

# Silent Earth: Levinasian Environmental Ethics and the Kantian Sublime

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The Gist: This textually oriented paper aims to (1) establish Levinas' concept of the elemental as a potential basis for a specifically Levinasian environmental ethics, (2) identify a structural obstacle to this approach, and (3) offer a preliminary examination of the extent to which Kant's notion of the sublime in nature may be employed as a means of surmounting the obstacle.

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To what *degree* do we own our homes, hammers, dogs? Beyond that line lies wilderness. We probably experience its presence most often in the negative as dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet.

– Don McKay, *Vis à Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry and Wilderness*

Levinas [does not recognize] any imperative imposed on us by nature. The earth, the light, warmth, liquidity, chromatic density, sonority, and the landscapes, ecosystems, oceans, and planetary system do not appear, do not exist, as a phenomenal field constituted by human subjectivity; human subjectivity is an evolutionary part of Earth's ecosystem. The most urgent ethics of responsibility is yet to be elaborated.

- Alphonso Lingis, "The Malice in Good Deeds"

## *Introduction*

Could anything be so other as the human other? What about the earth itself, which precedes and conditions human life? Why claim, as Levinas does, that only an other human – to the exclusion of what is other *than* human – is radically other? In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas tirelessly privileges what he calls the "face" of the other. "It is only man," he insists, "who could be absolutely foreign to me."<sup>1</sup>

I here propose a Levinasian environmental ethics that foregoes the celebrated notion of the "face" and bases itself instead upon Levinas' frequently neglected account of the "elemental" – the "non-possessable," non-human environment that constitutes, contains, and nourishes the human subject (TI 131). I start from a basic agreement with the primary assertion of Levinas' ethical phenomenology: the original force of ethical imperatives must issue from what is radically other than the subject; otherwise, the subject is closed off to genuine responsibility. However, I depart from Levinas by seeking to displace the priority of the human in his concept of radical alterity in order to thereby free this rich concept for a proper extension into

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 73; hereafter, *TI*.

environmental ethics under the form of what I call *elemental alterity* – the impersonal otherness of the earth, the wilderness implicit perhaps even in things. The difference between the alterity of the face and elemental alterity is crucial; it is the difference between the foreign and the wild, between the otherness among humans and the otherness of what is expressly non-human.

While Levinas does not acknowledge the radicality of elemental alterity, I argue that it is nonetheless suggested in his text and may be extracted by means of an immanent critique of *Totality and Infinity*. My central thesis is double: (1) even as the human subject is constituted in and by the elemental (according to Levinas' genetic account of subjectivity in Part II of *Totality and Infinity*), the elemental retains a radical alterity of its own and, further, (2) this elemental alterity is itself of a kind other than – but no less radical than – the alterity of the face. What makes this distinction so important is that it supplies the proper ground for a Levinasian environmental ethics, a topic other writers have pursued, but only on the basis of the face. I argue that the imposition of the face on the environment runs the risk of anthropomorphism and that since the environment raises a distinctly non-human set of ethical questions, the elemental – the very wildness of wilderness – is the only proper domain for a Levinasian environmental ethics. While it is not my aim to reproach Levinas for having neglected the earth – for this was simply not his focus – my primary goal is to expose, clarify, and develop the manner in which a non-human, environmental sort of radical alterity is already silently at work in *Totality and Infinity*.

As we shall see, however, the very argument I will make for the radical alterity of the elemental – which emphasizes the strict non-humanity and deep silence of the elemental – reveals an obstacle to our goal: since the Levinasian ethical imperative is based in language, and since the earth cannot speak, it is not clear whether or how the earth would be able to issue an ethical call. In the final pages of the essay, I shall aim to offer a *preliminary* assessment of the viability of employing Kant's account of the experience of the sublime in nature in the *Critique of Judgment* as a model for thinking about the ethical imperative issued by the elemental. This path is not without its difficulties, but it does show promise.

The work I aim to do in this essay is theoretical and textual. I seek to read and interpret *Totality and Infinity* and the *Critique of Judgment* in order to discover the potential of these texts to refresh our *thinking* about our experience of the natural environment. This essay, therefore, claims to be no more than a preparation for the serious and pressing work being done under the name of environmental ethics.

### *I. Levinas' Phenomenological Ethics Deserves Our Attention*

Let us first ask: Why does Levinas insist upon the privilege of the face? By “face,” Levinas does not mean the phenomenal appearance of the front part of the head. Indeed, the notion of the face is introduced as an expressly ethical counter-example to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, the traditional framework that Levinas' project both inherits and challenges. Very broadly speaking, traditional Husserlian phenomenology claims that the sense of all things – tables and mountains, birds and neighbors – is grasped always *in terms of* a horizon relative to the perceiver-knower. In this way, it tacitly denies meaning to whatever does not appear in such a reductive context. Ethical phenomenology, by contrast, is attuned to the manner in which the face exceeds the phenomenological grasp and introduces something radically other. The face is precisely that aspect of the other person that reveals itself only *in and on its own terms*, disputing and “overflowing” any attempt to contain it in a context (TI 195). *I do not “have an experience”*

of the face; *it expresses itself* – from, by, and for itself. “The eye [of the face] does not shine,” says Levinas, “it speaks” (TI 66). Given its putatively unique power to contest the familiar strategies by which the subject grasps the world, the face of the human other is for Levinas the *original and only* source of any properly ethical response – one whose motivation does not issue from within.

In view of Levinas’ explicit claim that his ethics is reserved for humans, a critic might reasonably wonder at the outset why I should even *consider* trying to extend it beyond the human. A phenomenological ethics based on radical alterity is pertinent and compelling, I argue, because it locates the imperative squarely in the ethical relation itself. Traditional ethical theories – very generally speaking – have typically sought to *mediate* the ethical impulse through universal principles (the Good, God, Reason, etc.) as a way to establish a ground of similarity and kinship between the agent and the other in order to justify ethical responsibility. Yet, although such theoretical considerations are hardly irrelevant, they are seldom if ever what moves us to act. Levinas’ particular achievement, then, is his discovery of what I call an *immediate* ethics, that is, one whose motivating power issues not from a derived sameness, but rather directly from the radical otherness of the other who (or *that*) is already pressing a claim upon me at the level of experience, difficult to define and frequently neglected as this experience may be. In the context of Levinas’ human ethics, this claim shows up in the very singularity of the other person, the revelation of which Levinas named the “face,” but we may also wonder whether and how ethical otherness might show up otherwise.

Given the power of the face to im-mediate ethical response, it is perhaps not surprising that those who are environmentally-minded want to ask whether this power might also motivate responsibilities that reach beyond the human. In the early essay, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, Levinas himself posed a version of this question: “Can things take on a face?”<sup>2</sup> His reply – “the analysis given so far is not enough to give the answer” – was a clear invitation. In response, a few philosophers have made fascinating attempts to find faces in stones, in animals, and even upon the earth.<sup>3</sup> I reject this approach, however, for, as Levinas himself argues, the radical alterity of the face is located in its speech, the acute particularity of which is precisely what commands ethical response (TI 142, 66). Thus, the Levinasian face must always be a human face. What makes my proposal new, then, is not the aim to extend Levinas’ phenomenological ethics beyond the human realm, but the insistence upon doing so on the basis of the elemental. Since the earth does not speak, its ethical pull must precede language. An environmental ethics based on the face could not explain how the earth can command ethical response without being able to express its distress. In short, not only would such an ethics be false to Levinas, but it would also be false to the earth.

The aim in what follows is to employ Levinas’ concepts of radical alterity and the elemental to adumbrate an immediate ethics of the environment, that is, not a justification for responsibility (which so many traditional theories seek), but rather a phenomenological account of how we might find ourselves *already* moved to respond.

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. A. Perperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 10.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Edward Casey’s “Taking a Glance at the Environment: Prolegomena to an Ethics of the Environment” in *Research in Phenomenology* 31 (2001), pp. 1-21; Christian Diehm’s “Facing Nature: Levinas Beyond the Human” in *Philosophy Today* 44, No. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 51-9.

## II. *An Immanent Critique of Part II of Totality and Infinity*

We may now begin our effort to establish the elemental as a basis for a Levinasian environmental ethics. In order to do so, we need first to show that, on the strength of Levinas' own arguments in *Totality and Infinity*, the elemental must in fact be understood as a radical alterity that, like the face, contests all forms of comprehension and possession. If the elemental can be shown to be such a radical alterity, then there are Levinasian grounds for paying it ethical attention, which was hitherto reserved for the face.

The elemental, which Levinas occasionally refers to as "nature" or as "earth," should not be understood naturalistically as designating the totality of natural entities and systems (TI 157, 142). Rather, as a phenomenological notion, it is to be viewed as a formal concept of the natural environment that includes its relationship to human subjects, problematic as that relationship may be. Indeed, it is in the context of his account of the genesis of subjectivity that Levinas introduces the elemental. In this account, the elemental (in contrast to "earth" or "nature") is literally environmental: it *surrounds* the subject. The subject develops itself, says Levinas, as "interiority," that is, through a "centripetal" movement of "separation" from a primordial immersion in an elemental medium. As the subject makes a home for itself by transforming portions of the elemental medium into its own interior, it is necessarily also treating the rest of the elemental medium as exterior. The subject thus develops itself as an inner core around which a region of the outside is appropriated and oriented – "coiled," as Levinas says (TI 175). In a self-constitutive process Levinas calls "enjoyment" (*jouissance*), the subject "lives from" (*vivre de*) and is supported by the otherness of elemental exteriority; it is "enrooted in what it is not" (TI 143). We might say, then, that the subject is *made of* elemental otherness. Levinas would surely accept this claim – so long as we concede that the alterity of the elemental is "only at first other," that, since it has been transmuted into the "same" (i.e., the subject), it is a relative and not a radical alterity like that revealed by the face of the other person (TI 38). Yet, it is precisely this caveat that I dispute.

*If* "relative alterity" refers to absorbable otherness (i.e. otherness that begins as distinct from the subject but is susceptible to being perceived, comprehended, used, possessed or otherwise incorporated by the subject) and *if* "radical alterity" or "absolute alterity" refers to *un*-absorbable otherness (i.e., otherness that refuses and exceeds every attempt to contain it), *then* the elemental, too, is a radical alterity (see TI 194). My claim: the alterity of the elemental dimension is such that it retains its radicality even as it appears to be transmuted into the same in the course of enjoyment.

How can this be? Enjoyment is, as Levinas says, "a very different intentionality," that is, one that accounts for the *affective* comportment of a corporeal subject sustained by the elements (TI 122, 126). In contrast to the classical Husserlian transcendental ego, the Levinasian subject is more than a representational consciousness to which objects in the world are given as products of sense-bestowal. As embodied, the subject is itself *given to* the material world in which it is immersed – as gills in water, or lungs in air. The intentionality of enjoyment is not a "consciousness of ..." (*conscience de*), but a "living from ..." (*vivre de*).<sup>4</sup> The subject is a "product," Levinas says; it "undergoes influences" (TI 164). Enjoyment is therefore not originally the activity of an interested agent, but an *affectivity*, that is, an intentionality somehow motivated by what is enjoyed. This reversal, as Levinas quietly admits, "affirms [elemental]

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<sup>4</sup> As we recall, the French "de" can mean "of" or "from."

exteriority as non-constituted, prior to all affirmation” (TI 127). As embodied, the subject has *already* been and continues to be constituted in a pre-representational affective relation to the very exteriority it purportedly constitutes transcendently (according to classical phenomenology). It follows that the elemental medium *precedes* the efforts of interiority as a non-constituted “antecedence” (TI 129). Thus, the elemental dimension, says Levinas, “overflows” [*déborde*] every possible representation of it (TI 128). With this reference to “overflowing,” Levinas tellingly slips into the very language he later uses to describe the radicality of *personal* alterity: the face, he says, “refuses to be contained” and “overflows the sphere of the same” (TI 194, 195). Moreover, almost despite himself, he admits that the subject’s enjoyment is limited by “the very strangeness of the earth” (TI 142). The elemental is strange indeed: not only is it independent of subjectivity, but its otherness is two-faced, for it retains its independence even as it is consumed.

The crucial point to recognize at this stage is that, like the face, the elemental must not be understood as a proper phenomenon – for it resists phenomenological accessibility – but rather as what Levinas calls an “enigma” – the non-phenomenon, that which is radically other. In the essay “Enigma and Phenomenon,” Levinas introduces the notion of the enigma – an equivocal, uncontextualizable presentation – as a way to contrast the presentational mode of the face with that of phenomena. There, the enigma, which is set up as the mark of radical alterity *as such*, is described as a “trace,” as “duplicitous,” as “manifesting itself without manifesting itself,” and as having “already withdrawn.”<sup>5</sup> In *Totality and Infinity*, the elemental is described in strikingly similar terms, namely, as something that “already withdraws” and “gives itself while escaping” (TI 141). Furthermore, the elemental, too, has a duplicitous character (Levinas describes it as both “surface” and as “pure depth”), seeming to present us with a side as a thing does, as though it were concealing other sides, and yet lacking the substantiality that would allow it to be stabilized and constituted (as a thing is) in the phenomenological gaze.<sup>6</sup> In short, if the face is radically other, then so is the elemental, for both are enigmata.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 70; hereafter, *EP*.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the strange spatiality of the elemental, see *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 131-142.

<sup>7</sup> Note for Levinasians: In the name of brevity, I refrain from giving a proper explanation of why Levinas’ account of “labor” (in terms of which he continues his quasi-figurative account of the constitution of subjectivity) does not undermine my claim that elemental alterity must be counted as a radical alterity. I hope a few words here will suffice for the moment.

Since, as Levinas says, enjoyment “is not insured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys” – since food doesn’t stick around – the subject’s consequent “insecurity” leads it to take recourse in what Levinas calls “labor” (TI 144). Whereas enjoyment enjoys on the fly, consuming as soon as it receives, labor “takes possession” of the element and “separates its take from immediate enjoyment,” “holding it far from the lips” (TI 159, 161). By saving its take for later in the form of a possession deposited in the “home” (which confers upon it status of a “thing”), labor “masters the future” and “enacts a “withdrawal from the elements,” that is, a interiorizing or “centripetal” counter-withdrawal in response to elemental withdrawal (TI 160, 153). It might seem, then, that labor’s power to secure the future against the elemental’s withdrawal into the past demonstrates that the alterity of the elemental must be relative and not absolute. This is Levinas’ stated position (see TI 73, 141 175).

However, although I do not wish to deny that what labor appropriates must be a relative alterity, I would argue that, on the strength of Levinas’ own analysis, this relative alterity is not the elemental itself. Two points are relevant: (1) As would become clear in an analysis of what Levinas calls the “primordial grasp” of the hand (whose very “destiny” is labor, he says), the moment the elemental is grasped in labor, it releases a thing – a relinquishment akin to the tail the gecko leaves behind – and this is what gets possessed, not the elemental itself (TI 159). After all, the elemental is, as we recall, essentially “non-possessable” unto itself. (2) Labor is no more than a temporary compensatory process which, although it attempts to overcome the withdrawal of the elemental, succeeds only in postponing it (or at least the insecurity to which the withdrawal gives rise). “The stirring of the elemental,” admits

### III. A Typology of Radical Alterity

By now I hope to have established the first half of my central thesis: that the elemental qualifies as an instance of radical alterity and, hence, Levinas is wrong in his insistence that only another human can be radically other. Next I shall attempt to argue the remaining half: the modalities in which the face and the elemental resist phenomenological accessibility are essentially distinct. I will frame this claim as a (partial and tentative) typology of alterity: 1) relative alterity and 2) radical alterity, within which I distinguish i) human alterity and ii) elemental alterity.

On the one hand, we have the phenomenon (e.g., a thing), an intentional object of the constituting subjectivity. A phenomenon presents itself in a luminous horizon wherein it is profiled and given meaning with reference to other objects and relative to the constituting consciousness. As such, the otherness of the phenomenon is relative. On the other hand, there is the non-phenomenon – the enigma – which does not appear in the horizon of presence, but rather disturbs it, for it is not something of which we can *have* a proper experience. “Having an experience” suggests both presence and possession, but the enigma spurns these.<sup>8</sup>

The main point here is that there is further differentiation under “enigma,” namely, that elemental alterity represents not simply another *instance* of radical alterity, but in fact carves out an *other type*. This differentiation is founded on two related grounds (which I only sketch here):

(1) *Primordality*. Whereas human alterity issues from the foreignness of another subject, the elemental – insofar as it precedes individual existents and indeed the very opposition between interiority and exteriority – is *primordial* alterity. Allow me to briefly explain. The elemental, says Levinas, is not a “something”; it is insubstantial, a “quality without support” (TI 137). In its groundless depth, it arises not from a horizon (as a thing does) but from a “nowhere” (*non-lieu*) that Levinas calls the “*il y a*” – the “there is,” the “very fact”<sup>9</sup> of materiality – an anonymous but inextinguishable pure there-ness whose mode of presentation occurs at the very edge of sensibility, the (non-) experience of which Levinas compares to the thick murmuring seemingly harbored in darkness, in the absence of light and form (TI 132). As the material minimum of existence – as the “positive nothingness” that would remain even in the total absence of existents (human subjects), the darkside of the luminous phenomenological horizon – the *il y a* is the lower limit of elemental depth (TI 200). In its relation to the *il y a*, the non-ground (*abgrund*) that permits the elemental’s evasion of every determination but which prohibits it from slipping into total absence, the elemental arises as an existence that precedes all individual existents. However radical human alterity may be, it issues always from another subject; in its relation to the *il y a*, the elemental is the other of subjectivity itself, and it is for this reason that I call it a *primordial* alterity.

(2) *Silence*. While the face is “where precisely an *existent* presents itself *personally*,” the elemental gives an *impersonal* presentation that emerges from the nowhere of sheer *existence* (TI 142). Whereas the alterity of the face lies in the utter *singularity* of its speech (which Levinas

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Levinas, is “uncontrollable” (TI 160). Thus, the centripetal movement of possession and domestication is not irreversible; it is continually menaced by the tendency of the elemental for *centrifugal* recession.

<sup>8</sup> Much more could be said about the peculiar sense in which enigmata are absent, and about the a-present temporality of their non-presence: at the very “moment” the enigma is encountered, not only is it already past, but it is past without ever having been present.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 51.

associates with what he calls the “infinite”), the alterity of the elemental lies in the *indeterminacy* of its dark materiality (which Levinas associates with the *il y a*, “positive nothingness”) (TI 200). The face reveals precisely and only itself and thus frustrates comprehension by the intensity of its singularity – by its blinding determinacy, so to speak – as a direct encounter with the sun overwhelms the eye and destroys both the visual horizon and its own presentation. However, what makes the elemental elusive is the compounding depth of its dark indeterminacy, an entropic expanse that precludes the possibility of the elemental presenting “itself” – personally and in speech – in the way the face does. Showing neither face nor facet, the elemental withdraws from determinacy altogether and into “an ever-new depth of absence” (TI 142). Simply put, the elemental is *silent*, for it does not “present itself.” Whereas the singularity of the face consists in the uniqueness and unparaphrasability of its self-expression, the elemental, as impersonal, is speechless, making no sound other than the “silent rustling” of its withdrawal. It exists, as Levinas tangentially admits, “without revealing itself, outside of being and world” (TI 142). (Perhaps we could say that the dark materiality of the elemental designates the absolute outside of language.)

#### IV. *An Obstacle: Does Elemental Alterity Issue an Ethical Call?*

Considering that elemental alterity constitutes another *type* of radical alterity, distinguished by its priority over subjectivity and its inability to be revealed in speech, it could easily seem that any Levinasian environmental ethics would be stillborn. After all, how could one *hear* the rustling of silence? From where would the call issue? That is, how could the earth itself command ethical response without being able to express its distress? The silence of the earth is a major concern for environmental thinking; it likely accounts, at least in part, for why humans have found it so easy to dam a river or to clear-cut an entire virgin stand. How do we encounter and respond to an alterity that does not speak, whose ethical pull – it seems – would have to precede language?

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to consider one possible avenue for addressing these serious questions: Kant’s notion of the sublime in nature in the *Critique of Judgment*. Not only does Kant’s description of our complicated perceptual relation to the sublime mirror Levinas’ description of the elemental, but it also suggests a model by means of which elemental alterity might be understood as expressing an *aesthetic* imperative, that is, a sensible presentation that has the power to *move* the subject. The experience of the sublime is able to so move the subject, I argue, without language, without having to say a single word.

Kant’s notion of the sublime in nature points to those experiences in which the natural world presents itself as so great as to surpass our abilities to secure a comprehensive view and to thereby inspire in us an attitude of astonishment, wonder, and respect. For Kant, the feeling of the sublime arises in two modalities. We experience the *mathematical sublime* when the imagination – the faculty by means of which, for Kant, the mind synthesizes sensuous intuitions – is confronted with a vast *magnitude* (paradigmatically occurring in nature, but secondarily in architecture) and attempts but fails to form an “aesthetic estimation” of its magnitude, that is, to unify its component parts in a single sense intuition.<sup>10</sup> We experience the *dynamic sublime*, on the other hand, when we encounter the great *might* of nature in contrast to which our own physical powers are dwarfed.

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W.S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 251; hereafter, *CJ*.

Thus, in both cases, suggests Kant, the experience of the sublime involves a confrontation with a certain formlessness or “unboundedness” attributed to the sublime object, owing either to our inability to perceive the enormity of its size (e.g., a towering cliff) or to its appearance as sheer force (e.g., a raging storm); it is in its “chaos,” he says, “that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime” (CJ 245, 246). In his analysis of both beauty and the sublime, Kant is concerned with aesthetic judgments, namely, those judgments that are based upon the feeling of pleasure or displeasure rather than upon any concept of the object at issue. In contrast to natural beauty, which “carries with it a purposiveness in its form, by which the object seems as it were predetermined for our power of [aesthetic] judgment” (i.e., predetermined to appear to us as being, in its form, just right), the “contrapurposive” sublime frustrates our powers. Kant says:

If something arouses in us, merely in apprehension and without any reasoning on our part, a feeling of the sublime, then it may indeed appear in its form [or lack thereof] contrapurposive for our power of judgment, incommensurate with our power of exhibition, and as it were violent to our imagination, and yet we judge it all the more sublime for that. (CJ 245)

#### V. *Affinities Between the Elemental and the Sublime*

Despite the great differences in both timbre and terminology between Levinas and Kant, there appear prima facie to be at least three affinities between Levinas’ description of the elemental and Kant’s account of the sublime in nature.

(1) To begin with, as we have suggested, neither mathematical nor dynamic sublime objects afford us a proper experience. Like the Levinasian enigma, the sublime object is an equivocation: it imposes itself upon us, but (since it is characteristically unbounded and indeterminate) without our being able to fully comprehend it (in the mathematical case) or master it (in the dynamical case). To encounter the sublime is to be taunted. Moreover, in contrast to our experience of beauty, which “induces calm and restful contemplation,” says Kant, the presentation of the sublime is complex, coming to us as a sort of “vibration, ... a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object” (CJ 256). But let us return to this strange vibration, for it involves a point upon which we shall seek to criticize Kant later on.

Moreover, the sublime shares the two features that distinguish the radical alterity of the elemental from that of the face, primordiality and silence.

(2) Like the elemental in its connection to the *il y a* – that groundless minimum of existence that is utterly indifferent to the presence of human subjects and in which all human subjects disappear – the sublime, in its “chaos” and “violence,” entails a crisis of the subject and its powers. Both the elemental and the sublime place the subject on uncertain ground: the elemental in its connection to the “non-lieu” – the non-ground – and the sublime object as an “abyss [*Abgrund*] in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself” (CJ 258).

(3) The experience of the sublime is an “emotion,” a literal being-moved from without (CJ 245). As an aesthetic presentation that “agitates” us by its indeterminacy – by its unboundedness – the sublime object reaches us in utter silence (CJ 258).

Furthermore, in contrast to the positive pleasure of the experience of beauty (so pleasurable says Kant because, although the aesthetic judgment operates without reference to any predetermined

concept, the beautiful object appears as something whose purpose is to be beautiful in just the form in which it appears), the experience of the sublime moves us to feel “not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect,” which Kant refers to as a “negative pleasure” (CJ 245). So, again, the crucial point is that, independently of all subjectivity and language, the sublime in nature has the power to move us to an attitude of respect. For Kant, this is tantamount to the ethical viewpoint: “it is difficult to think of a feeling for the sublime in nature without connecting with it a mental attunement similar to that of moral feeling” (CJ 268). The sublime prepares us for “esteeming” something “even against our interest,” he insists (CJ 267). Have we not here found in the experience of the sublime an instance of the sort of Levinasian immediate ethics we described above in which the ethical imperative is not mediated by any universal principle but is rather located squarely in the our encounter – our non-experience – with radical alterity?

We should note that such an “aesthetic” ethics of the sublime would be distinct from whatever “aesthetic” appreciation we may have of the beauty of nature. Such appreciation would originate in our interests – in our desires for the “restful contemplation” the scenic landscape affords – and would therefore be precluded from the realm of a strict ethics of alterity.

## VI. *Two Objections*

i. Perhaps the most pressing objection to any attempt to use the Kantian sublime in nature as a model for the imperative of Levinasian elemental alterity is that Kant’s account presents the sublime as something produced within the mind and not, as we might expect, as something that exists outside the subject. While Kant admits that “we may quite correctly call a great many natural objects beautiful,” when it comes to the sublime all we are entitled to say about a natural object is that “it is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind . . . for what is sublime, in the popular meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason” (CJ 245). The Kantian sublime, therefore, is not at all radically other, but issues from the very core of the sphere of the same.

Kant’s claim that the sublime is a mental event solves a problem for him, namely, how it is that the experience of the sublime is both pleasurable and not. Whereas the encounter with the great magnitude or great might in nature frustrates our sensory or physical powers and is therefore experienced as “contrapurposive” and thus unpleasant, (Kant takes it to be a fact that) the feeling of the sublime also involves pleasure, which, for Kant, arises when a purpose is achieved or acknowledged. The sublime experience is pleasurable, Kant suggests, because it is purposive not for the imagination but for *reason*, our transcendental or “supersensible” “vocation” and the highest of the faculties Kant attributes to the mind and which, when operating in its pure form, is capable of forming ideas – concepts of objects that cannot be found in the empirical world (CJ 257).

Properly speaking, for Kant, the natural objects we call sublime are but *occasions* for our recognition of the “superiority” of our reason over nature; the purpose they serve is to engender this recognition (CJ 261). That is, the frustration of our sensory or physical powers is but the first pole in the *bipolar* experience of the sublime. This is why Kant describes this experience as a “vibration” between repulsion from and attraction to the putatively sublime object. The repulsion from the sublime object, which we feel as it brings us to the rather unpleasant realization of the inadequacy of our powers, leads us to a compensatory pleasureable feeling of great self-worth

(owing to the presence of reason within us) and, consequently, to a feeling of attraction toward the object. Kant indulges in wordplay to make the point: “nature is called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it elevates [*erhebt*] ... the mind ... even above nature” (CJ 262). Only the mind is properly called sublime. The reason that we are nevertheless so often tempted to speak of nature itself as being sublime is that, by means of what Kant calls the fallacy of “subreption,” we mistakenly attribute sublimity to the external occasion for the internal generation of sublimity (CJ 257).

In the case of the mathematical sublime, wherein the imagination tries and fails to grasp something vast in a single sense intuition, the very fact that we make the attempt shows (according to Kant) that we must *already* have the *idea* of such a vast *totality*, which in turn demonstrates that we are in possession of the faculty of reason. In the case of the dynamic sublime, wherein “the irresistibility of nature’s might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence,” we are also led to recognize that, by virtue of the *freedom* of the rational will that allows us engage in the contemplation of nature, the “mind cannot be subdued by danger” and that we therefore have an “ability to judge ourselves independent of nature ... and ... a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be assailed and endangered by nature outside us” (CJ 261). This realization, says Kant, “keeps the humanity in our person from being degraded” when our physical impotence is made clear to us (CJ 262). In each case, then, the experience of the sublime shows us that, on account of our rational capacities, we are beings who transcend the bounds of finite empirical reality. Thus, if the source and goal of the experience of the sublime is located in the subject itself, it would appear that it could not ground and ethical experience of alterity.

ii. A second objection to the claim that the Kantian sublime could serve as a model of the elemental ethical imperative is that Kant’s examples of the sublime point to Romantic experiences of the dramatic and distant – “massive mountains climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging streams in them,” “pyramids of ice, the gloomy raging sea” – whereas the elemental is something that, like a “bath,” intimately surrounds and constitutes the human subject (CJ 256, 269). How, we might ask, could we expect the sublime to serve as a model for the elemental ethical imperatives issued not from some “out there” but from within a local environment – right here – where they are perhaps most pressing?

## VII. Responses and Conclusion

Let us first respond to the second objection, for it can be addressed quickly. When we speak about using the sublime as a model for the (non-) experience of the elemental imperative, we are interested not in predominant or historical examples of the sublime, but rather in the structure through which it is experienced, for it is the structure of the experience that conditions the respect it engenders in us. Consider the way the sublime initially frustrates our physical and sensory powers. It is the experience of being overwhelmed by that which we cannot take in as a whole in sensation or cannot master by any physical means. Levinas describes the encounter with the elemental in similar terms. Preceding the constitution of the phenomenological horizon, it “overflows” every attempt to contain it in perception or understanding and it ultimately refuses to be dominated even by the powers of human labor. As Levinas acknowledges in his account of labor and possession, the “things” we make from the elemental and claim to own are time-

sensitive. A thing is never a sealed deal, he suggests: “the identity of thing remains unstable and does not close off the return to the element” (TI 140).

In order to address the first objection – that the Kantian sublime is located in the mind of the experiencing subject and therefore could never serve as a model for something radically other – we shall have to allow ourselves to be critical of Kant by rethinking the notion of the sublime and loosening it from the dualistic and anthropocentric assumptions of his transcendental philosophy.

As initial justification for making this critical move, we may point to several dubious features of Kant’s account, which, by his own admission, “seems farfetched” and which, in view of the contrapurposiveness of natural objects encountered as sublime, he himself referred to as a “mere appendix” to his larger project of determining the transcendental conditions for aesthetic and teleological judgment (CJ 262, 246):

(1) Kant’s contrast of our “physical impotence” with the “independence” of the “mind” relies upon an unproven dualist assumption (which, moreover, Levinas the phenomenologist would not grant), and does not prove the superiority of the mind over physical reality.

(2) Kant’s insistence that our initial feeling of powerlessness before the sublime in nature gives way decisively to the revelation of the superiority of our faculty of reason is inconsistent with his own description of the experience of the sublime as a “rapid alternation” between repulsion from and attraction to the sublime object – i.e., an unresolved vibration, and not a strict progression from repulsion to attraction.

(3) Kant’s claim that natural beauty can be rightly attributed to objects while the sublime cannot be so attributed appears ungrounded and appears to reflect only Kant’s contrived need to explain why, despite the unpleasant recognition of our sensory and physical limitations the sublime originally produces in the subject, the sublime must also be understood as pleasurable and purposive.

(4) Kant tellingly refers to nature’s might as “irresistible” and, despite his keen awareness of the fallacy of subreption, finds himself unable to resist offering several descriptions of nature as paradigmatically sublime. When explicating the dynamical sublime, for example, he asks us to

consider the bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean all heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river. (CJ 261)

So, rather than viewing the perceptually and physically disempowering encounter with sublime nature as a reminder of our putative intellectual and spiritual superiority over nature, might we not instead allow ourselves to feel our *entire* subjectivity overwhelmed and exceeded by the great magnitude and might of nature? We do in fact ordinarily experience the natural world in this way and, when we quite naturally announce to others that we feel “blown away” by certain encounters or that we find them to be “breathtaking,” we do not then rush to retract these statements in order to reassert our dominant position. Does Kant’s eagerness to skim over the experience of the greatness of nature in favor of compensatory feelings of human superiority not in fact betray his implicit recognition of this power? Rather than being concerned to “keep the

humanity in our own person from being degraded” by nature’s power, as Kant suggests, why not instead allow ourselves to feel the openness in our humanity to the environment, to that that which surrounds us completely but which nevertheless remains radically other to us? With his focus on determining the mind’s *reaction* to the encounter with the natural sublime, Kant seems to neglect the import of his own point that this encounter is in the first instance a question of emotion, of being moved from without. The natural sublime throws the first punch. *It* hits us. Lacking the means to take a measure of its magnitude or to contend with its might, we feel wonder and are filled with respect.

My intention here is not to argue (contra Kant) that since the sublime cannot be understood simply as a mental event, it must therefore be located in nature. Such a move would simply shift us to the other side of Kant’s dualism. I would like to propose, rather, that we focus on our experience of the sublime in nature and think of it as a model for our (non-) experience of the elemental imperative. In other words: abiding Kant’s claim that the encounter with the sublime in nature is a type of occasion, I am proposing that we rethink just *for what* it is an occasion.

The sublime is not, I have argued, an occasion for our feeling a compensatory swell of anthropocentric superiority. Might we not instead view it as an occasion for an experience of our radical openness and vulnerability to that which is other than us as humans, to our being given to relation to the elemental earth not merely as the nurturing medium of human life but as something radically other – a relation which issues in our being moved in and through this relation to an attitude of respect? Such respect is no doubt insufficient for an environmental ethic, but until we can find a way to feel moved to respect without having to resort to finding a rationale for why we ought to feel respect, no such ethic can hope to get off the ground.

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