LEVINAS AND THE AESTHETIC AS GIVEN

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There are few places where Levinas gives a phenomenological account of aesthetic experience. In a 1948 article entitled "Reality and its Shadow," he does offer criticism of what he calls "artistic idolatry" by way of a phenomenological analysis. However, this criticism is not a complete treatment of what will be called here the aesthetic moment. When one examines aesthetic experience more closely one finds that it is given in a way that does not seem to fit squarely with Levinas' ontology of the Same and the Other. It is the purpose of this paper to offer a tentative phenomenological analysis of the aesthetic moment and to examine how this buttresses with the ontology of *Totality and Infinity.*

We may begin by noting that the aesthetic moment is not given in the same way as with other quotidian experiences such as grocery shopping or paying bills. For example, although one can experience a poem in the same way that one experiences a greeting card by merely reading it and moving on without registering anything in particular about the experience, an aesthetic moment has the possibility of motivating one to change one's life in a way that the everyday encounter with objects does not. Yet, the aesthetic moment is not given in the same manner that, in Levinas' account, the Other is. The aesthetic experience falls somewhere between the two. It is this middle ground of experience that will be considered as an aesthetic moment.

A work of art, a painting or a poem, for instance, does not give itself in the same manner that a rock or a hammer discloses itself. A work of art is not merely an object. It implicates the viewer as a participant in something more. One is called to a work of art. As objects, artworks are within a world. Even though one can know some object of aesthetic experience in the same manner that one knows his or her surroundings, the work of art is not entirely possessed by an individual in this way. Art has a unique ability to take objects that belong to the world in a particular way and bring them to our attention. In extracting them from the world, the aesthetic experience is partly composed by an artwork's ability to remove a thing from a subject and re-appropriate it another way. Levinas notes, "[a] painting, a statue, a book are objects of *our* world, but through them the things represented are extracted from our world" (*EE* 46). This is another way of expressing that the work of art is in some sense the image of an object, but it points to something else as well. Though the statue does, in a sense, extract the thing, an athlete, for instance, from "our" world, it also immediately returns something else. It is not as though we chase after a lost athlete by way of the statue. Rather, we encounter the statue as importing something new to the world. At least two separate operations are occurring here. On the one hand the experiencer in an aesthetic moment is experiencing some work of art in the same way that other objects are experienced. The viewer of a statue is approaching the composition with a background of experience that informs him or her about the work in some way. Previous experiences with statues are culminating in a particular moment and these dictate, to some extent, the experience that he or she is having. On the other hand, however, the experiencer also finds that the objects that he or she knew going into the aesthetic moment have been ripped from their original context and given back in an entirely different way. Levinas writes:

> Even the most realistic art gives this character of *alterity* to the objects represented which are nonetheless part of our world. It presents them to us as nakedness, that real nakedness which is not the absence of clothing, but we might say the absence of forms, that is, that nontransmutation of our exteriority into inwardness, which forms realize. (*EE* 46)

The experience of a work of art is that it maintains its alterity despite the experiencer. One finds that the representation provides an insight into a perceived or potential reality rather than concealing it. It is possible that a work parts ways from what is considered "realistic" and, yet, still offers this experience. Take, for example, Picasso's "La Guernica." The composition goes beyond the enumeration of events to convey a sense of loss and anguish that is not limited to a list of facts about the war. It is not one's knowledge that the subject of the painting is the bombing of a small Spanish town that provides the grounds for experiencing it as a painting of war. Instead, it is in experiencing the painting as it could be *any* town that is horrific. "La Guernica" calls to the viewer not merely as a historical monument, but as a scene that transcends historical context.

At the same time, a sense of context is pertinent to the experience of a work of art. American art students do not experience "La Guernica" in the same way the Spanish did in 1937. Rather, a new context and appreciation is brought that offers different insight and will, necessarily, bring a different encounter to the participant in some aesthetic experience. This tells of the diversity of experiences one can have from a work of art. Perhaps one feels nothing; perhaps one changes one's life. Meaning, while provided by the experiencer, can be changed by the work of art. This gives it a peculiar sense of agency that is not experienced in the everyday disclosure of objects.

Art also has the ability to speak to the experiencer as a guide. For example, in his poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Rainer Maria Rilke seems to be experiencing some kind of life-changing call while viewing an ostensibly damaged statue. The poem ends with, "for there's not one spot— that doesn't see you. You must change your life." The torso of the statue still commands with its eyes, despite the complete lack of a head. To experience compulsion from what may otherwise be considered a block of marble points to an experience that goes beyond that of the everyday disclosure of objects. We can feel compelled by a work of art in a way that is not brought merely by introspection. Rather, it is the result of an encounter that lies, in a sense, beyond any individual's control. The aesthetic moment is marked by a certain lack of volition on the part of the experiencer that tells, again, of the peculiar agency that a work of art can possess.

Now one might wish to resist this account of aesthetic experience. One could certainly contend that the work of art is an object that is disclosed like any other object. The subject only has to learn the language, as it were, of art. By this, I mean that one could argue that a subject only has to learn to appreciate art, to learn the fundamentals of poetry, or to study the great composers in order to be able to *understand* a work of art. An example of this might be a movie's musical score where the audience has been trained in advance to react in certain ways to certain styles of music. Once one has watched even a few horror films, one is never unsure as to when to be anxious while watching a new

film. However, this approach fails to encompass the many different ways in which art speaks to us. This criticism seems to hinge on one's knowledge of some particular art form or another. One would conclude, then, that a lack of knowledge would prevent one from having an aesthetic experience. However, the subject who is not a student of art, but who is nonetheless struck by the form of Bernini's sculpture "Apollo and Daphne" cannot be said to have needed some particular language or skill in order to have an aesthetic moment. It is more appropriate to say that this person's experience is the result of an openness to the aesthetic moment, a willingness to hear when it speaks.

Thus, we find that one of the primary aspects of an aesthetic moment takes its positive form in realizing that it is different from other everyday experiences in virtue of requiring an openness to the moment. In this experience, one is not picking apart a work analytically in order to grasp the meaning. Instead, one is allowing the work to speak, to compel, in its own unique way. One is in a position to be affected in the aesthetic moment precisely by the agency that the work of art seems to employ. It is this agency that structures the aesthetic moment that, in the end, will differentiate the experience of everyday disclosure from aesthetic experience.

To put this into the overall context of Levinas' project, however, becomes a more difficult enterprise. In *Totality and Infinity*, we are given an ontological structure that has two poles. On the one hand, there is the disclosure of the Same. On the other hand, there is the revelation of the Other. In the disclosure of the Same, the subject encounters alien objects and incorporates or subsumes them under categories. In this manner, one develops relations between things and oneself as well as between the objects. These relations are signified in Levinas' term "touch." In touching something the space between one object and another is given. The touch is an action, but also a relation. The touch is the way that the subject knows the components of its world. Touch, in this case, is not limited merely to a tactile definition, but includes the ability to listen, to see, taste, and smell. Our ability to utilize these senses and subsume the alien into categories falls into the phenomenological category of touching. Through the touch, objects are taken, manipulated, and given significance through reference to other objects (*TI* 191). More importantly, the alterity that alien objects have is only a relative alterity. These objects are appropriated by the subject and fitted into his or her world. A hammer has a specific place within one's world precisely because he or she has appropriated it to fulfill that role. This is evident when someone utilizes a rock to perform the same function. The meaning of a particular object in the world is provided by the subject without regard for an "essential" being it might have.

The Other, however, resists this conceptualizing, touching, and grasping in a way that allows him to maintain his alterity. This signifies a radical break in how the experience of the Other is given. Levinas offers an account of the Other's mode of givenness in *Totality and Infinity* with a discussion of the revelation of the face. The face here is not referring to the actual visibility of someone's face. As Levinas notes, vision moves to grasp and this would be reducible to the totality as conceptualized datum. In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas points out that "you turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you describe them. The best

way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes" (*EI* 85)! Vision cannot be a transcendence of the separateness of the I and the Other because it will always apprehend within a horizon. It will set its own limits and will not have access to that which sits beyond everything the subject can grasp (TI 191).

If an object is given to the subject through disclosure, then "the face is present in its refusal to be contained" (TI 191). In touching or grasping something, one contains it, encloses it in a concept. The face of the Other is precisely that which cannot be contained. It will spill over any conceptual boundaries and is, thus, infinite. Levinas continues, "[t]he presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing, the sphere of the same determines its 'status' as infinite" (TI 195). The presence of the Other in the face is that which the subject cannot grasp. In that it cannot be grasped, it must be offered by the Other. Or, to put it another way, if the subject cannot go to it, it must come to the subject. For Levinas, this process necessarily takes the form of revelation: "[t]he revelation of the other, presupposed in all other relations with him, does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse" (TI 197). The face *comes* to me. It is an epiphany.

We can now address the question as to where aesthetic experience should be located within Levinas' philosophy. There are many aspects to an aesthetic moment that would suggest that it falls within the province of the Same. For example, a work of art can be handled and treated as a commodity: one can put a price tag on a work of art. Furthermore, vision renders a painting knowable by conceptualizing it. We do this when we say that a work belongs to this or that school of art. However, there are more important ways in which the Same contributes to the aesthetic moment. The subject must also bring something to the aesthetic moment that opens him or her up to such a moment. One such condition would be having developed an appreciation of the aesthetic or at least a desire for aesthetic experience. By this I mean that if one cultivates a love of poetry, one will create more possibilities for experiencing the aesthetic while reading poetry. This is not to say that a lack of knowledge is an obstacle that must be overcome, but rather it is like saying that if one creates fertile ground for such experiences then one is more likely to have them.

At the same time, there seem to be elements more akin with experiencing the Other within the same experience. In maintaining its alterity, by informing the subject in an aesthetic moment about him or herself, one experiences the aesthetic as other than disclosure. This is not to say that the work of art is given in revelation in precisely the same way as the Other, but rather that there is an agency within the aesthetic moment that is not entirely conditioned by the subject. The aesthetic moment speaks to the subject in a way that the everyday disclosure of objects does not.

So while it does seem to be the case that there is something about the aesthetic experience that must be revealed to the subject, it is also true that the subject must actively participate in the aesthetic moment insofar as one allows oneself to be open to it. For example, if one were to look at a painting by Braque, one might be unimpressed or completely baffled by the Cubist style. Yet, in having a prior knowledge of art history,

one is able to situate a piece and to be able to appreciate it by giving it a context. To introduce an aesthetic context seems to be a matter of experience. So in talking of an aesthetic experience in its givenness, **we** must conclude that it is given in a way that is not quite disclosure and not quite revelation. It is its own mode of givenness that, in its concrete form, is experienced as a bit of both.

The question to be asked then is whether or not this can reasonably be reconciled with Levinas' thought. To begin with, if the radical alterity of the Other is the significant break in Levinas' ontology, is there room for another break that would constitute the concreteness of aesthetic experience? One appears to be pushed to deciding whether one is committed to this third mode of givenness as a structure of experience or whether one prefers to dice up aesthetic experience between revelation and disclosure. It would seem that if one wishes to divvy up the aesthetic moment between the two modes of givenness that Levinas provides, then one is dealing merely with abstractum. On the other hand, to place the aesthetic moment fully on one side of the break that Levinas argues for does not do justice to the experience as it is given. One might argue that to have an aesthetic experience that falls on the revelation side of Levinas' break without any context borders on an unnecessary employment of the mystical to explain what seems to be an otherwise relatively common experience. At the same time, one might be inclined to place an aesthetic moment with Other in order to stress its irreducibility to the disclosure of the Same. Otherwise, all mundane experience would be aesthetic moments, and this does not seem to be the case. There are several key ways in which an aesthetic moment is analogous with, though not identical to, the revelation of the Other. The inexhaustibility of meaning that an aesthetic moment can produce is similar to the Other's inability to be contained or subsumed under a category. In fact, to say "what a painting is about" is in a sense to do violence to it. Alternatively, one could place aesthetic experience entirely in the realm of the Same. Yet, here, the experience lacks the agency that seems to give aesthetic objects their unique quality.

Where one falls on this question further directs the inquiry. If one settles on the existence of the aesthetic as a structure of givenness, one must ask whether this can fit with Levinas' overall project at all. In the context of his project, the radical break between the Other and the Same is what gives primacy to ethics over ontology. It is not immediately clear that his project can account for another mode of givenness. If it is a matter of merely tinkering with the phenomenological structure that Levinas provides or whether serious reformulation of the radical break between the Same and the Other is in question. Depending on one's metaphysical-ontological-ethical sensibilities, these questions can carry a tremendous amount of weight and are worthy of consideration.

In conclusion, if we grant Levinas' distinction between the givenness of mere objects and that of the Other, then we must consider where aesthetic experience falls in this framework. Levinas' account of the aesthetic is lacking and upon revision, it seems to create problems for his project. There is a case to be made for incorporating a third mode of givenness into Levinas' framework; yet, if this is possible, what other structures of givenness can be articulated? As is obvious by now, the purpose of this paper is less concerned with answers than with asking questions. With this in mind, perhaps one can

use the phenomenological tools that Levinas provides to give an account of experience that does not shortchange to the aesthetic nor the Other.

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