with aesthetics in his early years: 1936. *Les aspects de l'image visuelle* (with R.Duret) and 1936. *L'esthétique française contemporaine* (with V.Feldman)

approaches to aesthetics - the ontological approach of which Heidegger was representative and a post-Kantian approach were both neglectful of his crucial notion of the 'Other'. That is, they were both primarily subjectivist and so, in his terms, were a continuation of the traditional Western philosophy of the Same.

Using Levinas's account of ethics I believe it is possible to provide an aesthetic framework which differs from the overly subjectivist perspectives of the ontological or the Kantian approach. This 'Levinasian framework' can guide us towards an ethical approach to art². Traditionally, aesthetics is concerned with a mode of seeing or feeling but what I am describing as a 'Levinasian framework' is an interpretation of aesthetics which is a mode of subjectivity analogous to Levinas's ethical subjectivity. It is a re-orienting of an egoistic conception of aesthetic subjectivity and instead is an approach to aesthetics, like his ethics, in which there is an openness to the Other as an Infinity. In Levinas's terms, this response to the Other is a form of transcendence. In order to clarify this position I will compare this Levinasian ethical framework to other, more subjectivist, approaches. Although I believe this could be applied to any artworks I have chosen to look at works from outside of the Western tradition: namely Australian Indigenous artworks. These highlight quite well, for a number of reasons, the contrasting approaches. For instance, the culture from which these works spring has historically been treated unethically by being seen as Other but being colonized by a notion of the Same.

Levinas's notion of the ethical is characterized as *beyond* ontology – as in his later work *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*³ - so one problem which immediately arises is to clarify, from a Levinasian perspective, what is meant by *ontology*. In chapter 1, I will examine this question as well as show how Levinas's ethics are closer to a meta-ethics than, say, a prescription for good or proper conduct. I will also explicate some of the relevant notions that Levinas and his commentators use to engage with his notion of aesthetics. What is significant, I think, is some of the different ways that Levinas tries to communicate his vision of humanity in his own type of 'Copernican Revolution' where the locus of ethical

² As this is a general approach, or stance towards art it can be applicable to not only visual art as this is the example used further in the thesis but all forms of art.

³ *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne U.P., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2013, originally published in 1974

subjectivity is not in a conscious, intentional subjectivity – from an ‘I’ but rather is in the Other – however that is described: the Other, the Infinite, alterity or *God*.

Chapter 2 will be a discussion of Levinas’s notion of aesthetics. What exactly does Levinas mean by aesthetics/art and is this consistent across the duration of his career? Importantly, I will consider what Levinas does *not* mean by aesthetics. For this I will contrast Levinas’s thinking on art with two influential interpretations of art: post- Kantian, which I describe as ‘subjectivist’ and a Heideggerian ontological approach to art.

These first two chapters will be mainly exegetical; however, in chapter 3 I will examine how Levinas’s ethics and aesthetics are interrelated. This chapter will show how the apparent incompatibility between his ethics and aesthetics can be resolved and then used to structure an approach to art which is analogous to his approach to ethics. In order to do this I will examine the diversity of views amongst Levinas’s commentators and some of the key concepts they use. Some of these commentators describe his ethics and his views on art as contradictory, incompatible, or, merely that his aesthetics are peripheral to his thinking on ethics. There are some, though, who argue that his thinking on aesthetics is fundamental to his conception of ethics. That is, even though he seems to denounce art as unethical, his reflections upon art actually allow a deeper understanding of his thought on ethics. Henry McDonald, for instance, argues that Levinas’s notion of aesthetics is the very basis of his ethical conception. Robert Eaglestone’s analysis concludes that the creation of an apparent incompatibility between art and ethics for Levinas is because of his concept of representation. Once representation is re-conceptualised by Levinas in his later work in terms of *the Saying* and *the Said* then this new schema can be used to show how art, understood as a type of *the Saying*, can be ethical. The way these commentators resolve the incompatibility is through some sort of notion of an ineffable or pre-cognitive thinking in Levinas. Whether it is ‘inspiration’ or the zone of the ‘il y a’ or ‘participation’ or the ‘hitherside’ of cognition, the source of aesthetics is interpreted to be parallel or in some way analogous to the source of ethics. If this is so, then Levinas’s conception of both ethics and aesthetics can be considered as forms of transcendence (but not the same transcendence).

At the end of this chapter I compare several approaches to aesthetics some of which I find, from a Levinasian perspective, to tend to be subjectivist and therefore incompatible with his

notion of ethics because these limit ones access to the infinity of the Other. As a tentative solution I gesture toward an approach to aesthetics which could be ethical in Levinas's terms, in that by being responsible to the Other, it is open to disrupting one's settled sense of identity and questioning the certainty of the aesthetic subjectivity. This is perhaps an approach which could be further explored in a more detailed phenomenological study with a greater range of artworks.

Chapter 1 - ethics

What exactly is Levinas's ethics? I will here attempt to elucidate Levinas's notion of ethics as it relates to this discussion of aesthetics. I will claim that Levinas's ethics is rather more than a prescription of what constitutes a 'good' life but is a radical rethinking of what it is to be human. In this next section I will discuss some of Levinas's idiosyncratic terminology in an effort to understand how these can be relevant to his notion of aesthetics.

Introduction

Levinas says no one is good voluntarily. This does not mean that he conceives of ethics in a Kantian sense as a duty, merely that it is not a choice of mine to be good. The idea that 'I' can choose to be good doesn't make sense in a Levinasian way because the 'I' is actually in question as well as what is 'good'. That is, it is not at all clear what 'I' am. For Levinas it is not that I am forced *against* my will but I am forced 'before' my will, before the structure of intentionality. Thus ethics for Levinas is a radical rethinking of the relation between subjectivity and the Good. It is a rethinking of the priorities of Western philosophy where, as Peperzak puts it, "the opposition between 'is' and 'ought' is neither valid nor even possible." (Pepperzak, 1992, p.Xi)

Typical of Levinas's thinking is that there is a reversal going on here. It is Levinas reorienting ethics as something which precedes ontology. That is, it is not 'I' who chooses to be ethical but ethics that constitutes the 'I'. Levinas is not creating a moral or an ethical system but is enquiring into the nature of ethics and constitution of subjectivity itself. Levinas experienced the trauma of the Russian revolution, World War one, World War two including being taken prisoner, and lost most of his family in the Holocaust. Having lived through such events it is understandable why Levinas reacted with such a radical system. For Levinas this period in history was characterized by an extreme collapse of all ethical values which he saw as a crisis of Western Liberalism and not merely an aberration. He saw a conflation of a metaphysical desire for totality with a political totalitarianism. His response and a common way of explaining the motivation for Levinas's ethics are the two questions: how did this happen and how can it never happen again?

Part of the rethinking of this notion of Liberalism is influenced by his Jewish faith which importantly includes his study of the Talmud in depth with a strange character named M. Chouchani who was described as a 'vagabond scholar'. How much of his thinking on Judaism bled into his philosophy is a moot point but there is no doubt that the 'exotic' tendency of his thinking - to go outside of the usual Western ontological structures – is influenced by his Talmudic studies. This can be noted even in his terminology where he uses religious terms in his philosophy, such as the term 'religion' by which he means 'sharing'.

Although Levinas was also heavily influenced by phenomenology especially Heidegger's thinking in *Being and Time*, he was concerned to re-establish a sense of ethical subjectivity which he believed was lost in the notion of human being as *Dasein* but, crucially, without merely re-establishing the Kantian 'Rational being' – the abstracted idea of human being as a rational agent divided by reason and emotion. Levinas's notion of 'human being' is the concrete, embodied, social individual, the living breathing person who eats soup, has sex, is fearful, enjoys walking, becomes fatigued, is a parent. It is a conception of people as they live in the world and share that world with other people rather than thinking through a philosophical abstraction.

Part of this idea of people is that we are not doomed to be essentially alone in some sort of existential isolation. Levinas opposes both an existential philosophy fashionable at the time of his early writings and the Heideggerian conception of subjectivity as entirely an openness, an open site in the world. We are rather 'pre-originally' connected to the Other and all Others. I will explain this temporal expression below but this is, I believe, an optimistic philosophy as it paints a picture of humanity not as a collection of individual egos struggling against one another, a vision influenced the 'French' (Kojévian) reading of Hegel,⁴ but as an interrelated whole responsible for each Other. While this might seem optimistic (or some may claim utopian) the ethical relationship is, as mentioned, not a choice; it is not one of my 'possibilities' as Heidegger might put it. Levinas describes the ethical relationship (in increasingly hyperbolic terms) as being 'hostage' to the Other. So how is the Other

⁴For Levinas this is precisely the foundation of war, as it "establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other". (*Totality and Infinity*, 1969, p.21)

constitutive of my subjectivity and how does it 'call' or 'command' me, in fact what is it actually commanding?

While Levinas is attempting to readdress the notion of identity and question the nature of subjectivity, he is also questioning the post-Heideggerian priority of ontology. He instead posits something that is 'otherwise than being' or beyond being. This, he says, is 'pre' ontological although the term 'pre' is itself an ontological term and so is not strictly correct; but it gives some idea of the problems of language which Levinas encounters in trying to go beyond ontology. (This aspect of Levinas's project is an issue to which I will return.) There are various ways Levinas has to describe the interaction with the Other but they all emphasize that this relationship is asymmetrical. It is I who is responsible for the Other, and all Others and this responsibility to the Other is the very structure of my subjectivity.

Responsibility

The basis of Levinas's ethics is 'responsibility' which he describes as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. Responsibility is an immediate reaction to the signification or proximity of the Other but it is not so much something I do but something that I am. Thus it is not an attribute of subjectivity but responsibility is constitutive of identity⁵ and the basis of responsibility is passivity. This passivity means that, as mentioned above, it is not that 'I' take responsibility but responsibility takes me (to the Other). In his later work Levinas calls this 'substitution', where I am put in the Other's place. It is passive because this is not an act of intentionality or a conscious decision but it is a response to the command or call of the Other. That is, Levinas places the locus of my responsibility in the Other. He claims responsibility is always already there, it is pre-original (pre-ontological) or prior to all initiatives, duties or principles: he describes it as "an-archic".⁶ The idea of 'substitution' acknowledges the claim by the Other but also importantly establishes my identity as situated in the Other. It is the relationship with the Other as alterity that constitutes my subjectivity.⁷ I do not just 'care' for the Other or 'help out' but I have absolute responsibility for myself and the Other. As he puts it "the condition of being

⁵ See for instance (Ethics and Infinity, 2012, p.95)

⁶ See for instance "Levinas and Language", John Llewlyn in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 2008

⁷ See (Levinas, 2013, p. XIX)

hostage is an authentic figure of responsibility". (Levinas, 2013, XX) He describes the self in this ethical relation of absolute responsibility as:

"Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity". (Levinas, 2013, p.15)

Thus the relationship with the Other is not a harmonious relationship of communion, or sympathy, and is especially not one where we try to 'understand' the Other but the relation with the Other is, as he says "a relationship with a Mystery". (Levinas, 1989c, p.43)

What is the Other?

So what is this 'Mystery'? What is the Otherness of the Other, this alterity, that Levinas is referring to? It is a way of describing another human being but I think there is also a determination to engage with the concept of difference and not merely, as he claims the philosophical tradition does, by reducing the Other to the Same. Sometimes he describes this difference in terms such as alterity or the Infinite or even God.

This use of the term 'God' is clearly influenced by a reading of Descartes but also by the fact, as mentioned previously, that he studied the Talmud in great depth. While he was careful to some degree to distinguish between his 'philosophical' thought and his 'religious' thought it is still an interesting question as to how much one influenced the other.⁸ For instance one could think of his Judaism not as a set of beliefs but rather as a form of language or expression. And furthermore one could, perhaps, argue that his religious intuition was the 'Otherwise' that he was trying to communicate or incorporate in his work. At any rate, the methodology of the interpretation of the Talmud, where there is no one correct reading, seems to inform Levinas's vision of philosophy, especially after *Totality and Infinity*.

Infinity is, as mentioned, another term Levinas uses to describe the Other and this also includes a temporal notion as seen in his Cartesian understanding of infinity where

⁸ See for example, a recent work by Michael Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism*, Stanford U.P., Stanford, 2010

Descartes says, in the 3rd Meditation, that the infinite is put in him before the finite. Though influenced by Descartes, Levinas differs in his conception of God: he does not see God as a being nor as Being itself but as a notion outside Being or that which is beyond Being. Thus he calls God the “non-contained par excellence” (Levinas, 1989a, p.173). Again we find the theme of inverting the usual or traditional notions by Levinas’s claim that the infinite is prior to the finite. This term is a concept that the Western tradition has ignored or forgotten. In this tradition’s quest for knowledge, it has colonized thought and ideas concerning the infinite. In Levinas’s words:

“For the things, the work of ontology consists in apprehending the individual (which alone exists) not in its individuality but in its generality (of which alone there is science). The relation with the Other is here accomplished through a third term [the concept] which I find in myself.” (Levinas, 1969, p.44)

So infinity is that which is outside or more correctly beyond the self or the same. I cannot grasp the Other because there is always more in the Other. In the ethical oppositions of *Totality and Infinity* he says I cannot ‘totalize’ the Other because the ethical relation to the Other is as an Infinity. Infinity can be ‘defined’ as limitless or unbounded – the opposite of finite – but also it has become closely aligned with knowledge so infinity for Levinas comes to mean unknowable in principle.⁹ For Levinas this is crucial because he claims this notion of the infinite breaks the established subjectivity. It is a breakup of consciousness or, to put it another way, it overturns the character of intentionality. This breakup of consciousness is not an un-consciousness but rather is a passivity of consciousness. Because of this my responsibility is not only beyond my intentionality but is infinite. As Lingis puts it:

“I am responsible for processes that go beyond the limits of my foresight and intention to carry on even when I’m no longer adding my sustaining - even when I’m no longer there. Serious responsibility recognises itself to be responsible for the course of things beyond one’s own death. My death will mark the limit of my force without limiting my responsibility. There is in the sense of infinity that opens responsibility, not as a given

⁹ This concept and the language used is criticised by Derrida in his *Violence and Metaphysics*. This led Levinas to rethink his use of language and the idea of presence.

immensity of its horizons, that is the process by which it founds do not cease to extend – an infinity of infinity.”¹⁰

Levinas uses the figure of the face-to-face relationship from his early work up until *Totality and Infinity* to signal this encounter with the Infinite.

Face

Levinas discusses this encounter with the Other in his earlier work through the figure of the “Face”, in later works such as *Otherwise than Being*, he dramatises this encounter using the term “substitution”. What he means by the *Face* is not merely the actual face of a person (and certainly not the image of the face as we will see in his aesthetics¹¹) but the expression or signification that one responds to in this relation. When I encounter an Other, what is signified is not another “me” (which would be, for Levinas, ‘sympathy’) but something Other, something that I cannot understand or comprehend – as mentioned above it is *infinite*. It is alien, it is an alterity. The *Face* is the locus of the ethical relationship with the Other. This encounter brings into play our responsibility for the Other and so brings us out of a particular state of ourselves but it is also a command and a summons. Its command is “do not kill me”. Once we are in a face-to-face relationship with the Other, and face-to-face can mean we are addressed by the Other in language though not necessarily, then we are commanded by the Other. We are, in effect, subject to the Other. We are incapable of indifference. The subjectivity is released from a purely egoistic existence – from the world of enjoyment, pleasures of the world – a type of being-for-itself. This is, for Levinas, ‘transcendence’. He says that: “Going towards the other is not going outside the human, not transcending humanness but how the human shows itself.” (Levinas, 1996, p.42) (This notion of *transcendence*, being open to the Other, is important for his arguments concerning art, as we shall see later.) Derrida illustrates the mysterious nature of this transcendent encounter:

¹⁰ Alphonso Lingis in *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne U.P., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2013, XX

¹¹ Eaglestone p.113 “the Beautiful is not the Ultimate. The Beautiful can be discussed as a Face. But in it there is also the possibility of enchantment, and, from that moment, a lack of concern or ethical cruelty” Levinas

“In the face, the other is given over in person as other, that is, as that which does not reveal itself, as that which cannot be made thematic. I could not possibly speak of the Other, make of the Other a theme, pronounce the Other as object, in the accusative. I can only, I must only speak to the other; that is, I must call him in the vocative, which is not a category, a case of speech, but, rather the bursting forth, the very raising up of speech. Categories must be missing for the Other not to be overlooked; but for the Other not to be overlooked, He must present himself as absence, and must appear as non-phenomenal. Always behind its signs and its works, always within its secret interior, and forever discreet, interrupting all historical totalities through its freedom of speech, the face is not ‘of this world’.” (Derrida, 1978, p.103)

If the Other is not ‘of this world’ then what sort of world? For Levinas, it is from the ‘Otherwise than Being’, the ‘world’ beyond categories, beyond what he calls ontology. Once we see the Other as a category we are, as he says in *Totality and Infinity*: ‘totalizing’ it, that is, limiting it. We are therefore not allowing it to be Other but regarding or responding to it as the *same* thus not as an alterity, not seeing it as an absolutely singular individual but as a generality. We limit the Other through concepts and this, for Levinas, is a manifestation of ontological thinking which he traces back to the development of Western philosophy in general. What Levinas sees as one of the deficiencies of the Western philosophical tradition is the neglect of the notion of ‘difference’ and the privileging of the notion of the ‘same’. The significance of the *Face* is that it signifies “the rupture of phenomenology” (Levinas, 1987, p.107) or the break with this way of thinking. The responsibility to/for and response to the *Face* is something that Levinas refers to as pre-ontological, thus it is not the subject as ego or consciousness, or intentionality that is responding but an identity prior to that development. But what is this identity?

The *il y a*

A major theme especially in Levinas’s early work concerns the development of subjectivity and its relation to Being or existence. It is here that his notion of the *il y a* (the ‘there is’, a radical non-alterity, sameness) is encountered. Levinas describes the *il y a* as “the anonymous rustling of existence” (Levinas, 2011, p.61) and is a starting point of an ethical critique of metaphysics and ontology. As will be seen in the next chapter it is also a crucial concept for some commentator’s interpretations of Levinas’s notion of aesthetics. What

makes Levinas's concept of the *il y a* so crucial is that he says it precipitates the formation of the subject. This notion was introduced in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other* (around 1947) but he maintained it was significant throughout his work. Levinas describes the *il y a* as an unmediated relationship to existence and describes it in this way:

“For where the continual play of our relations with the world is interrupted we find neither death nor the ‘pure ego’, but the anonymous state of being. Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with the world; it is antecedent to the world”. (Levinas, 2011, p.8)

The notion of the *il y a* is a critique of Heidegger's idea of Being and a telling point of difference between these is in the interpretation of the relation between Being and beings. Levinas explains Heidegger's position as follows:

“The most profound thing about Being and Time for me is this Heideggerian distinction [of existence and the existent]. But in Heidegger there is a distinction, not a separation. Existing is always grasped in the existent...” (Levinas, 1987, pp.44-45)

For Levinas existence can be grasped without an existent – without a ‘world’. As the title of his early work makes clear, it is existence but without existents: Being without beings. The *il y a* as a site reveals the idea of the excluded middle of logic where one *is* and at the same time *is not*. Or to put it another way, it transcends the distinction between ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’. In this state one is a proto-subject where one lacks agency: “It is a wakefulness without intentionality”. (Levinas, 1989a, p.166) What is explored by Levinas here are processes which might be termed pre-conscious. That is, they are not opposite to consciousness but rather a state where we are vigilant without being wakeful. One way Levinas says we feel the *il y a* is through the states of insomnia, fatigue or indolence but also importantly through art. It is through art that we encounter this ‘hitherside’ of being. This he describes as an anonymous state of being where, for example, in insomnia it is not that ‘I’ can't sleep but that ‘it’ can't sleep. Levinas says of the *il y a*:

“The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which one participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously.” (Levinas, 2011, p.53)

The *il y a* can be seen as the beginning point of a creation story for Levinas. He says there is pain/evil (mal) in Being because in this scheme evil is not an anomaly from an original perfect genesis but is just as intrinsic to Being as untruth is intrinsic to truth and anxiety over Being is just as primal as anxiety over death. It is a site of emptiness but at the same time it is also one of chaos and it is out of this that the 'hypostasis' emerges. This is the existent as subject for itself.

The hypostasis

In his earlier works Levinas uses the term 'hypostasis' to describe the emergence from the *il y a* into a form of existent (though it falls out of favour in later works). In *Time and the Other* he describes it as:

"The present is the event of hypostasis. The present leaves itself, better still, it is the departure from self. It is a rip in the infinite beginningless and endless fabric of existing. The present rips apart and joins together again; it begins; it is beginning itself". (Levinas, 1987, p.52)

This gives an idea of how Levinas is concerned to refigure the notion of the subject which, as it were, first emerges from the *il y a* not as a substance or a rational consciousness nor even a site of unconcealment but is the actual event of being. That is, the subject *is* the event not merely a place or a site where an event 'happens'. Levinas says this is a transmutation where a pure event of being becomes a substantive – the *hypostasis*. It is a subjectivity which is no longer an anonymity. This seems to emphasize the dynamic nature of identity or subjectivity to an even greater extent than Heidegger's notion of human being or existence as Dasein. This, once again, is a reworking of the traditional figure of human being as a stable, consistent, rational substance.

So initially in the *il y a* the existent or 'pre-subject' just *is*. This is then liberated from the anonymous existence – but this state is chained to itself, it is: "the encumbrance of the ego by the self." (Levinas, 1989c, p.38) In this sense it now has intentionality and possibility of its own and it has the sense of an *event* of being. This seems to be for Levinas the second stage of a type of creation myth where a sense of self, a pure egotism emerges which is for-itself. It is a subjectivity of the world and in the world: but, it is also a solipsism. Interestingly,

although this notion of subjectivity is the unethical aesthetic subjectivity, Levinas illustrates the tragic sense of this loneliness by referring to the tale of *Robinson Crusoe*:

“...the situation Robinson Crusoe is privileged to experience when, in a magnificent tropical landscape, where he has continued to maintain civilization through his tools and his morality and his calendar, he still finds in his encounter with Man Friday the greatest event of his insular life. It is the moment when finally a man who speaks replaces the inexpressible sadness of echoes.” (Levinas, 1989d, p.148)

In this solitary existence, which Levinas describes as being in the ‘light’ (a sort of intelligibility or consciousness opposed to the ‘darkness’ of the *il y a*), it seems as if everything is my doing - I never encounter anything other than myself in the world: it is the very notion of Idealism. This being or this ‘I’ is an escape from the anonymity of the *il y a* through the event of being or a sense of self. This is the first step towards the ethical and a release from the oppressive burden of pure existence but it is also described by Levinas as an enchainment in a burdensome, solitary, and fatal existence. The existent is bound to the existence it has taken up. It is “riveted to its own being.” (Levinas, 2011, p.84) Why is it fatal? According to Levinas, the being of Being is what early Heidegger called a ‘being-unto-death’, because this autonomous and solitary being can only be limited by the Otherness or alterity of death.

Death

For Heidegger facing death can be an event of freedom while for Levinas it is a limit of possibilities: it is the appearance of the absolutely unknowable – which he describes as foreign to all light or the impossibility of possibility (reversing Heidegger’s notion). This facing death as the limit of my possibility makes me aware of my limitations. It also makes me aware of the unknown character of death: it is an experience of alterity as the Epicurean saying goes ‘If you are it is not, if it is you are not’. He says:

“In suffering there is a proximity to death which does not take place in the light. It is not my possibility to die as it is thrust upon me. Death does not take place within the light because the subject is not in a relation with something for itself but is in a relationship with mystery.” (Levinas, 1987, p.40)

The significance of death is that it is an experience of the shock of passivity. In death the subject is no longer “able to be able”, (Levinas, 1987, p.42) it is a loss of force, power, ability – the “I can” of intentionality and its very constitution as an existent – the end of mastery as a subject. This is something that the ‘I’ cannot assimilate; it cannot reduce it to the Same. It is, to me, absolute alterity. Levinas says the solitude of this subjectivity is not confirmed but broken by death. The importance of this is that it provides a relation or even revelation of absolute alterity but also gives a unique relationship to time: death is never now, it is never present but always the future.

Time

Even in his very early writings such as *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* (1934) Levinas makes the connection between ideas of time, subjectivity and also, importantly, ethics. He writes that the ideal of the West which is ‘True freedom’ involves a belief in the Instant – that which has no history in the absolute sense as every instant is a new beginning as there is no cause. He sees this as a violent fantasy and a disembodied view of the self. True history is a limitation on freedom as is the relation to the Other. Levinas uses the figure of time to demonstrate the influence of the Other over this subjectivist version of the self.

This relation of time to oneself and the Other is a continuing theme through his work including *Otherwise than Being* although it seems to be subordinated to spatial metaphors around the time of *Totality and Infinity*¹². This theme of time plays a key role in the rethinking of subjectivity but also aesthetics as will be discussed later. A typical philosophical understanding of the present is a relationship between time and existence where existence is persistence in time. While ‘Clock time’ is usually conceived as a simple experience of duration, Levinas re-conceives time as the inner structure of subjectivity.

One way Levinas explores time is through the term ‘the instant’. In this conception of time there is a disconnect between past, present and future so that there is only present and each instant can be seen as an inauguration of a new beginning not just a link in the chain of a continuum. “The present is then a situation in being where there is not only being in general, but there is a being, a subject”. (Levinas, 2011, p.73) In his earlier work this idea of

¹² See Eric Severson for his discussion of Levinas and time in *Levinas’s Philosophy of Time: Gift, Responsibility, Diachrony, Hope*, Duquesne U.P., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2013

the present is how an existent emerges from the *il y a* and so the conception of the instant is, what he calls, the drama of its struggle for existence: it is the instant as a type of immanence as the focus is the activity within the instant rather than its relationship to other instants. This reveals the nature of his conception where each instant is a new beginning, or a 'birth' – an accomplishment of existence. The evanescence of the present means that, for Levinas the present is "never inherited but always won". (Levinas, 2011, p.78) It has no relationship with the past as we usually think of it. This means that the return of the present to itself is the affirmation of the 'I'. The importance for Levinas of this concept of time is that it is constitutive of his particular conception of subjectivity. As he puts it:

"The present instant constitutes a subject which is posited both as the master of time and as involved in time. The present is the beginning of a being. The expressions which constantly recurred in this exposition, such as ...'the event of...'aim to convey this transmutation of a verb into a substantive and to express beings at the instant of their hypostasis, in which while still in movement they are already substances ". (Levinas, 2011, p.102)

So this way of thinking about the 'timeless present' (without past or future) can be seen both as a beginning of an identity, a freedom, a rescue from the *il y a* but ultimately it has the character of an oppressive captivity without hope or future. It is the very essence of immanence which is therefore the opposite of Levinas's whole project, which is to uncover the way to what he calls *transcendence*.

So how is this transcendence possible? It is in the encounter with an alterity that time takes a new mode - what Levinas calls in *Otherwise than Being*: 'diachrony'. It is through this notion of time that Levinas explains how the self can transcend itself and so come to establish an ethical connection to the Other. As he says, "time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, it is the subject's very relationship with the other". (Levinas, 2012, p.57) Levinas's notion of time is quite consistent with his quest to reconfigure ethics as outside of the usual ontological categories. Likewise, his notion of time as 'diachrony' breaks with the idea of the present as related to 'my' past. For Levinas, diachronous time is a past that was never present: what he calls the 'immemorial past'. When there is an encounter with the Other I am removed from my history; I am interrupted (or the 'I' is interrupted) and time is given a new dimension. This diachrony not only stops me totalizing the Other -

drawing the Other into myself - but draws me out of myself and, as he puts it in another critical expression, 'I substitute myself for the Other'. In what can be called the centre-piece of his later work, *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas uses the notion of 'substitution' to explain the ethical relation and in so doing inverts the egoistic understanding of identity.

Substitution

In essence, the notion of 'substitution' conveys the idea that underlying one's subjectivity is a kind of 'pre-subjectivity' - a for-the-other rather than a for-oneself. It is only 'later' - in the ontological time of synchrony than one is for- oneself. As this substitute one is 'hostage' to the Other: "it is through the condition of being a hostage that there can be pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity in the world – even the little that there is, even the simple 'after you sir'" . (Levinas, 2013, p.117) Again the figure of the hostage conveys the impossibility of doing otherwise than being commanded by the Other. It is not a question of freedom on my part to choose to be compassionate or to take responsibility - I am not good voluntarily. Thus, although Levinas's terminology may change his 'ethics' is always intending to undercut the notion of the ethical human being as a conscious and or rational being. For Levinas, to be a human being is to be a being of sensibility. The Other is signified to my sensibility, it is not a perception or a cognition on my part. He emphasizes this by again describing the subject as being 'passive':

"... a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed, and exposure without holding back, exposure of exposedness, expression, saying. This exposure is the frankness, sincerity, veracity of saying. Not saying dissimulating itself and protecting itself in the said, just giving out words in the face of the other, but saying uncovering itself that is, denuding itself of its skin, sensibility on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves, offering itself even in suffering – and thus wholly sign, signifying itself". (Levinas, 2013, p.15)

How far does this 'substitution' go for Levinas? In typical fashion it is absolute – I do not merely feel pity, compassion or have sympathy for the Other but I stand in for the Other, completely – I take responsibility for the Other and for all the Others. It is necessarily an asymmetrical relationship; otherwise it would be a matter of calculation and economics which would be 'ontological' – or an event in the 'light'. Levinas adopts a revealing

formulation from Rimbaud – “Je est un autre”¹³. This can have a variety of interpretations: literally it is ‘I am an other’, ‘I am Other’ but can it also be ‘self is other’? ¹⁴ This expression *Je est un autre* perhaps sums up Levinas’s thought on the creation of the ethical subject – if this is interpreted as meaning not only that we are constituted by the Other/s but that there is an underlying unity or connectedness between human creatures. Isn’t this paradoxical for Levinas? If the Other is, as he claims, absolutely other how can there be unity? How can his vision of humanity be, as I say above, an interrelated whole each responsible for each Other? Levinas would call this a ‘pre-original’ understanding of unity which could be the alterity that Levinas calls ‘God’. Therefore, rather than the traditional conception of a distinct separation where ‘I’ am here and ‘you’ are over there (to use spatial metaphors); ‘we’ are both Other in that the Other is what constitutes the ‘me’, (the ‘me’ as a ‘pre-ego’). This does not mean that when I am called to the Other what I find is another me, as in Heidegger’s conception of Dasein where what confronts me is another Dasein. This problem of trying to describe in ontological language something which is supposedly beyond ontology is taken up by Derrida,¹⁵ who asks: if Levinas does not accept the other is like me then what is the phenomenological base for his descriptions? Levinas’s answer is that the other manifests through language, but then, again, how is that possible if our language is based on the same?

This philosophical problem of language, for Levinas, is how to express ideas which undermine ontology without using ontological language – that which is otherwise or beyond oppositions and dichotomies?

the Saying and the Said

Levinas confronts this dilemma in *Otherwise than Being* and his answer is to explore the use of seemingly opposing terms: an ethical term, ‘the Saying’, opposed to an ontological term ‘the Said’. For example, in explaining ‘God’ or the Infinite he describes *the Saying* in this way: “It is then an idea signifying with a signifyingness prior to presence, to all presence,

¹³ Rimbaud, Letter to Georges Izambard: Charleville, 13 May 1871 (the French usually translated as “I is an Other..” Je suis.. would be.. I am.)

¹⁴ See Robert Bernasconi, *To Which Question is ‘substitution’ the answer?*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, p.243

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics in Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass, Routledge, UK, 1978

prior to every origin in consciousness and thus an-archival, accessible in its trace.” (Levinas, 1989a, p.175)

The Saying then, is a signifying of the Other or a signing from *God*. *The Said* on the other hand is language construed in terms of concepts and cognitions, what Levinas terms ‘ontological language’. It is that which points to being or presence. *The Saying* is a type of sensibility prior to language. In hearing I respond to the Other as an Other before I hear the words. Another way he describes the distinction is to term the *the Said* as ‘apophantic’ – a type of judgement which covers up meaning and gives something merely present-at-hand. This division has important consequences for his idea of aesthetics because art can be interpreted as a manifestation of *the Saying*.

In this chapter we have seen how Levinas’s ethics are closer to a meta-ethics than, say, a prescription for good or proper conduct. I have shown some relevant notions that Levinas and his commentators will use to engage with his notion of aesthetics. What is significant I think is some of the different ways that Levinas has tried to communicate his vision of humanity in his own type of ‘Copernican Revolution’ where the locus of ethical subjectivity is not in a conscious, intentional subjectivity – from an ‘I’ but rather is in the Other – however that is described: the Other, the Infinite, alterity or *God*. In the next chapter I will give an overview of Levinas’s idea of aesthetics and its relation to his ethics. As will become apparent, at least with his early views, aesthetics and ethics are considered something of an opposition.

Chapter 2 - aesthetics

There has been a history of disquiet between art and ethics. Even in the earliest days of philosophy Plato was to some extent suspicious of artists and thought perhaps his Republic might be better off without them. Levinas too does not find the two fields to be compatible. Is this necessarily so or can art and ethics be sympathetic? In this section I will address the question: what is art for Levinas? Or perhaps more correctly what does art mean for Levinas – what does it stand for?

There is no doubt that from his early work until at least *Totality and Infinity* Levinas generally took a very negative view of art. Some commentators describe him as being ‘suspicious’ of art but this could perhaps imply a degree of ambiguity whereas, I believe, Levinas’s dissatisfaction with aesthetics was consistent with the overarching aims of his project to make ethics ‘first philosophy’. He saw that two approaches to aesthetics – the ontological approach of which Heidegger was representative and a post-Kantian experience of the subject were both neglectful of his fundamental concept of the Other. That is, one could argue they were both primarily subjectivist and so in his terms were, as discussed in the previous chapter, a continuation of the traditional philosophy of the Same. Because of this Levinas is disturbed to see that the status of art is such that it is identified with spiritual life or as giving access to a higher reality. He, on the contrary, sees art, conceived in these terms, not as an entry into a higher being but as an escape from reality; it is being evasive. In the concrete world of intentionality and responsibility it seems that art is shirking its responsibility. For Levinas art is a misdirected activity: “Art lets go of the prey for the shadow” (Levinas, 1989b, p.141) and the “myth takes the place of mystery” (Levinas, 1989b, p.142) (and we have seen that for Levinas the mystery is the Other, infinity, god – the central concept of his ethical vision). For Levinas then, art is characterised by a sort of disinterestedness and irresponsibility. This flight from responsibility (for the Other) is why he claims “art is not the supreme value of civilisation.” (Levinas, 1989b, p.142) Art, framed in either of these two ‘poles’, Heideggerian and Post-Kantian, is not transcendent and so is unethical in Levinas’s terms. It was only later when he reframed the approach to art as a possible means of transcendence by re-thinking the idea of language and representation as

the Saying and *the Said* was he then able to think of art (typically poetry) as possibly a means of engaging with alterity.

But what are his early views based on? His early works on art - *Reality and its Shadow* and *Existence and Existents* can be seen as quite a direct response to both Heidegger's work especially his *The Origin of the Work of Art*¹⁶ but also Sartre's writing on art: *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*¹⁷ Levinas clearly finds these two approaches to aesthetics unsatisfactory as they both emphasize and consolidate the central role of the subject and therefore fail to take into account the primacy of the role of the Other in preceding and constituting subjectivity. That is, Levinas was examining the role of alterity or the *beyond being* whereas Heidegger's notion of aesthetics remains within it and Sartre's work on art was focussed on the self to the extent that the other person becomes an object and possession of the self – what Levinas terms 'totalization' and is the basis of all violence.

The ontological approach for Heidegger is characterised not by a Kantian sense of the science of the beautiful, nor with a Sartrean experience of imagination but a happening of ontological truth in the artwork. For Heidegger an artwork is a verb not a noun. Art *works*, in a manner similar to Heidegger's statement that the world *worlds*. To emphasize this when he talks of art he uses the term 'artwork' not art object or piece of art because an artwork is not a mere thing like any other thing. Although an artwork does have a certain 'thingly' aspect to it, for instance one can hang a painting on a wall, install a sculpture in a room or a garden, transport an artwork to another place, it somehow goes beyond, there is always something more than a mere thing, in its encounter with *Dasein* it unconceals; it is truth in the sense of *aletheia*.

Heidegger, in turn, contrasts his understanding of art to the usual conception of Plato's notion of art as mimesis. This Platonic view echoes to some extent Levinas's notion of art as representation. He argues that we do not see the object but merely the representation of it.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, Routledge, London, 2002

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (For a discussion of this as an influence on Levinas's early work see pp.129-130 in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, Blackwell Publishing, Melbourne, 1989)

The image is an allegory of being. It is like a simulation of the object; one sees the colours and forms but not the actual object. The object itself has withdrawn. And so an image in this conception is a consciousness of the absence of the object. It is a mere reflection or as he figuratively puts it a 'shadow' of the object. One can see here reverberations from Plato and the story of the cave and one could interpret Levinas as a Platonist even if he seems to explicitly deny it as such when he says that this Platonist discussion fails to recognize the "simultaneity of the truth and image." (Levinas, 1989b, p.136) Again to distance himself from the Platonic dualism he says his notion of shadow not only enables the idea of resemblance to be situated within the general economy of being (thus not in a separate reality) but says it is the very structure of sensibility itself. It is this 'side' of reality he calls the 'hitherside': "The painting does not lead us beyond the given reality but somehow to the hither side of it." (Levinas, 1989b, p.136) The artwork image for Levinas leaves us aware of the absence of the 'real' object; we have 'only' an image – a re-presentation of the object. This for Levinas provides a lifeless approximation and is an *inversion* of being: we are taken to the 'hitherside' of being: the equi-primordial non-truth of being. Therefore, the image comes to be identified with the terms 'resemblance' which Levinas also terms 'idol'. Art as an idol is an interesting figure as it gives a sense of taking or mis-taking the trace of the thing for the thing itself, or the trace of being for something which is beyond being, which for Levinas is *infinity*, or the alterity. (As mentioned above one cannot help but wonder how much 'religious' thought is informing his understanding of art). Thus art, seen in this way as representation, has a totalizing function. It is a limiting or even limited function and Levinas understands this in temporal terms as the notion of 'the meanwhile', 'the between times' or as the term which will be used in the next chapter by several commentators - the *entretemps*. He says that every artwork is a stoppage of time. It is a frozen moment, not a developing, unfolding evanescence.

Levinas illustrates the idea of the *entretemps* by examples from the plastic arts: the painting of the *Mona Lisa* and especially the statue. For example, in an artwork the image presented will endure throughout time in exactly the same way because it is caught in an instant of time. It is in a sense 'frozen' in time. It has no future or as Levinas puts it, 'evanescence'. It is an instant rather than a developing, unfolding being. It has the imminence of the future but doesn't have the present; it is an impersonal and anonymous instant. It is this essence of

time within all art which gives it its 'acuteness', or intensity. He says an artwork has an aspiration for life but only an aspiration. Literary works and even time-based artworks works such as cinema, theatre and music, he says, do not 'shatter the fixity' of images. This fixity he compares with concepts which "initiates life and offers reality to our powers, to truth, and thus they open a dialectic." (Levinas, 1989b, p.139) Artworks in this view cannot open a dialogue which is a going outside of our own subjectivity and being open to an Other and this, he calls, "inhuman and monstrous!" (Levinas, 1989b, p.141)

For Levinas art is only a façade, at best it is able to bewitch us with its beauty: "it captivates by its grace as by magic, but does not reveals itself" (Levinas, 1969, p.193) the form has no ontological status and therefore it cannot aspire to transcendence. For Levinas it cannot "overcome the egoistic, ontologically scented thought of Western culture and history". (Eaglestone, 1997, p.117) What connection does it have with the Other? Art is created by egoistic creatures and entrances the viewer and keeps them within their own world of enjoyment and takes us to the hitherside of being. Levinas describes how the type of being that art is, which he illustrates by discussing the temporal nature of art, is different from the type of being that the human being is. Art cannot be a 'face'¹⁸ in the same way the human is: it has no potentiality toward the future. In a decidedly unambiguous comment about art he says it is:

"...the essential contemplation of the shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city. There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague." (Levinas, 1989b, p.142)

One would think that there is no possibility that Levinas could bridge this divide between ethics and art; and yet, I believe that, as Eaglestone and others have pointed out the problem with Levinas's concept of art is that it is a problem of representation rather than

¹⁸ In an article titled "Is Ontology Fundamental?" (1951), he puts just this question: "Can things take on a face? Isn't art an activity that gives things a face? Isn't the facade of a house a house that is looking at us? The analysis conducted thus far is not enough to give the answer. Yet we wonder whether rhythm's impersonal gait – fascinating, magic – is not art's substitute for sociality, the face, and speech".

art. Once representation – language - is re-conceptualised in *Otherwise than Being* as *the Saying* and *the Said*, this new schema can be used to show how art, understood as a type of *the Saying*, can be ethical. In fact, in later works he speaks highly of the work of artists such as Blanchot, Paul Celan and even visual artists such as Charles Lapicque because of the mysteriousness in the artwork that becomes valued as it is able to sidestep 'ontology' - it is associated with the 'hitherside' of being in the same way that the 'face-to-face' relationship with the Other sidesteps 'ontology'. Levinas shows this thinking in an article about the poet Paul Celan, written in 1972, where he seems to agree with the quote from Celan: "I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem". (Levinas, 1996, p.40) Levinas thus interprets art as a means of transcendence like *the Saying* or like the 'face'. He puts it in these terms:

"The fact is, for Celan the poem is situated precisely at this pre-syntactic and pre-logical level (as we have all grown to expect these days!), but also a level that is pre-disclosing [pré-dévoilent]: at that moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing [au moment du pur toucher, du pur contact, du saisissement, du serrement]—which is, perhaps, a way of giving, up to and including the hand that gives. Language of proximity for proximity, older than that of "the truth of being"—which probably it carries and sustains—the first of all languages, the response preceding the question, responsibility for one's neighbour, enabling, by its for the other, the whole wonder of giving." (Levinas, 1996, p.41)

But art cannot be a *face* in the same way as a human other surely. An artwork is not a person but it is not an object either, it is as Severson puts it: a "hybrid" (Severson, 2013, p.71) (or as Heidegger puts it 'an origin'). So is an artwork a replica of a 'face'? An idol? I am not commanded by the artwork in the same way as I am commanded by the Other – but is it a matter of degree? Can we use the Levinasian ethical framework to experience art in an ethical way and so bring aesthetics and ethics into sympathy? Levinas says this about the Other and the image of the 'face':

"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. This overflowing, irreducible to an image of overflowing, is produced commensurate with—or in the inordinateness of—Desire and goodness, as the moral dissymmetry of the I and the other.” (Levinas, 1969, p.297)

Can we approach art in the same way that we approach the Other? But then for Levinas it is not a question of ‘us’ approaching: it is we who are approached by the Other. It is difficult to understand aesthetics without calling into action the egoistic character of the tradition of aesthetics. Levinas talks about the ethics of the Other but what exactly is the Other? It is the other person, the other human being, of course, or is it? Whilst the motivation is to rediscover the ethical moment in human relations there is also search for the infinite. Is Levinas’s priority the infinite via the other person or is the *infinite* a concept to describe the Other person? Art cannot be another person; it can only reflect or signify the Other – it does not have the same presence as the Other person, but can it give a glimpse of the infinite? The question is: for art to be ethical in Levinas’s terms, can art take us not to being but to *otherwise* than being? This is the main question: if art is a way to the infinite then art, like ethics, can perhaps be ethical.

In the next chapter I will discuss several approaches that other commentators have taken to this problem. Some have taken Levinas’s text to show that he himself was reticent to consider aesthetics as ethical, while others have made more radical interpretations in order to demonstrate the centrality of his aesthetics to his ethics.

Chapter 3 – relationship between aesthetics and ethics

One problem in grappling with the relationship between Levinas's ethics and aesthetics is to understand how to reconcile ethics and aesthetics when, as noted above, there is abundant evidence from Levinas's writings to conclude that his idea of aesthetics is incompatible with his ethics. In this chapter I will show how various commentators have attempted to resolve this dilemma. Silvia Benso, for example, sums up the thoughts of many commentators when she writes that Levinas clearly argues; "there is a lack of proximity between ethics and aesthetics". (Benso, 2008, p.170) All commentators seem to agree that there is some ambiguity if not contradictions in his antipathy to aesthetics. Therefore it is pertinent to ask whether Levinas's thoughts on aesthetics are actually peripheral to his thoughts on ethics or does a closer analysis of his work reveal an unacknowledged connection between art and ethics? I will examine the diversity of views amongst Levinas's commentators; some of whom describe his ethics and his views on art as contradictory, incompatible, or, merely that his aesthetics are peripheral to his thinking on ethics. There are some interpretations though which seem to be most fruitful for integrating his aesthetics to his conception of ethics. I will discuss some of the significant themes which arise to demonstrate that it is possible to interpret Levinas in such a way that his notion of ethics can be used as an approach to art.

One of the problems in interpreting Levinas (although obviously not exclusive to him) is the slippery nature of his use of terms such as art and poetry. While it is true that there is ambiguity in art, there is also ambiguity in Levinas. Sometimes, for instance, when he uses the word 'poetry' it can mean a type of writing – a certain genre of art, other times it can signal art in general, and it is also used to mean 'prayer' or a type of transcendence. One has to be very careful when interpreting Levinas to be aware that particular phrases or words supporting an argument are very deeply embedded within the context of his specific arguments or descriptions. Perhaps some of these differences of interpretation among commentators could be due to, as Schmeidgen points out, a certain confusion between the normative and descriptive in Levinas's reflections. What does Levinas mean by the word 'art', is it 'authentic art'? Levinas himself distinguishes between so-called representational

art and non-representational art but for my purposes here I don't believe that this distinction is so clear cut and can be quite arbitrary.

Positions

There are at least three key positions that are taken in regard to the issue of the integration of Levinas's ethics and aesthetics but they all acknowledge in some way an ambiguity in this relationship. These are also not distinct positions and there may be some overlap between them. I shall next give a brief tour of some of the commentator's positions to give an idea of the diversity of views which Levinas evokes and then I will discuss in greater detail the issues and common threads used in these positions.

The first position is that Levinas is either inconsistent or ambiguous (or both). This is so because his understanding of art itself is ambiguous, or that the context is crucial for understanding Levinas's use of aesthetics - as the context changes so do Levinas's arguments. Tanja Staehler¹⁹, for instance, argues that Levinas's statements of art must be put together not used against each other to fully comprehend his notion of art and its relationship to his ethics. She claims that Levinas "engages quite closely and in a supportive fashion with some art, such as Paul Celan's poetry". (Staehler, 2010, p.123) So, on the one hand, Levinas, in later texts, appears to be suggesting that art can be a way to the Other but in other places (especially earlier texts such as *Reality and its Shadow* and *Totality and Infinity*) he claims that aesthetics and ethics are incompatible. Why this ambiguity? Staehler argues that Levinas understands that ambiguity is inherent to art and therefore his statements about art reflect this ambiguity. Importantly, Staehler believes, this lets us acknowledge both sides of Levinas's conception of art rather than having to pick a side and decide which one is 'correct'. While some argue that Levinas contradicts himself, Staehler argues that all the statements taken as a whole, rather than used against each other present a coherent position. In *Reality and Its Shadow* Staehler says that Levinas not only states his principle theses which remain constant throughout his work but that he claims art responds to the ambiguities in reality and that it "does justice to these more than any other human enterprise". (Staehler, 2010, p.126)

¹⁹ Tanja Staehler, *Images and Shadows: Levinas and the ambiguity of the aesthetic*, *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, XLVII/III, 2010, pp. 123-143

The second position is that Levinas says that art and ethics are incompatible but there is a way to reconcile them. Silvia Benso,²⁰ for example, claims that although Levinas does condemn art a careful reading of his statements on art show that an ethical aesthetics can be, as she puts it, salvaged. She does this through a parallel reading of Plato and Levinas which she says shows significant similarities. She claims this demonstrates that there is not so much distance between Beauty and the Good, or aesthetics and ethics as Levinas would have us believe. She says:

“The goal is rather that of reclaiming art and the aesthetic from the too easy, too quick condemnation to the realm of the unethical and inhuman to which Levinas assigns it, and disclosing in it elements of what, alone for him, constitutes the human; that is, the ethical. The goal is the recuperating the human character of art. The essay argues for the possibility of an ethical (in the Levinasian sense of non-moralistic/pedagogical/didactic) moment within artistic phenomena.” (Benso, 2008, p.172)

In a similar gesture Matthew Sharpe²¹ argues that aesthetic experience, as analysed by Levinas, has an uncanny structural proximity to his analyses of ethics and therefore recognition of this primacy might well cause us to reconsider Levinas’s classically ‘Greek’ as much as his ‘Judaic’ devaluation of aesthetics as one dimension of human experience. This *Greek* notion of aesthetics is presumably referring to a Platonic reading of Levinas which I will discuss below.

Jill Robbins²² too writes that Levinas’s aesthetics and ethics are closer than he explicitly acknowledges. Although Robbins presents an abundance of evidence to support her argument that, for Levinas, the ethical and the aesthetic are incompatible, she still wonders: “does the work of art give access to the ethical, as Levinas understands it?” (Robbins, 2005, p.366) Although her answer is, throughout her essay, a resounding ‘no’, she does open the possibility that there is a formal or structural similarity between the exteriority of the ‘face’

²⁰ Silvia Benso, *Aesth-ethics: Levinas, Plato, and Art*, *Epoché*, Volume 13, Issue 1, Fall 2008

²¹ Matthew Sharpe, *Aesthet(h)ics: On Levinas’ Shadow*, *text theory critique* 9, 2005

²² Jill Robbins, *Aesthetic totality and ethical infinity; Levinas on art* in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Claire Elise Katz with Lara Trout, Vol IV, Routledge, London, 2005

and the exteriority of the subject to itself, in as she puts it: “the mode of aesthetic absorption.” (Robbins, 2005, p.366) That is, she argues that although Levinas has a deep mistrust of aesthetics there is perhaps a way of using his structure to think the ethical and aesthetic together. Robbins acknowledges that Levinas’s later writings engaged with art in a more positive way than his early writings but she does not want to approach the issue with what she calls a ‘transformative’ view. She examines the ‘tension’ within each of his texts rather than having a ‘before and after’ approach.

The third position taken by some commentators, in a more radical interpretation, is that Levinas’s aesthetics and ethics are inextricably linked: his notion of ethics is structurally supported by his ideas on aesthetics. Peter Schmiedgen²³ sees the notion of Idolatry as crucial because he argues that, for Levinas, representational art is idolatrous and therefore his ethics is connected to his understanding of aesthetics because it is fundamentally iconoclastic. (Schmiedgen, 2002, p.146) By which he means, for Levinas, an artwork is the outcome of an attempt to synthesize and hence represent the un-synthesizable infinity of the Other. In this respect Levinas’s understanding and critical evaluation of art is intimately connected with the most central concerns of his ethical reflection. Schmiedgen therefore describes the dissolution of the subject which comes from the Other as ‘iconoclasm’. What Levinas posits, according to Schmiedgen, as his highest goal is “engagement with the other and not with our representations of the other.”(Schmiedgen, 2002, p.148)

Henry McDonald²⁴ goes further and argues that not only is Levinas’s aesthetics inextricably intertwined with his ethics but plays a crucial role in the attempt to make ethics ‘first philosophy’. For McDonald it is the concepts of the *Il y a* and the *entretemps* that provide the common ground of Levinas’s aesthetics and ethics and the binding notion McDonald uses is the ‘tragic’. The notion of the *tragic* provides a non-conceptual basis for rethinking not only aesthetics and ethics but also Levinas’s particular conception of subjectivity in which the settled sense of identity is disrupted. McDonald argues that his notion of aesthetics, as he puts it, “dramatizes” Levinas’s notions of ethics. He says:

²³ Peter Schmiedgen, *Art and Idolatry: Aesthetics and Alterity in Levinas*, Contretemps 3, July 2002

²⁴ Henry McDonald, *Aesthetics As First Ethics: Levinas and the Alterity of Literary Discourse*, Diacritics, Volume 38, Number 4, Winter 2008, pp. 15-41

“It is aesthetics, as a mode of expression of the tragic grounded in the *entretemps* of the artwork that gives access to such a temporally transparent dimension by virtue of its ability to infiltrate, between the lines, its culture and society.” (McDonald, 2008, p.18)

The *il y a* is a key concept also for Gerald L. Bruns who similarly uses it to link aesthetics and the ethical. For example, he argues that the type of language in poetry “exposes us to regions of subjectivity or existence on the hither side of cognition and being”. (Bruns, 2008, p.206) For Bruns, the poetic, therefore, is similar to the ethical in that they are both types of *the Saying* which, as discussed above, Levinas contrasts to the propositional character of *the Said*. Levinas’s concepts of *the Saying* and *the Said* can be used to reconcile Levinas’s antipathy to art. Eaglestone, further, argues that the way Levinas uses these ideas in his later work, *Otherwise than Being: Beyond Essence*, provides the basis of a strategy of “continual interruption” which offers a way to understand criticism (and therefore also possibly art). The continual interruption is necessary if one is to avoid a static and therefore a potentially totalizing viewpoint.

I have just mentioned briefly some of the main ways in which Levinas’s ethic and aesthetics can be integrated and will now examine in more detail some of the themes commentators have engaged to reconcile his ethics with his aesthetics. The problem, for Levinas, is that art is construed as not giving us the voice of the Other but only representations of the Other. How can art be construed so as to be ethical?

Platonism

One question often raised by Levinas’s description of art is whether his notion of art is Platonist? A particular reading of Platonism could seem to give Levinas a fairly simple dichotomy between ethics and aesthetics. Benso points out that Levinas, like Plato, denounces art as it evades its ‘responsibility’ as images are “bewitching”.²⁵ But Schmiedgen illustrates the dilemma of deciding one way or the other where, in a discussion of language, he says: “Levinas ... condemns the poetic in favour of the prosaic, and yet also in a

²⁵ Levinas quoted in (Benso,2008, p.168) “The most lucid writer finds himself in the world bewitched by its images. . . .”

thoroughly Platonic move he condemns poetry from within a language that speaks of 'clothing the world in light' for example." (Schmiedgen, 2002, p.155)

Matthew Sharpe in his paper uses a quote from Plato which seems to sum up perfectly the perceived parallel between Plato and Levinas on art.

"So if we are visited in our state by someone who has the skill to transform himself into all sorts of characters and represent all sorts of things, and he wants to show off himself and his poems to us, we shall treat him with all the reverence due to a priest and giver of rare pleasure, but shall tell him that he and his kind have no place in our city, being forbidden by our code, and send him elsewhere, after anointing him with myrrh and crowning him."²⁶

Unsurprisingly there is no consensus regarding Levinas's relation to Platonic thought. While several commentators note a superficial resemblance to Plato, Benso argues there are distinct parallels while McDonald argues that Levinas's view of art was not Platonic although it was a disengagement from the world, this disengagement was not to a 'higher' reality, a 'beyond', but to the hither-side of time – the interstices or the *entretemps*. As McDonald says: "Levinas' aesthetics, like his ethics, are non-meaning based, non-conceptual, non-ontological, form of signification that signifies not for but to a subjectivity, to the constitution of subjectivity". (McDonald, 2008, p.36) The only consensus McDonald sees on the issue of Platonism is that that Levinas sees art and ethics as incompatible.

Benso though describes Levinas's aesthetics as a "Platonic program" (Benso, 2008, p.164) and likens Levinas's criticisms of art from his early work to a particular reading of Plato. She then uses Platonic and Levinasian themes to attempt to demonstrate an analogy between art and ethics, (although she also admits that Levinas's articulation of art is a simplification of the phenomenon of art). In this reading of Plato art is shunned for three reasons: moral, political and ontological. Art is untruthful, it may cause a loss of control for the rulers over the excited participants in art and also because art, being copy of a copy, is an inferior level of reality. But she also points to the affinities between Plato and Levinas, importantly, in their idea of the Good beyond Being. While this reading of Levinas is understandable for

²⁶ Plato, Republic, Book III, 398a

what he terms 'representational' art would it also hold for art which he terms Modernist (non-representational). Levinas characterises visual art as 'replica' – a substitution of the image for the object, as we have seen this is characterised as Levinas's notion of 'idolatry'. This is why for Levinas, unlike Heidegger, art is not an 'unconcealing': it is not concerned with truth but with its opposite, an untruth: it is a 'de-figuring, de-forming, de-worlding the world'. Art displays Being as a 'shadow' – a resemblance. It is the *il y a*, which as we saw from his ethics, is a central notion and is a site from which subjectivity emerges.

Benso also looks at Levinas's style of writing and again, like Schmiedgen, compares him to Plato in the sense that while both seem to oppose ethics to art they both use 'poetic imagery' to convey their thoughts. In many places Plato uses beautiful myths to illustrate his points e.g. the myth of *Er*. (Benso, 2008, p.171) Benso asks "could it be that rather than an enemy of ethics it is at the protective margin and expresses without controlling?" (Benso, 2008, p.171) If this is so then perhaps rather than just collapsing ethics in to aesthetics (or vice versa) Levinas's ideas are interlaced. A way of interpreting this for Benso is through the notion of inspiration or 'Divine madness – the muses', from the *Phaedrus*, which is used as a way to discuss the idea of the human becoming the voice of God. In Levinas's terms this is the *infinite* (or the epitome of alterity). For Benso, Plato understands art to perform an additional but no less essential function as:

"...a mode of enthousiasmos – a divine possession, or perhaps divine inspiration...capable of undermining the ontological power of the I and its rational attempts at controlling being through techne." (Benso, 2008, p.173)

The main reason that art, for Levinas, is such a danger to ethics is because it can seek to dominate the subjectivity and therefore be merely egoistic which means, therefore, it forgets the Other. This then goes to the heart of the issue of responsibility which, as mentioned above, is the key concept in Levinas's ethics. Without a responsible subjectivity there can be no ethical response. In order to resolve this Benso asks "could art be a matter of inspiration or prophecy and therefore ethical?" (Benso, 2008, p.173) In this way art is closer to "prophecy" (Benso, 2008, p.173) which in more contemporary terms could be known as inspiration:

“The artist is not the author of his works...efficient causality is at the service of a summons penetrating it through and through. It is subjected to mysterious voices.”
(Benso, 2008, p.173)

Benso argues that while Levinas usually conceives of art in terms as simple aesthesis or simple sensation there is a way to an ethical within Levinas’s aesthetics and this is the distinction between inspiration and possession. The problem of inspiration for Levinas is that of a lack of responsiveness of the subject. One can become possessed and possession implies a denial of artistic (and ethical) subjectivity which prevents one from being responsible. In *Reality and its Shadow* he describes art as ‘rhythm’ which “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”. (Levinas, 1989b, p.132) But as Benso points out he also says: “All works of art are more perfectly works of art to the degree that their authors do not count, as if they served an anonymous order”. (Benso, 2008, p.174) Benso claims the crucial point here is to determine in whose service is the work of art. Can art really serve an anonymous order, if so is that the *Il y a*? Or is it, as Benso suggests, the ‘nameless’ – the Other? This would mean that art could be prophetic in that it announces the ethical. When talking about reason Levinas says: “possession by a god, enthusiasm, is not the irrational but the end of the solitary... or inward thought, the beginning of the new experience of the noumenon – already desire.” (Levinas, 1969, pp.49-50) Benso calls this the announcement of ethics. So, for Levinas, there is artistic *possession* which is irresponsible and lost in anonymity. This is opposed to artistic *inspiration* which can be an assumption of responsibility, or responsiveness to what may be Other than self. Clearly, then, as the basis of his ethics is ‘Responsibility for the Other’, for Levinas, art can only be ethical if there is an assumption of responsibility.

But is there a difference here, for Benso, between mere responsiveness and *responsibility*? Benso suggests, from her reading of Plato, that inspiration is not just a simple possession but there *is* a measure of responsibility involved. It is a response to the call of the Beautiful which she says is also essentially the call of the Good. In a move which she claims parallels Levinas’s idea of the self called by the Other, Benso says the artist is summoned (or for Levinas, chosen), by this inspiration that constitutes ‘good’ art as it is responding to the

'higher' plane. Presumably for Benso this is a 'good beyond Being' which in Levinas's terms is an *Otherwise than Being*. Therefore, for Benso, it is the source of an artist's inspiration that is the criterion for distinguishing non-ethical from ethical art. According to this schema the artist can be doing the work of the Good, which is a self-effacement, for Benso. Thus art is not in Levinas's terms 'inhuman' ('monstrous') but Benso claims can be 'nonhuman' because it is more than human (for Levinas this would be termed merely 'human' because it is an ethical being). The artist then is figured as a medium for 'God' and thus the Good. In Levinas's terms 'God' is the Other, the alterity, infinity, the other human being or as Benso says "a secularized divinity". (Benso, 2008, p.176) For Benso art can be construed as responsibility to the 'call' of the Good and so therefore must be ethical in Levinas's framework.

Benso's argument takes Levinas's quote: "this intrigue of infinity in which I make myself author of what I hear"²⁷, to clearly parallel Plato's conception of art as a "gift from the Gods".²⁸ But is it so clear? Is mapping Levinas's ethics onto Plato's aesthetics proof that one is like the other? There is at least some interlacing of these ideas and for Benso what is common is that both art and ethics originate from the same mysterious region. Levinas might call this 'god' and this is something which can't be exactly and concretely conceptualized or in Levinas's terms – totalized as it is beyond being. This strange undefinable world of inspiration is related to another non-conceptual zone which is on the hitherside of being – the *il y a*.

The *il y a* / entretemps

As mentioned above, the *il y a* is one of Levinas's fundamental notions and is accordingly at the core of several commentators work as the source of both ethics and aesthetics. It is a confrontation with Heidegger's notion of being and therefore plays a pivotal role in the subversion of Heidegger's project to establish ontology as 'first philosophy'. In *Being*, Levinas recognizes a notion of elemental evil.²⁹ He is here addressing the idea that evil (mal)

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Stanford, Calif, Stanford University Press, 1998, 76. Quoted in Benso, 2008, p.177

²⁸ Quoted in Benso, 2008, p.178

²⁹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*, trans. by Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 62-71

in Being is defect and that it is just as originary to Being as un-truth is to truth. What this gives us is an ethical critique of ontology and so is central to understanding Levinas's notion of aesthetics, not as a form of ethics, but as significant in the formation of his account of ethics. For instance, McDonald claims the *il y a* and the related concept of the *entretemps* (the temporal counterpart of the *il y a*) have their origin in Levinas's aesthetics. (McDonald, 2008, p.17) McDonald argues that, instead of aesthetics being the 'other' of ethics, it is the very foundation. Levinas held that rather than being a way to a higher realm of reality, as is sometimes posited in what Levinas calls 'the common understanding', art's ontological significance is that it 'disengages' one from the world and therefore one encounters the 'hitherside' of being. McDonald says aesthetics works to "delineate the bounds of the ethical; it is the way we do and do not conceptualise ethical categories". (McDonald, 2008, p.17) He uses a notion of the 'tragic' to account for Levinas's aesthetics as the basis of his ethics and the *il y a* is the basis of what he calls the 'tragic' account of being.

"It is aesthetics, as a mode of expression of the tragic grounded in the *entretemps* of the artwork that gives access to such a temporally transparent dimension by virtue of its ability to infiltrate, between the lines, its culture and society". (McDonald, 2008, p.18)

The notion of the 'tragic' provides a non-conceptual basis for rethinking not only aesthetics and ethics but also Levinas's particular conception of subjectivity in which the settled sense of identity is disrupted. This identity is the Modern notion of rationality which Levinas critiques through his notion of time as the *entretemps*. For McDonald this is the temporal basis of Levinas's aesthetics. The *entretemps* is a so-called between-time which eternalizes or suspends indefinitely the evanescence of the present moment. Accordingly, the *entretemps* abolishes both the past and the future and it is therefore 'monstrous' Levinas says because it thereby abolishes hope, and hope for Levinas, is life. According to McDonald tragedy gives expression to or opens up a mode of time for the non-presence of things. It constitutes subjectivity by delineating the bounds of the ethical, breaking down certainty into uncertainty: "it dramatizes language's self-overcoming – its signification of an immemorial past and an unpredictable future within the externality of the moment's inwardness". (McDonald, 2008, p.17) For Levinas, it is out of tragedy that the ego is formed,

as he puts it 'out of the horror of being'. One can see this in Shakespeare or Sophocles, for example. As McDonald puts it:

"Tragedy dramatizes the invasion of unmeaning in the hero's life and consciousness: an Unmeaning that is not meaningless in the sense of being the opposite of meaningful, but rather belongs to a nether world in between, in violation of the excluded middle..." (McDonald, 2008, p.27)

McDonald uses *Huckleberry Finn* as an example of literature that dramatizes or illustrates Levinas's ethical structure. Huck acts against all his previous moral teachings and finds this 'non-indifference' (not self-denial or renunciation) in relation to Jim. He is, it seems McDonald is saying, to have found a Levinasian sense of responsibility which commands him against his own intentions, even his own 'morality'. His identity is called into question and thus his settled sense of subjectivity. In Levinas's terms he transcends himself.

Bruns also parallels the *il y a* with a region of aesthetic and ethical anticipation. By distinguishing between representational art and Modernist art he claims that the Modernist artwork could be seen as a mode of transcendence in Levinas's sense because Modernist art acts like poetic language, which for Bruns:

"...is a discursive event that interrupts the logical or dialectical movement of signification and thereby opens up a dimension of exteriority or wordlessness – a world without things, or perhaps one should say: things free of the world" (Bruns, 2008, p.210)

So for Bruns, like the other commentators who interpret art as ethical in Levinas's terms, the work of art can be 'non-violent', Art disposes us towards other things in a non-violent way because it allows strangeness. In art we enter into the *il y a* – the world is stripped away and we discover it afresh. In this way subjectivity returns but with new insights into our relationship with ourselves in the world.

This is in contrast to the colonizing of conceptual thinking which as, signification is, as in Hegel's dialectic of negation, an annihilation of things in their singularity and replacement with concepts, it is a quashing and transforming. Levinas's friend and writer Blanchot describes poetry as a refusal of this 'speech of death'; it interrupts the dialectical movement

in which things are conceptually determined. For Blanchot the world is not the concern for poets because they are interested in what things and beings would be if there were no world – existence without existents, that is, the *il y a*. Thus for Bruns, the Levinasian (Modernist) artwork is a way of introducing the *il y a*. Art then, in this way does not represent things but “materialises” things, it is experienced in a new and unexpected, unusual way. It is not just that art is unconcerned with mimesis; it is no longer merely concerned with the beautiful object. In the aesthetic experience art smashes the conceptual structure, the rigidity of the frame and allows new thoughts to pour in, new connections to be made, new perspectives to be seen. It welcomes the Other rather than obeying rules of the beautiful which, from a Levinasian perspective, continues a relationship with sameness. Thus art becomes, in Brun’s interpretation, an anticipation of the ethical relationship with the Other which is to say that put into terms of language one could then claim that both poetry and the ethical are both forms of *the Saying*.

Language

Robbins though, interprets Levinas’s notion of language differently, as she points us to a problem with a more literal interpretation. She too claims the essence of language, for Levinas, is that it is a command of ethical responsibility and there is a distinction between propositional language and poetic language (by which she means language which is metaphorical or image laden). But in her understanding poetry (aesthetics) therefore gives a *false* transcendence – or a false relationship with the infinitely Other. It is an oppositional structure in which the “relationship of image to reality is like a caricature is to a face”. (Robbins, 2005, p.362) This is so, Robbins argues, because an image of a ‘face’ is an attempt to, in Levinas’s terms, ‘totalize’ it. Robbins says that Levinas therefore thinks of images in terms of “idolatry”. (Robbins, 2005, p.362) To capture this sense of a duality of being Levinas says: “idols have mouths but do not speak”.³⁰ The problem that Robbins is pointing to here is that while the Other commands from the ‘face’ which is a figure, Levinas condemns the use of images as unethical. It seems to be this logical bind which he ultimately addresses as a problem of language and representation in *Otherwise than Being*.

³⁰ Interesting that this is a quote from the Bible - Psalm 115:5 – “They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not:”

Schmiedgen alerts us to further complications in Levinas's ideas on language in that there are ethical and non-ethical, presumably aesthetic, uses of language. Levinas uses the figure of 'face' as the call of responsibility to the Other which is in fact literally the voice or speech of the Other but as Schmiedgen points out one cannot generally assert that the realm of the ethical is the realm of speech. He says there are also finer distinctions to be made between the poetic and the prosaic. Schmiedgen interprets Levinas as positing the prosaic as ethical and the poetic as unethical. And yet this relationship between rhetorical and propositional language and thus ethics and literature is thought differently by other commentators. Bruns for instance sums up well how ethics and aesthetics can be thought of as compatible:

"the language of poetry exposes us to regions of subjectivity or existence on the hitherside of cognition and being. The ethical and the poetic are evidently species of saying (*le Dire*) in contrast to the propositional character of the said (*le Dit*)." (Bruns, 2008, p.206)

It is only in his later work that the Levinas seemingly concedes (though it is never completely unambiguous) that poetry (aesthetic language) can be a form of communication which is not 'violent' in Levinas's terms.

The Saying and the Said

The notion of language as *the Saying* and *the Said* is also used by Eaglestone, despite what he claims is Levinas's deep suspicions if not antipathy to art, to reconcile ethics and aesthetics. He can do this because what Eaglestone finds in Levinas is not a problem of art but a problem of his notion of representation. As Derrida³¹ points out in his critique, Levinas is attempting to escape philosophical discourse by using philosophical discourse (or as Levinas would say 'ontological' discourse), which is impossible, it is like outrunning one's shadow. Therefore Levinas needed some means of expression which would go beyond what he calls ontological discourse and would go to the *beyond being*. Thus, once Levinas rethinks his approach to language in *Otherwise than Being* then the aesthetic according to Eaglestone can be ethical. Eaglestone's conclusion is that the notions of *the Saying* and *the Said* can be used to offer a way to understand criticism (and therefore art). That is, as

³¹ Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, published in 1967

opposed to Levinas's comment that "art does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue", ³² if art is construed as *the Saying*, then perhaps it can begin a dialogue.

Eaglestone is mindful of the fact that, as an approach to aesthetics, this cannot be applied as a methodology or a system as this would run counter to Levinas's whole point which is not to totalise but to let be, to open up. Eaglestone understands this approach as a need for "continual interruption". To underline this idea Eaglestone describes *the Saying* as the state of not being at home, it is "the strangeness of the ineluctable call to responsibility", (Eaglestone, 1997, p.177) which could neatly summarize an ethical approach to art.

Participation

Another interesting way of looking at the *il y a* is through the notion of 'participation', ³³ as this is perhaps particularly relevant for discussing how Levinas's ethical framework could be used as an approach to artwork such as Australian Indigenous art. It is a term which was derived from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and is introduced in the description of the *il y a* in *Existence and Existents*. ³⁴ Levinas says it was used by Lévy-Bruhl to describe an existence where horror is the dominant emotion and so it is apt as Levinas describes the *il y a* in the same way. It is a 'primitive' state or 'pre-logical' where 'mythology' rather than reason is the norm. 'Participation' is a 'reversion' to so-called primitive thought or non-conceptual structures. But this is not an historical stage that we have 'overcome' but is merely an alternative way to approaching the world or more correctly of existing. Levinas expresses certain reservations about it in this way – "renewal of mythology the kind of elevation of myth and tolerance for the cruelties which myth perpetuates in plurality". (Robbins, 2005, p.365) For Levinas it seems like it is a type of 'paganism', a place where there is an absence of 'God'. For Levinas it is participation with an aesthetic imagination which is therefore according to his dichotomous understanding of art and ethics, unethical. Thus, Robbins argues that it is the most significant term which makes aesthetics and ethics incompatible in Levinas's work. For Levinas 'participation' is to be associated with what he describes as a 'primitive' and automatic way of thinking which is incompatible with ethical thinking. Levinas uses the term 'participation' to describe the idea or action of not respecting the

³² Levinas quoted in Eaglestone, 1997, p.104

³³ See Levinas, 2011, p.61

³⁴ See Levinas, 2011, p.55

Other as an absolute Other. In *Totality and Infinity* it is a 'break' from ethics. This also explains Levinas's reliance, in his description of the *il y a*, on Lévy-Bruhl's account of mystical participation in primitive societies. Like the *il y a*, primitive mysticism takes place before all Revelation, before the light comes.³⁵ It is allied with death and impersonal existence.³⁶

Contrary to Robbins, as we have seen above, this concept of the *il y a* is exactly how, in a more radical (or a more positive) reading of Levinas, there is a conjunction of the aesthetic with the ethical. In aesthetics, if one can embrace this 'pre-logical' structure as a way of re-addressing one's identity or subjectivity in a way that is non-totalising, in that it doesn't dominate existence, then one can (in Levinas's terms) approach the impersonal 'god' which is in the universality of existence. How is this possible in a concrete example?

Australian Indigenous art

Can this so-called Levinasian approach or what I have called a 'Levinasian framework' be used as the rationale for approaching artworks of any sort? From an interpretation of the literature presented here I will analyse some approaches to understanding the relationship between Levinas's ethics and his aesthetics. Again, we would be doing violence to Levinas's thought if we developed a total scheme or system based on his thought. That is, this could be a way, not the only way of thinking about aesthetics. One way of illustrating this approach is with a non-European art practice such as Australian Indigenous artworks.³⁷ That is, to provide a certain contrast it may be fruitful to consider an artwork situated outside the European pre-Modernism/Modernism/Post-Modernism/(Post-Conceptual?) canon.

One thing perhaps all Indigenous works have in common with Levinas's ethics is that they are both born out of an historical trauma. For Levinas it was the Holocaust, for indigenous Australians it is the colonisation of the 'Country' by Europeans. As Elizabeth Burns Coleman³⁸ points out the relationship of Western audiences to Indigenous art is intrinsically

³⁵ See Levinas, 2011, p.56

³⁶ See Levinas, 2011, p.61

³⁷ See for example the image on page 43. I do not wish to generalize about Indigenous art as it is too a broad an area. For the purposes of illustration and being mindful that a full exposition of the relation between Indigenous art and ethics would be a complex undertaking I will limit my discussion to this single work but I believe it is applicable to similar works.

³⁸ Appreciating "Traditional" Aboriginal Painting Aesthetically, Elizabeth Burns Coleman, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Summer, 2004), pp.235-247

linked to the history of colonialism and the work of indigenous people is framed by post-colonial politics. What I understand by Country here, is not only the geographical location, but also the metaphysics, ontology and social culture of the Indigenous people. Examining Australian Indigenous art can be thought of as the Self/Other relation but on a macro scale. Australian Indigenous culture has been colonised and absorbed by a Western culture that has not respected it as Other, so to approach these artworks in a Levinasian way perhaps parallels the notion of 'I am an Other' (Je est un autre), the idea of substitution, where I stand in for the Other which is in effect a retuning or refocusing of my identity or subjectivity. It is not a matter of the 'I' judging but of reassessing what constitutes the 'I'-the coherent identity.



Yikartu Bumba Manyjilyjarra born (1940s)

Jakayu Biljabu Manyjilyjarra born (c. 1937)

Nyanjilpayi Nancy Chapman Manyjilyjarra born (c. 1941)

May Chapman Manyjilyjarra born (1940s)

Doreen Chapman Manyjilyjarra born (1970s)

Linda James Manyjilyjarra born 1984

Mulyatingki Marney Manyjilyjarra born 1941

Reena Roger Manyjilyjarra born (1950s)

Beatrice Simpson Manyjilyjarra born (c. 1966)

Ronelle Simpson Manyjilyjarra born 1988

Muntararr Rosie Williams Manyjilyjarra born (c. 1943)

Ngayarta Kujarra, 2009

So how do we approach this Indigenous artwork in an ethical manner? If we look at an artwork such as this work above there are at least three possible ways to engage:

We can see it in terms of 'aesthetics' in a Western subjectivist (Kantian) sense of judging its quality of beauty but what standard do we use? The obvious danger is that it is seen as 'like' a Western painting, therefore negating its Otherness. It is an approach where there is, as claimed above, an annihilation of things in their singularity and replacement with concepts. This would be to colonise it by absorbing it into an alternative tradition. This comparison is common and as Judith Ryan³⁹ points out it absorbs Indigenous art into a European aesthetic, which at the same time colonises but also validates it. It gives it value but not as itself. One just has to see the example of Emily Kame Kngwarreye⁴⁰ whose work has become famous as it has to a large extent been viewed through the lens of movements in Western Modernist culture.

Alternatively often Indigenous art is approached in an anthropological way – the thinking is that the image is composed of pictographs and once these are unlocked, like some sort of secret code, the image will then be comprehensible. Levinas would describe this as symptomatic of the ontological approach where we want to know and understand everything. We can do this only through concepts that miss the individuality of the artwork (or individual). Again, 'Understanding' in this way can be a type of absorption or negating of the Other.

So how do I relate to something from within a Levinasian ethical framework? The dilemma is that sometimes we must engage in some way but how do we engage ethically? Perhaps it is in an attitude of accepting the 'alterity', the Otherness and of being open to the, what Levinas would call, the *infinity* that may constitute an ethical engagement. The previous approaches use the values of Western art (and hence philosophy) as the criteria of whether something is 'good' (or valuable) which means it is not being seen as Other or as itself but as an extension of the Same. This parallels (or as mentioned above – anticipates) an ethical

³⁹ Judith Ryan, p.24 *haitioca*

⁴⁰ Some information can be found at <http://www.emilymuseum.com.au/>

blind spot where one is not being responsible for the artwork presented. In the same way that I regard the Other as another me rather than as an absolute Other, I am deaf to the command. Or put in another way in terms from the later Levinas, I am taking in the artwork as *the Said* rather than listening or being commanded by *the Saying* because only in this way would we glimpse the *infinite*. Approaching art in this way, the ethical dimension of art lies in not just what it says about alterity but that it opens us to the fact of alterity. So perhaps a Levinasian ethical approach would be to approach an artwork without totalising it, limiting it, absorbing it, creating a version of the Same and not respecting it as Other.

Chapter 4 – conclusion

The earlier works of Levinas do seem to set up an opposition between art and ethics. One reason for this may be that he was determined, in opposition to Heidegger's project to institute 'ontology as first philosophy', to install 'ethics as first philosophy' and so everything else was subordinated to that aim. In addition to this one cannot, of course, disregard the enormous impact of the Holocaust on Levinas and how this influenced his search for a way of understanding the foundations of violence between people. What was crucial for Levinas's thinking was the relationship to the human other.

His results of that research uncovered ways of thinking (Liberalism, and Hitlerism) which he believed inevitably lead to violent confrontation. Therefore, a radical rethinking of what it is to be human where an egoistic model of subjectivity was overturned by the idea of responsibility for the Other. Levinas's continual quest was to reorient ethics as something which undermines traditional ontology; a notion of subjectivity where it is not 'I' who chooses to be ethical but ethics which constitutes the 'I'. Thus, Levinas is not creating a system of moral conduct but is enquiring into the nature of ethics and subjectivity itself. Whilst Levinas was heavily influenced by Heidegger's thinking in *Being and Time*, he needed to re-establish a sense of ethical subjectivity which he believed was lost in the notion of human being as *Dasein* but, crucially, without also re-establishing the Kantian 'Rational being' – the abstracted idea of human being as a rational agent divided by reason and emotion.

The basis of Levinas's ethics is responsibility which he describes as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. Thus, it is not an attribute of subjectivity but responsibility is actually constitutive of identity. It is here that his notion of the *il y a* is encountered and is a starting point of his ethical critique of metaphysics and ontology. What makes Levinas's concept of the *il y a* so crucial is that he says it precipitates the formation of the subject. Art is used by Levinas as a way of demonstrating what he deems as 'the horror' of the *il y a*: an existence without existents. This is therefore the other of ethics as ethics is the responsibility of the ethical subject. In this schema then art must be an irresponsibility because it panders to the egotism of the self and takes us to the non-truth of being. Ethics for Levinas is concerned with social interaction so if art was concerned with the social, that

is with being responsible for the Other, being open to the Other, then it would be ethical in Levinas's sense. Art though for Levinas does not do this because of how it is interpreted.

Levinas's dissatisfaction with the two 'poles' or approaches to aesthetics, the ontological approach of which Heidegger was representative and a post-Kantian experience of the was because both were neglectful of his fundamental concept of the Other. That is, one could argue they were both primarily subjectivist and so in his terms were a continuation of the traditional philosophy of the Same.

There is a diversity of views amongst commentators; some describe Levinas's ethics and his views on art as contradictory, others claim that there is an incompatibility, or, merely that his aesthetics are peripheral to his thinking on ethics. There are some, though, who argue that his thinking on aesthetics is fundamental to his conception of ethics. That is, even though he seems to denounce art as unethical, his reflections upon art actually allow an understanding of his thought on ethics with considerably more depth. For some commentators the significance is that his aesthetics is the foundation of his ethics. Those commentators such as Bruns and McDonald who have a radical interpretation of Levinas rethink the *il y a* as the possibility of the ethical instantiation of aesthetics. Eaglestone and Bruns also state that the problem of art for Levinas was actually a problem of representation. Once representation – language-is re-conceptualised in *Otherwise than Being as the Saying* and *the Said* then this new schema can be used to show how art, understood as a type of *the Saying* can be ethical.

If this is so, we can perhaps use a Levinasian ethical framework to discuss aesthetics. I used Australian Indigenous art as an illustration to highlight how we could approach art in an ethical manner. Levinas gave us an ethical framework in which to discuss artwork from an 'alien' culture but may also be applicable to any artwork.

If the commentators such as McDonald, Eaglestone or Bruns are correct, then aesthetics as an integral part of Levinas's ethics is important for aesthetics and its relationship to ethics. This then can have important implications for both fields as it can strengthen the idea of an aesthetic and ethical subjectivity – the subject as a being in an aesthetic sense but also in an ethical sense. But what does that involve? It is a particular understanding of time and subjectivity and therefore one's relation to the 'not-me'. It is a relation with the radical

Other. How can art relate to this? Because, if these interpretations are correct, then art might be conceived as having a similar openness which is a non-totalizing viewpoint, an openness to the infinite – whether termed as Levinas says ‘God’ or *autrui*. It is ‘being aesthetic’ as a way of being in the world – a way of transcendence in Levinas’s terms. Blanchot describes this as a region... “in which subjectivity no longer presides over things from a standpoint or perspective of the whole, certainly not from the perspective of ownership or conceptual possession.”⁴¹

This project in the end, besides engaging in some issues in Levinasian scholarship, seeks to develop a framework to examine the question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics and to demonstrate how aesthetics can be interpreted as a way of transcendence.

What Levinas reminds us of is that: “the relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, with sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place... The relation with the other is a relationship with a Mystery.” (Levinas, 1987, p.43)

⁴¹ Bruns, 2008, p.223 (see also footnote 22 where Blanchot says: “The words *exodus* and *exile* indicate a positive relation with exteriority, whose exigency invites us not to be content with what is proper to us (that is, to our power to assimilate everything, to bring everything back to our ‘I’ ”)

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