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## THE EROTIC/AESTHETIC QUALITY SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEVINAS'S ETHICAL AN-ARCHAEOLOGY

### ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the place and the role of the aesthetic quality and the role of the erotic in Levinas's project that deals with ethical an-archaeology. Despite Levinas's categorical statements that there are irreconcilable differences between ethics and aesthetics, i.e. between ethics and the erotic, above all, it is emphasized here that these differences do not represent a stark or sharp contrast, but quite contrary, they often constitute a subversive ontological element. On the other hand, somewhat unexpectedly, with its ethical anti-aestheticism Levinas's "noncontemporary" thought appears to be, at the same time, both significant and critical, elementary, emancipatory and contemporary in relation to present-day reactionary reactualization and revitalization of the aesthetic quality which mechanically proceeds to develop on the margins of Levinas's emancipatory past.

### KEYWORDS

the erotic, aesthetics, phenomenology, ontology, ethics, an-archaeology

### Introduction

Discussing the role of the *aesthetic quality* in Levinas's ethical project is particularly intriguing for two reasons. First, the aesthetic quality has to be determined by ethical reasons and has to develop primarily on the horizon of contemporary and yet archaic thought which *openly and directly opposes any aestheticism*. Second, in the spirit of some kind of modern artistic avant-garde, this contemporary and yet archaic thought accuses the aesthetic quality of being immoral and of corrupting the truth. So, insisting on alternative, ethical humanism, at the same time, shows paradoxically all the weaknesses already expressed by *revolutionary artistic trans-aesthetic avant-garde* that, with its radical and modern anti-aestheticism, fails to distance itself from the significant influence of the aesthetic quality. This alternative ethical humanism could be seen as increasingly important in context of modern and *humanistic anti-aestheticism* (which is known to have been defeated in the meantime and to have been subject to ideological aesthetics), manifesting itself as a rigid, non-dialectical and insufficiently reflective thinking which readily makes a pact with pre-modern traditions. On the other hand, Levinas's "non-contemporary" thought with its ethical anti-aestheticism, at the same time, somewhat

unexpectedly, imposes itself as something that can still be considered significantly critical, elementary, emancipatory and modern. It can also be seen as something that is in an abstract and general sense opposed to the present-day ideological and reactionary aesthetics of repetitive mimetism. In general context which is increasingly burdened with profound class differences and differences in material circumstances, the orientation towards the aesthetic quality is thought to be an essential part of a systematic ideology which uses the aesthetic quality for its manipulations and turns it into its instrument used to deviate from the truth and from the beauty that even the ancient Greeks associated with the truth and with a meaningful existence. Therefore, in an attempt to oppose that ideology, one welcomes any thought that is skeptical in relation to the existing unrestrained and irrational power of the aesthetic quality and that is very much interested in strengthening and developing the potential of universal reason, even if that thought is old-fashioned and conceived with precocity just like Levinas's thought partly is.

### The Erotic, Aesthetics and Ethics

In pursuit of pure, sovereign and non-ontological *ethics*, Levinas's thought refuses to be intertwined with any form of thought or judgement which belongs to *ontology*. According to this philosopher, *aesthetics* occupies a key position since it immediately and directly points to the horizon of being: to the way it emerges, appears, reveals and manifests itself, and overall to the material world that witnesses the birth of being and to the way in which that being reveals and shows itself. Therefore, the author became distrustful of *phenomenology* although he felt its strong presence during his formative years and he cannot escape its influence since phenomenology always speaks about everything that constitutes the very excellence of being. Phenomenology is always interested in what is, in some way, the most essential part of being. *Aesthetics* and *phenomenology* are naturally interdependent and lead directly to *ontology* since they formed and developed in its shadow. After all, it is no coincidence that in the modern phenomenological tradition that dates back to Husserl's school of thought, the *aesthetic dimension* soon became the basic field of phenomenological research and phenomenology acquired its inevitable *aesthetic trait*.

However, as far as methodology and subject-matter are concerned, Levinas's thought forms an alliance with phenomenology and aesthetics despite the fact that Levinas reaches for highly unusual means and solutions with the aim of developing one single ethics which is at the same time both *non-phenomenological* and *trans-phenomenological*, i.e. both *anti-aesthetic* and *trans-aesthetic*. If one looks at it closely and if one is at liberty to say that, Levinas's thought never denied their dominant presence at any stage of its development. Levinas always keeps to a phenomenological method of analysis and in the subject field he pays attention to those subjects and topics that dwell on the edges of phenomenological experience and that were studied by phenomenology. Suffice it to say that the question of the Other, as one of the central and fundamental

themes of his philosophy, exists as an essential theme in Husserl's opus and as such it directly influenced Levinas's specific view on alterity. As far as aesthetics and the aesthetic quality are concerned, it is known that Levinas's thought was very much influenced by *art* and *literature* in particular. On numerous occasions, Levinas himself emphasized that literature had revealed to him the possibility to arrive at a *special ethical meaning* which stood in total contrast to an ontological one (Levinas 1982: 16–17). In his various works, he openly and directly refers to the way art points to *personal ethics* and to the way in which personal ethics becomes part of art.<sup>1</sup>

Levinas is simply convinced that the aesthetic dimension of art at the same time conceals and reveals its ethical meaning<sup>2</sup>. One regrets his inability to perceive in the realm of beauty the meaning that surpasses its purely aesthetic horizon just like one regrets his complete disregard of nature and everything that remains on the outside in relation to man and his world and that equally or even more shows the signs of a certain *transcendence*. Being fascinated by the importance he attaches to interpersonal relations, he remains blind to everything that transcends man and everything that critically influences man's destiny. His humanism, begins to take shape of Nietzschean diagnosis that says "human, too human" and displays all the weaknesses of the thought which were noticed by Aristotle long time ago when Aristotle claimed that human beings were not by far the most sublime in the universe since celestial bodies surpass man in terms of divine nature. Many thinkers and philosophers called into question and doubted this Levinas's idea and considered it to be unsustainable. Despite the importance attached to human relations, it is, after all, an outdated and obsolete idea that abstract interpersonal relations, deprived of any concrete social quality, can be seen as "the site of transcendence".

However, when one reads Levinas's work first and then discusses aesthetics, one notices that the erotic is not directly linked to aesthetics at the early stages of Levinas's work. Although the link can usually be established between the two since the erotic itself displays some aesthetic elements as much as it is a deliberate variation of raw sexuality and a reflexive and critical deviation from its coarseness embodied in a sexual act. Not only does Levinas fail to establish that direct link, but he also tries hard to distance the erotic from the aesthetic quality because of the ethical meaning of the erotic. Despite the fact that, at first, the aesthetic quality appears to be absent and invisible, it cannot fail to come to the forefront and to come to the surface of the erotic imbued with ethical principles. If it is examined more closely, it can be easily seen that the aesthetic quality shows up in places where *the ethical meaning* of the erotic is being constructed. According to Levinas, woman escapes man and remains

1 When one studies Levinas's works which treat art as a special subject, three works particularly come to mind: *Reality and Its Shadow*, *Proper Names*, *On Obliteration*.

2 The way Levinas interprets the work of Vasily Grossman is well-known just like it is well-known that he often found in Grossman's work the examples which illustrated his concept of personal ethics. See Levinas 1991: 253–264.

distanta the very moment when she seems so close and available to him. That moment marks the beginning of a *game* which is undoubtedly aesthetic in one of its aspects. Even though Levinas does not see it that way, the game of *attraction and repulsion* is certainly aesthetic in every sense of the word. The game is being played here on the margins and its participants are playing with liminal space and its meaning. It is understood that even *belated ethical responsibility* possesses the aesthetic quality as much as it reflects the peculiar forces of attraction and repulsion between I and the Other. It is obvious that the aesthetic quality cannot be cancelled and removed without any trace from one such erotic which has an emphatically ethical structure.

After all, when Levinas develops one extreme and rigid ethical idealism which takes the form of an abstract utopia that categorically opposes the existing reality, he looks at the matter from another angle, seriously running the risk of turning his thought into aesthetics as its polar opposite, or to be more precise into the aesthetic quality, which is the last thing he wants. Without underestimating the significance of other moments of the situation when the aesthetic quality becomes prominent, one can say that his work, designed to assume the form of the already mentioned abstract utopia, is in stark contrast to the existing reality.<sup>3</sup> His work tends to become something highly aesthetical when it comes to a particular *abstraction which is isolated and separated from real trends in the contemporary social reality and from life seen in its entirety and when it comes to a Kantian abstraction that does not deal with the very existence and its problems, but focuses on special characteristics and particular qualities*. There is no doubt that Levinas's work does not deal with the existing social, political and economic problems which are directly related to human existence and which determine and define that existence. His work also does not dwell on the problems of the survival of human race bearing in mind that it is not highly unlikely that humankind and other living beings will disappear from the face of the earth. In addition to that, it should be mentioned that the future of the planet earth is obviously in jeopardy. There are strong indications that in the realm of politics, Levinas's work becomes opportunistic and that it is freely associated with a predominant neo-liberal, neo-imperialistic and capitalistic system and various doubtful regimes as the Zionist regime is.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, his work stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to Fromm's work which is also dedicated to love and which sees love from a rationalistic perspective and talks about its disintegration in contemporary Western society in which the narcissistic form of love prevails.

Therefore, Fromm has every right to state that the principle of capitalism and the principle of love are incompatible (Fromm 1956: 83–107). Symptomatically,

3 One usually talks about *utopia* with reference to the thought of E. Levinas who undoubtedly uses it in many different places. He does it in such a way that it contrasts our own idea of utopia. See the text "Le lieu at l'utopie" in Levinas 1984: 153–159.

4 See "Dialogue sur le penser-à-l'autre" in Levinas 1991: 237–245. Compare with „Etat d'Israël et religion d'Israël“ in Levinas 1984: 323–330.

Levinas work does not take part in the discussions related to ecological, geostrategic and other issues that affect the entire planet and thus his work is limited to certain subjects and has limited importance. When compared to the concept of responsibility that Hans Jonas develops that incorporates other aspects of responsibility besides the ethical aspect, Levinas's understanding of this term seems to be superficial and not fully developed (Jonas 1990). So, if one sticks to the idea that his work is seen as some sort of "abstract utopia that is in stark contrast to the existing reality", one cannot help feeling that his work is easily incorporated into every doctrine which *only* cares about some ethical emphasis and *particular* and *out-of-the-ordinary* aesthetic nuance.

## The Erotic and Ethical Responsibility

At the later stage of his work Levinas somehow overlooks the fact that he himself previously established a close connection between the erotic and ethics. In the meantime, when he draws a sharp line of distinction between the erotic and responsibility, he tends to overestimate the motive of ethical responsibility and the novelty that it could bring and thus he essentially underestimates the erotic and disregards the crucial and important ethical characteristics that he earlier attributed to it. Therefore, a significant dilemma arises whether one such subversive act can be justified and explained especially at the time when *ethical* responsibility is seen in contrast to *ontological* and *aesthetic* aspects of the erotic as it is interpreted at the later stage of Levinas's work.

In his youth Levinas was lucid enough to notice that the erotic and responsibility are interdependent. Even then it was out of the question for Levinas to assume that the erotic could become responsible at a certain moment and at a certain point in context of some development and he immediately and directly treated the erotic as something ethical or more precisely as something fundamentally ethical. If Levinas was even then prudent enough to come to a conclusion that *ethics primarily appeared* in form of the erotic and if he was intelligent enough to see the erotic as a genuine champion of ethical energy, it is strange that he could have given up on the erotic at a later stage in his life when he intended to develop a radical ethical responsibility. It would have made more sense to him if he had connected closely the erotic and responsibility at this very stage, prompted by his previous experiences and his insight into internal connection between ethics and the erotic. He was on his way to become an intermediary between the meaning of the erotic and responsibility and the erotic and ethics and to attain the attitude that says that the erotic and responsibility represent different sides of one and the same behaviour and endeavour, if only he stayed on the path that he had embarked on in his youth when he, without any hesitation and inhibitions, was able to see the significance of *interdependence between ethics and the erotic*. Had he stayed on that path, it would not have been difficult for him to reach the conclusion that responsibility itself was led by the erotic and that it was essentially determined

by the erotic and that it reflected libidinal energy which represented a wide and general energetic potential.

But, it is well-known that Levinas does not appreciate enough either libidinal potential of the erotic or its instinctive nature or its tendency to find pleasure and satisfaction or its power to become a tyrannical force. But, there is that inability of his to see the *development* of the erotic or to recognize the different stages in the development of the erotic which always set it apart. He almost absolutely distrusts the erotic in Plato's work. He finds repulsive that interdependence and intertwining between the erotic, aesthetics and ethics and between the erotic, dialectics and philosophy. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in his anti-dialectic mood he is not able to gain an insight into the fact that at its peak ethics still presents itself as a fundamentally defined aesthetics and the precisely differentiated erotic. In Plato's work, the erotic reaches its peak and becomes genuine at the level of ethics and philosophy. There, it becomes prominent and reveals its true nature. Finally, the opinion that ethics is nothing more than a moment in an internal development of the erotic is not so far from Levinas's idea, particularly from his early idea which never says with certainty that ethics comes before the erotic and that ethics is a generic term which incorporates the erotic and takes precedence over it, but it is legitimate to claim as many commentators do that the erotic is the source of ethics.<sup>5</sup> The *belated anarchic responsibility* represents some kind of *love* as much as it shows that *the erotic comes first*.

It was said here that in an ethical sense this concept of love was formed by a particularly designed concept of *alterity*. This concept of alterity, together with the concept of plurality, asymmetry and transcendence which are constituted in a singular way, helps intersubjectivity to acquire a recognizable and highly unusual non-ontological meaning which points to that responsibility for the Other in contrast to responsibility for oneself.

In addition to that, it should be mentioned that Levinas with his insisting on the concept of the Other, regardless of our interpretation of his concept of the absolute Other and of his own views and despite himself, partly helps us understand the essential importance of the Other in the process of subjectivization and the process of formation of a certain prominent intersubjectivity. Connecting his central ethical concept of the Other with the concept of love that he holds in high regard, Levinas, at the same time, tries to establish the phenomenon of love. It is of crucial importance to do it at the time when the phenomenon of love is replaced by its surrogates such as the aestheticized forms of love. It seems that Levinas can take a great credit for it in view of the fact that his thought does not want to make compromises and to trade in the space of the modern ontological thought. In his own way, Levinas also relentlessly keeps on pointing to the ideological effects of the attempt to aestheticize

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5 One points out to the influential ideas of J. L. Thaysse who deals with this issue and who questions the hypothesis that the erotic is derived from ethics in many places in his work dedicated to Levinas. See Thaysse: 1998: 299–315.

the phenomenon of love. Even on an elementary, but essential level, with his own efforts Levinas takes a critical and emancipatory contemporary stand although it can be easily seen that his concept of love is far from being a precisely defined one. Levinas does not make a distinction between different forms of love. Like Stendhal (Stendhal 1937), Ortega y Gasset (Ortega y Gasset 1957) and Roland Barthes (Barthes 1997), Levinas does not attempt at differentiating and examining the different modalities and obviously different historical and structural forms of love. These forms perceived by these authors through contemplation stem from one basic definition of love. Even in this isolated place in ethics, his concept of love does not seem to be broad enough. For example, unlike Levinas, Fromm, understands that if one wants to have love, one needs to be responsible, to exercise, to work on oneself, to be patient and particularly to respect the other (Fromm 1956: 7–38). Levinas does not take into account the particular qualities of the other, he reduces those qualities to the abstract and general identity of the other. Badiou says that *duration* is a key characteristic of love while Levinas does not even mention it (Badiou 2009:17–23).

It is no wonder that some authors like Badiou question even the very concept of *love* (Badiou 2009: 10–16) when ethics with its general rigid concept of love reduces it to a certain sacrificial and moral experience which is neither erotically motivated nor aesthetically defined. The dilemma is how to ask that question whether love can be totally reduced to one's *moral obligations and duties to others*. The dilemma is by no means resolved by the fact that Levinas thinks that we are not dealing with morals here. According to him, ethics allegedly deals with something entirely different. Ethics is undoubtedly listed in the moralistic register and it even becomes a prominent representative of extreme moralism. After all, if love is seen from a designated ethical angle, it degenerates beyond recognition and it almost takes one of its pathological forms. Being obsessed with some other person, feeling fatal attraction for some other person and all the other forms of love, which demonstrate love as some kind of imposed or mandatory affection, bear much resemblance to Levinasian paternalistic and allocentric love.

## Conclusion

Finally, it is becoming difficult to present Levinas's interpretation of love as something credible and true. Although his interpretation and its abstract endeavors cannot be replaced in the fight against a powerful ideological and aestheticized opponent, his interpretation is full of contradictions because it is both *non-historic* and *at the same time* it invests all its hopes in *history*, i.e. in one *particular ancient period* in history. A serious suspicion arises that this theory has any right to appeal to history and its events to provide reasons which would support its claims<sup>6</sup> since this theory approaches the phenomenon of

6 A quote from *Totalite et infini* is given here as an illustration and a warning: "... Nous nous proposons de décrire, dans le déroulement de l'existence terrestre, de



love in a non-historic way without relying on a historical development of love in any way. This theory also underestimates modern historic phenomena and modern manifestations of history. Once it has done it, another serious suspicion arises, closely related to the fact that allegedly *universal* model of love is found in *an ancient Jewish tradition*. What rouses the suspicion is the fact that *this model of love is found in that very tradition* and the belief that this model is to be *universal*. The strongest suspicion is roused by the belief that the offered universal model of love represents some kind of *pure love absolutely devoid of any sexual pleasure*. Since this love is understood as *an unconditional sacrificial and ethical experience*, it is removed from its libidinal source and embedded in the *abstract surface of interpersonal relations* as the *only* place where such love can be born. When love becomes nothing more than *a duty and obligation towards the Other*, it loses its recognizable features and takes a highly unusual form. The last suspicion refers to the dilemma whether *this form* of love deserves to be called *love* at all.

On the horizon where Levinas's entire theory of love is called into question to a certain extent and where its major concepts, premises and primary goals become subject to radical skepticism, one can hardly expect of this theory to provide an insight into the critical, socio-historical and emancipatory potential of the erotic. At the same time one does not ignore the fact that on the abstract and critical level this theory sheds some light on all the ideological attempts to aestheticize this phenomenon. However, as much as his theory is subject to a historical and dialectical "reinterpretation", it can also become somewhat important because of its phenomenological aspects that are rather similar to dialectical actions. Levinas's phenomenology much more than any other phenomenology stands in close proximity to dialectics and not only in a formal sense which represents the other side of his phenomenology. More importantly, one can say here that his phenomenology develops the erotic as something *radical, idealized, aestheticized and spiritualized* which takes transerotic forms and modalities that remain *very much* distant from the *immediate sensual erotic*. In that regard, it certainly represents the continuation of that thought that was born in Plato's time and that reached its maturity through its concept of sublimation in psychoanalytic theory. Both Plato's erotic and Freud's

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l'existence économique comme nous l'appelons, une relation avec l'Autre, qui n'aboutit pas à une totalité divine ou humaine, une relation qui n'est pas une totalisation de l'histoire, mais l'idée de l'infini. Une telle relation est la métaphysique même. L'histoire ne serait pas le plan privilégié ou se manifeste l'être dégagé du particularisme des points de vue dont la réflexion porterait encore la tare. Si elle prétend intégrer moi et l'autre dans un esprit impersonnel, cette prétendue intégration est cruaute et injuste, c'est-à-dire ignore Autrui. L'histoire, rapport entre hommes, ignore une position du Moi envers l'Autre où l'Autre demeure transcendant par rapport à moi. Si je ne suis pas extérieur à l'histoire par moi-même, je trouve en autrui un point, par rapport à l'histoire, absolu; non pas en fusionnant avec autrui, mais en parlant avec lui. L'histoire est travaillée par les ruptures de l'histoire où un jugement se porte sur elle. Quand l'homme aborde vraiment Autrui, il est arraché à l'histoire." (Levinas 2000: 44-45.)



erotic reach a certain stage in their development when they become transerotic and stop being the sensual erotic. Although Plato's transerotic form of the erotic and Freud's transerotic form of the erotic maintain a close contact with the sensual erotic, Levinas's transerotic form of the erotic loses any touch with the sensual erotic. In the absence of dialectics that keeps an eye on what is obsolete, it is logical and normal that his ethics loses its touch with its erotic background and at the same time lacks any erotic quality. Therefore, this ethics can become a modern respectable critical thought provided it becomes subject to a socio-historical dialectical intervention and provided that it becomes an introduction to further thinking and provided there is possibility for one such process to occur. Otherwise, in our opinion, it loses any significance, merely manifesting itself as a developed religious thought.

What makes the process of idealization of the erotic genuine is the insistence on a social dialectalization of this process. What shapes the theory of the erotic and also makes it genuine is insistence on the opposite dialectical process of materialization of the erotic that shows that the erotic with its extreme subliminal forms is still essentially connected to the immediate sensual erotic. It all actually proves that in all its sensuality, the erotic is *autonomous* and that with its direct meaning it creates laws that prove to be crucial for ethics and aesthetics as the transerotic levels of reality.

It is clearly seen even in the work of Plato and Freud who are representatives of the erotology that idealizes the erotic. Both authors do not ignore the *sensual erotic* and particularly *instinctive nature* of the erotic which features prominently in psychoanalysis. While Plato sees both the relationship between philosophy and ideas and the relationship between lovers from the same angle, Freud thinks that at its peak subliminal social reality has the libidinal structure similar to the structure of a genuinely instinctive bipolarism.

However, this aspect of the analysis cannot be found in Levinas's work. He hardly points to any feedbacks and pure sensual reactions. Levinas ignores and keeps quiet about sensual reality in which he could discover the laws that regulate his ethical reality and the laws that define all forms of his responsibility for the Other.

As one-sided erotology that completely ignores the material side of the erotic and stresses its ideal side, Levinas's theory simply cannot manage to impose itself as a theory that is substantiated enough. In the end, what makes this theory of love limited and restrictive is the absence of socio-historical dialectics on the level of the idealization of the erotic and the absence of entire materialistic dialectics from the erotic. We have our reservations as to whether this suggested reinterpretation is possible. When we think of Hegel's and Marx's opinion that dialectics can be applied within the system, we are convinced that the suggested interpretation, that follows a certain direction and dialectical impulses found in Levinas's work, makes room for his philosophy to be transformed beyond recognition, giving his philosophy firm boundaries and a limited and abstract value.

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### Erotsko/estetsko u perspektivi levinasove etičke an-arheologije

#### Sažetak

U ovom članku naznačuje se mesto i uloga onog estetskog u Levinasovom projektu etičke an-arheologije, kao i status koji erotika ima u tom projektu. Naglašava se u prvom redu da uprkos autorovim izričitim postavkama o nepomirljivosti etike i estetike, odnosno etike i erotike, ta opozicija ne funkcioniše kao oštar i rezak kontrast, nego se, upravo obrnuto, neretko pokazuje kao subverzivna ontološka sprega. S druge strane, u odnosu na današnju reakcionarnu reaktualizaciju i revitalizaciju estetskog, koja se tek mehanički odvija na rubovima njegove emancipatorske prošlosti, Levinasova „nesavremena“ misao se svojim etičkim antiestetizmom, donekle neočekivano, ipak ujedno ukazuje kao jedno još uvek bitno kritičko i elementarno emancipatorsko savremeno mišljenje.

Ključne reči: erotika, estetika, fenomenologija, ontologija, etika, an-arheologija