

THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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ABSTRACT¹: This article attempts to grasp the condition of so-called “impossible experiences” in nature. An impossible experience is an experience that cannot fully be thematized or perceived with the senses. Some authors consider such experiences key to an ethical response. Emmanuel Levinas’s insights will guide us to further explore this initiated path. The focus of analysis is not on his indiscrete Other because it is not possible to repeat the requisites of the ethical moment represented by the indiscrete Other’s face – a breaking up of totality and a teaching. Instead, we will take a novel approach and draw a parallel with the phenomenological conditions of his less explored but promising discrete Other. It seems to offer an alternative manner of breaking through totality, teaching us a different subject, namely the secrets of hospitality.

KEYWORDS: Environmental ethics; impossible experience; Emmanuel Levinas; discrete other; teaching; break with totality.

1. Introduction

Environmental ethicists have long reacted against the objectified relationship of human beings with nature, since it is assumed to contribute to a commodisation of nature. Neil Everden (1989) calls it the nature-as-object view in which people consider themselves apart from nature. Seeking to provide an alternative view, these environmental ethicists have tried to deeply ground an opposite stance, emphasizing man’s inherent embeddedness in nature, or kinship relation with the ecosystem at large (Matthews 1991, Fox 1990). This stance is labeled the nature-as-self, "extended-self" or nature-as-"like-self" view (Everden 1989:158). Although this position might seem more likely to generate an ethical relation with nature, there are voices questioning that claim. Conceiving nature too much as continuous, homogeneous and predictable, such as is implied in both the nature-as-object view and the nature-as-self view, would be counterproductive to having an ethical relation with nature. Both aforementioned

¹ Original title: *Ethiek en natuur: een onmogelijke mogelijkheid. Emmanuel Levinas en de discrete ander.*

views would not leave enough room for the “pockets of resistance” (Everden 1989:160), i.e. unique experiences in nature also described as “nature-as-miracle” experiences, which leave us with the inability to reduce nature to homogeneity. Evernden assumes that all people have such unique experiences in nature. They may broadly be defined as occurrences that transcend normal understanding.²

This path is further explored in the article *The primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences* by Ted Toadvine (2003), who indicates why a nature-as-miracle phenomenon is so important. To the author, “an ethical response to nature becomes possible only when we are faced with the impossibility of reducing it to the homogeneous, the continuous, the predictable, the perceivable, the thematizable” (Toadvine 2003:140) (*italics mine*). The impossibility to reduce nature thus seems to be a condition for an ethical relation with nature to be possible. Toadvine briefly refers to previous instances of contemporary philosophers making us aware of such “experiences of the impossible” or “impossible experiences,”(2003:148) described in terms of the In-Itself (Sartre), the blind-spot of phenomenologicality at the heart of the visible (Merleau-Ponty)), or the *il y a* (Levinas). The experience is deemed impossible phenomenologically, at least partly, for it is impossible to grasp. The presumed “call of the outside” is unavailable to experience through our senses, and impossible to conceptualize or to conceive.

The stance taken by Toadvine and others is that the impossible experience is nevertheless quite a central experience, for even though it is unperceivable through the senses, and even though it occurs only in the margins of our awareness, it does do something to us. It is generally considered to break through the present, to break open thematization or signification, and to call on us to respond.

In this article we seek to further explore why this impossible experience would be so paramount in creating an ethical response to nature. What happens at these moments to provoke an ethical response? What are the conditions for the experience to be possible? To answer these questions, we will draw on some of Emmanuel Levinas’s main findings (2002),

² Some scholars in the discipline of environmental aesthetics investigate how an aesthetic appreciation of nature may help to develop an ecologically responsible attitude, while taking into consideration experiences defying full articulation. See for instance Godlovitch 1994, 2008 and Saito, 2008a. Also, aesthetics have for long emphasized scenic beauty, for that is where appreciation begins. Interestingly, they also raise the question of how to advocate an appropriate appreciation of unscenic nature, because these places are often key to the sustained working of the natural environment. One suggested answer is that such appreciation requires a kind of perception that is informed by relevant scientific facts. (Saiko, 2008b). In this article, we regard nature as natural beauty.

since there are important parallels with his ethical perception of “the face”, and more in particular with the breaking with totality and his teaching. To Levinas, ethics comes about the moment we have the person in front of us resisting all meaning and explanation, breaking through existing frameworks. Each time we see the face behind the face of the human Other, ethics is produced. To quote Levinas, “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other, ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics” (2002:43). These moments teach us that the Other is irreducible to our expectations. One can say that the notion of the (invisible) face behind the (visible) face points to this impossible experience.

There are some controversies in using Levinas’s perception of human ethics for environmental ethics. As commented on by different scholars, Levinas found it hard to answer the question whether animals or nature had a face, whether animals and nature could be Others, i.e. distinctly escaping full thematization in the same sense as human faces can (Burggraeve 2008, Diehm 2003, Peperzak 1992, Ainley 1989).³ Indeed, one cannot readily transpose the phenomenology of the face, in terms of a breaking with totality and a teaching, to our relation to nature, (even though some authors venture to do so⁴).

That is why in this article we will take another road and pioneer whether Levinas’s “discrete Other” can take up the role of breaking through contextual boundaries and the role of teaching. Two examples of being moved by nature will be introduced as one-to-one relations with “things” in nature, a plant and an animal, respectively. We begin with an in-depth introduction of Levinas’s distinction between sense and signification. This distinction is relevant to fathom the impossibility of the experience and next to grasp how nature - as signification - can be broken open by an exteriority -sense -, which is revealing or teaches.

2. Signification and sense

In his article Signification and Sense, (2006) Levinas attempts to make a clear distinction between signification and sense. To describe signification, he starts from the late modern notion of knowledge-building. This notion of knowledge-building is relatively common

³Burggraeve (2008, p. 115 ff) refers to Levinas’s occasionally hesitating before answering and points out that this is because Levinas is well aware of the risk of reducing the Other (albeit a non-human Other) into his horizon of understanding.

⁴ Diehm (2003) and others explore the notion of the Other’s face to ground an environmental ethics (not necessarily a nature-as-miracle view), to which end they start from the vulnerability of other living bodies.

nowadays. From a human sciences perspective, we are no longer supposed to think in terms of an absolute truth and essence. Plato's heights from which to contemplate the Ideas have become obsolete; signification does not precede language and culture. To the contrary, it is physical and historical-contextual.

Following Merleau-Ponty, Levinas opens up this physical knowledge, providing us with many more subtle tools to understand what this implies. In the first parts of *Totality and Infinity* (2002), he meticulously describes how a "subject" continuously constitutes itself and the world, by such different modes as enjoyment, labor and dwelling (physical) but also by representation. These modes have their own absoluteness and genuine access to the world, while alternately dominating the "subject's" acts. For instance, when we bite into an apple, we get to "know" the world of the apple by way of enjoyment. The knowledge that its taste provides is more than a simple sensational taste. We gain access to the inside of the apple. At the moment of enjoyment, we do not represent the apple with our mind, we are in it, in "the bowels of being." (2002:132) Through this unique relation, enjoyment – which is not accessible by means of representation – we achieve contentment – we "accomplish it" over and over again. Yet, enjoyment can be overridden by representation, for the next moment the I⁵ may start looking at the apple, observing its shape from a distance. The body, our senses, but also the hand that grasps, constitute – at least partly – the world.

Next, people can be regarded as co-creators of a common significance, of a horizon of inspiring significances. In the above-mentioned article, Levinas elucidates how such a process of inspiration occurs.⁶ How do people receive significance, and how does a shared significance come about? Due to the phenomenon of embodied thought, people apparently are on both sides. When individuals receive significance from a worldview, the horizon (as a shared background) lights up. Each time they understand this (e.g. a long thin object) as that (e.g. a tall tree), a reflection of this illumination is received in thought. But there is more. According to Heidegger, and Levinas agrees with this, signification glows in the work of poets and artists. It radiates in multiple ways in their works. Artists and poets play a major role in this process, as such putting into motion societies' wheels of what is and matters, inconspicuously transforming the significance of existing traditions and worldviews. Diversity is to be found as much within one culture as it is outside it, without ever saying all. The diversity of expression

⁵ Levinas introduces a difference between the subject of representation and the I of enjoyment. In enjoyment, the subject of representation is absent.

⁶ The article can be regarded in part a response to Heidegger's insights developed in the *Origin of the Work of Art*.

“scintillates with the inexhaustible wealth of its event.”(2006:18) That which is - that which ontologically is - is always a historical being changing through time.

Nonetheless, to Levinas, signification needs the ideal of unity, for as he claims, how else would people be able to communicate and at least basically understand each other? Signification, as plurality, cannot make up this unity itself, yet it cannot do without it.

Economic signification has managed to become the measure of being; in our worldview it is the leading essence of being, taking our needs as a starting point and our satisfaction as the ultimate goal - as that which matters. However, this a false univocality, for univocal signification cannot be based on materialism.

Also, within the modern encompassing view of totalities, unity is considered to reside in the penetrability of cultures, in the ability of mankind to learn each other's subtle languages. Again, Levinas has some doubts in this respect, claiming that beyond the possibility to understand each other, we have to take into account what could be called the willingness to understand each other in a certain way. This pre-established willingness is the condition that we interpret other cultures as equivalent and perceive differences as richness. Indeed, the wide variety of potential ways of being includes both the option of peaceful coexistence and the option of conquest or war. Cultural significances thus do not come about as arbitrary entities within the diverse reality of the given. Our willingness to perceive this plurality as richness cannot stem from this plurality. Rather, it seems more apt to assume that there is on the one hand a plurality of meanings and on the other hand sense, orientating this plurality. Levinas formulates it as a question: “Must we not, therefore, distinguish signification in their cultural pluralism from the sense, orientation, and unity of being, the primordial event where all the other procedures of thought and all the historical life of being are placed?” (2006:23)

Levinas cannot live with a dispersion and isolation of numerous significances, because of the absence of sense. To him sense ethically orients us. Absurdity is this “multiplicity within pure indifference” (2006:24). Hence, against a multitude of significances, he puts one sense, one orientation, a sense outside totality, outside significance, orienting and unifying this significance. This guiding sense is always ethics, for the orienting sense and ethics are one.

Decidedly, the question to be raised then is: where does sense come from, if not from this totality? To Levinas, sense, as one orientation, is produced by the human Other - the indiscrete Other - as such breaking up significance. I will explain how to understand this, but it should already be clear that with regard to the subject of this article, the impossible experience in nature, this statement will raise several difficulties. Fortunately, there are creative ways to resolve them by exploring his discrete Other.

When introducing the notion of the indiscrete Other, Levinas reacts against another element of the horizon, an implication he perceives as part and parcel of the idea of a totality or horizon, namely the thought that we can find sense if, as Heidegger expresses, “its [human] existence is an issue for this existence itself”. To Levinas, significance cannot be based on the being that exists in a way Heidegger describes. If so, we stay in the enclosing circle of totality. It is a totality of need and assimilation with the world. The being or self then refers to the numerous and inherent physical and mental acts of being, able to make the world into our world. Despite the inherent nature of this chain of making the same,⁷ of making the other into our own, there is another kind of intentionality possible. Indeed, our making the same can be questioned by the face of the Other. The free movement of creating multiple significances by representation, of creating horizons, is thus shattered. Levinas calls this the reversal of consciousness, which means that this consciousness is given another direction. It is now beyond being. In order to grasp what this means, we will have to elaborate a little on the notion of the face.

One could - incorrectly but more comprehensibly - call the face of the Other the dignity behind the physical form of a person. Levinas meticulously tries to express this in terms that seem to avoid rigidly pinpointing it down in time or concepts. Hence, because of an “extreme attention” (2002:178) we are able to see (but we cannot really visually see) the dignity in the expression, this dignity breaking through the form. The reversal of consciousness, making extreme attentiveness possible, implies that the supposedly autonomous subject can no longer integrate this Other subject into his or her implicit world of multiple significances. Expression breaks up the framework, the horizon of thought. Yet, it likewise provides sense, one sense and one orientation, outside of this context, outside the framework of significance. The impossibility to appropriate makes all the difference. Inversed consciousness cannot make the same. Put in different terms, it cannot get grip on it through thematization.

What happens to us when we are face to face, when we are “wit(h)nessing”⁸ the impossible experience? To Levinas, expression is a shock, a shock making us “see” the Other’s

⁷ Levinas’s description cannot be equated with an instrumental relation, for this has other, often pejorative connotations, which, strictly speaking, is not the case with Levinas.

⁸ This notion is originally from Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) but it is perfectly suited to express Levinas’s notion of crossing a distance that cannot be bridged by representation. To quote Levinas (2002:40), “the irreversibility of the relation can be produced only if the relation is effected by one of the terms as the very moment of transcendence, as the traversing of this distance, and not as a recording of it. (..) We know this relation only in the measure that we effect it, this is what is distinctive about it”. In wit(h)nessing, we keep a distance (like we do as witnesses), but we likewise traverse it in “being with”.

hunger as well as their height. We feel ashamed⁹ because of our freedom, of making the world ours and we may consequently grasp, through this higher attentiveness, that we had been unjustly confining the Other to a totality of our own, thus in a way killing him. This movement brings us to a notion of sense prior to significance, to a realization that existence is independent of our power or initiative. Expression speaks, and this one sense tells us “you shall not commit murder” (2002:119). It is a non-maieutic teaching¹⁰ coming from beyond the person, breaking through the representation of the face. We receive this teaching, this representation reversing our usual relationship and opening up as hospitality for the Other. We receive it as the “astonishing feat of containing more than is possible to contain” (2002:27). Expression, as Infinity, shatters totality; it breaks through all the envelopes and generalities of being.

3. Two impossible experiences in nature

This discussion of the distinction between significance and sense raises the question of how this relates to the impossible experience in nature. Do the same conditions apply? Is there a breaking up and a teaching as in encounters with the Other’s face? In order to understand such a possible relation, it may be fruitful to start from concrete examples. The following are brief descriptions of one-to-one encounters with a plant (a mushroom) and with an animal (a deer), respectively, provided by two students¹¹. The two examples are fairly typical and recognizable and could as such be considered too simple. Indeed, this would be so if all we saw is the plant or the animal. But it is not so if we perceive these examples as an analytic window permitting us to look at the impossible experience more closely. Also, even if we are not at all inspired by the same concrete examples such as the ones presented here, we will all have had similar experiences, provided we are open for them. When and why these impossible experiences occur, we cannot control, but what seems to be the case is that such experiences are at least dependent on context and mood.

To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be noted that, although the examples of impossible experiences given here all refer to nature-as-miracle, it would equally be possible to take natural disasters as examples, since they too remind us of what is not at all self-evident or appropriable, albeit in a violent way. It would be very interesting to incorporate an analysis

⁹ ‘Shame does not have the structure of consciousness and clarity. Levinas (2002, p. 84).

¹⁰ Levinas (2002:171) says that, ‘Socratic maieutics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing (which amounts to the same thing) that mind. It does not preclude the openness of the very dimension of infinity, which is height.’

¹¹ These examples were given by two students on a course on meaning in life, in which they were invited to reflect on situations in which they were moved.

of these phenomena but this would take us beyond the scope of this article. In a way, though, one could say that the concept of *il y a* in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* (2002) precisely refers to this side of nature.

Two examples of being moved:¹²

“One October morning, putting out the bin before having breakfast, I notice that it is a very misty and humid day, yet not cold. I look around, without giving special attention to anything in particular. All of a sudden, a sunbeam peeps through the haze, illuminating a mushroom at the foot of a young birch tree, in an unkempt corner of our garden. The spectacle stops me in my tracks for a few seconds, leaving me with a mixed sense of wonder and restraint. Then I go back inside, appeased by this feeling of insidedness.

The student who shared this experience, later added she had the feeling of having come close to something.”

“During a walk in the forest early one morning, I suddenly see a deer in a clearing feeding her fawns. It is a touching sight, interrupting my thinking and leaving me in a state of wonder. I dare not move and hold my breath so as not to be noticed but the doe becomes aware of my presence (I can see it has caught my scent, even though it does not find out where I am). Having become suspicious, it brings her fawn gently to a more secure place in the darkness of the wood. I felt I was getting very close to an intimacy, one you do not or cannot appropriate, sensing a distance you cannot bridge. That is why I probably had that mixed feeling of wonder and restraint, of intrusion and reticence.”

What is the relation with significance and sense, and even more so, with Levinas's face that breaks up and teaches? On the one hand, one might be tempted to see a major similarity, because, analogous to sense, the events of seeing the sun rays a mushroom or the deer feeding her fawn appears to be non-appropriable, non-evident; there is this impossibility of reducing

¹² In his article on being moved by nature, Noel Carroll (2008) maintains that being emotionally moved by nature is “really a matter of responding to nature as nature”. Also, he argues against the common-sense idea in the domain of aesthetic appreciation in which nature is said to be an indeterminate form. The author takes it that our experiences of being moved by nature are delineated by natural frames or closures. If they lack these frames, then the natural expanses have features that are naturally salient. The examples given here are of the first sort. The contours are clearly set, there is a specific and clear object of being moved: a mushroom and a deer and its fawn.

it to the homogeneous, of “making the same”, in Levinas’s words. Like sense, these events break through the conceptual framework of man-apart-from-nature, for the students somehow feel a “coming closer”. It likewise breaks through the opposite framework, human- as-part-of-nature. Indeed, the second student explicitly refers to the impossibility of bridging the distance, even if she felt she was coming very close, so close indeed, she describes it as coming close to an intimacy. The mix of wonder and restraint, of intrusion and reticence point to an “extreme attentiveness”, which is the very “result” of this impossibility of integrating the spectacle into one’s own world of significance.

On the other hand, it would seem all too naïve to assume the possibility of any convergence with Levinas’s description of ethics, considering that the differences greatly outnumber the similarities. Did the situation involve a shock? The description does not indicate this. Did it involve shame? Did the student see the hunger and height of the other? Was there a face that commanded her? Sense presupposes a face that teaches, that commands, and as such ethics comes about, “is produced,” as Levinas would say. But nature has no face in the sense that humans do. Non-humans cannot break up the totality nor can they teach us, “You shall not commit murder” (2002:199). Consequently, there appears to be no connection possible with infinity or sense, at least not in an unmediated, direct way.

How to solve this incongruence? Despite the seeming impossibility to ground environmental ethics through Levinas’ thoughts, it may yet be possible to resolve this if we rely on some elements from the work of Levinas that have been underexplored to date.

So how to proceed? Let us have a fresh look at what Levinas has to say. He claims that humans are co-creators of significances within an illuminating horizon, making all that is the same or their own, including fellow-humans. Yet, time and again, the face of the Other – their expression and speech, our attentiveness to their appearance – opens up this totality, makes us attentive to their height and their command not to put them into a totality. Only in a one-to-one relationship is this intrinsic inequality (the height of the other) apparent. It is neither visible nor traceable from a third-perspective position.

Analogous to this, we can see the plurality of enclosed significances of nature, people making everything non-human theirs. Yet, time and again the impossible encounter, as a one-to-one relation, breaks up our representation and opens up another kind of encounter. To understand the conditions that enable this impossible experience we can find inspiration in the works of Levinas, not by drawing a parallel with the human face of the indiscrete Other, but with the discrete Other, because the discrete Other has her own, particular way of breaking up and teaching.

4. The breaking up and teaching of the discrete Other

In the works of Levinas, the discrete Other, the woman, or the feminine in general, only sporadically appears. The reason for this is obvious: the face of the indiscrete Other has no gender, it can be female and male alike. Why would the discrete Other then be feminine? Levinas introduces her in *Totality and Infinity* on two occasions: when expanding on Eros and Love and earlier when developing his thoughts about dwelling and home. Here, we focus on his thoughts about dwelling and home, where the feminine should not be understood as the female sex but more in general as a dimension of femininity.¹³ What is of interest to us is that his discrete Other enables us, irrespective of gender, to fathom an additional and distinctive access to the world, creating the conditions for an ethical response to come about. The part on dwelling and home in which the feminine plays a cardinal role is a subdivision of Levinas's elaboration on the co-constitution of ego and world, or significance. In fact, to Levinas, for consciousness – signification – to come about, the Other is already the condition of possibility.¹⁴ As such, in dwelling we find the indiscrete Other “in disguise”, for whereas the indiscrete Other breaks through its own plastic, the Other can also be revealed, “simultaneously with this presence, in its withdrawal and its absence” Levinas says (2002:155).

How does the discrete Other act, according to Levinas? To him, the discrete Other, who welcomes you in the intimacy of the moment, is “not the thou of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the tu of familiarity, a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret. This alterity is situated on another plane than language and by no means represents a truncated, stammering, still elementary language” (2002:155).

Hence, although there is understanding without words, an expression in secret, to Levinas there is no teaching involved. This is because Levinas has a clear idea in mind on how to perceive teaching. As indicated above, it is one sense that is being posed. It is “to recognize

¹³ To quote Levinas (2002:158), “The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place – and the empirical absence of the human being of the “feminine sex” in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling.” We assume that in this case the feminine is to be taken figuratively, as a dimension of men and women alike. Decidedly, this is not to deny the considerable and critical body of work devoted to the place of the feminine in Levinas. See for instance Luce Irigaray (1986, 1991) and Tina Chanter (2001). This article is not concerned with a detailed and exegetical discussion of the notion of ‘the feminine’, which is considered problematic by distinctive feminist authors. .

¹⁴ Levinas is playing with the idea of time here, for whereas co-constitution of world and ‘subject’ seem prior, to Levinas, in order for us to have significance (consciousness), the Other must already have broken up this totality.

the mastery of the Other” (2002:178), to receive his command “thou shalt not kill,” in the sense that he commands me not to shut him up into my totality. The Other persecutes me, hunts me down, provokes me, takes me into hostage. Or, expressed in a more neutral way “Ethics is when my spontaneity is called into question” (2002:43).

Now we may wonder if all teaching needs to be in such commanding terms. Could it be that the discrete Other teaches, but differently? To gain a better understanding of this distinction, let us consider the dynamic of the ethical movement. In the above sentence, “ethics is when my spontaneity [in making the same] is called into question”, we can discern two simultaneous aspects. Firstly, it presupposes that the I (as spontaneity) is putting the other into his frame of reference. The I does so in a self-evident way for it is a common characteristic of humans to represent their experiences and put them in frameworks. And yet, the face of the Other, its irreducibility to the I’s framing, unintentionally questions this act. The face breaks through its own plastic (it breaks its own physical and mental form), making the I recognize the Other’s irreducible height and his own injustice of making it the same, while the I is open and susceptible or “hospitable” to this irreducibility. So there is the sense of a becoming “aware” of the injustice of encapsulating the Other and there is the hospitality to this irreducibility.

One could say that the feminine teaching of dwelling has a slightly different accent. The first constitutive moment of the dynamic - the injustice of making a totality - is less central, and may presumably even be replaced by another. As for the second moment, viz. the appeal for hospitality, we can see that, while this aspect is still discernable, the emphasis here is not on the Other’s irreducibility - for which we are inherently open or hospitable -, what stands out are the teachings of the very secrets of hospitality itself. Let us consider this step by step.

The invitation

We claimed in *supra* that the first constitutive moment of becoming aware of injustice was less vital in the structure of the ethical moment of feminine dwelling. It does involve a kind of interruption of the I’s representation, but, whereas the indiscrete Other interruption comes as a shock, the discrete Other welcomes us in the intimacy of the moment while “attending her own apparition”(2002:253).¹⁵ Discretely but decidedly, she is there. She takes up space, however

¹⁵ In French, the word ‘apparition’ has a double sense. Its first meaning refers to a sudden and thus unexpected appearance of someone, its second meaning is related to the manifestation of a supernatural being. In the context of the discrete Other I use an explanation that is somewhat in the middle of both. The indiscrete Other is attending her own appearance, yet an appearance that is so discrete that we are hardly aware of it. The appearance itself becomes an apparition.

discretely, but she takes up space nevertheless. Her taking up space is her welcoming us into the intimacy of the moment. This is how we can now understand that the indiscrete Other reveals itself in “its withdrawal and its absence”. The very essence of discretion is this simultaneity of presence and absence. Withdrawing, the discrete Other gently invites us, which brings about an interruption of representation. As the aforementioned examples of impossible experiences in nature illustrate, there is no command by nature, nor is there a sense of injustice being provoked, and neither can we discern shame.¹⁶ These attributes do not seem to fit, at least not with the two examples considered in this article. And yet, there is a shift in perspective. The first example, of the sunlit mushroom, suggests that the student’s routine is “stopped”. She looks around “without giving special attention to anything in particular”, when her attention is absorbed, this leaving her with a sense of wonder and restraint. Would we be looking in the wrong direction if we considered the interruption of the student’s routine by this event, not as a command, but as a gentle invitation? Could it be that at such moments we are invited rather than commanded to stop and look more attentively, with greater attention? The second example can be read in the same vein. An event - a deer feeding her its offspring - interrupts the thinking. The interruption is not experienced as a command, however. It does not come as a shock. Rather, it “touched” the student, as a moving sight. Again, can we see this touching as an invitation to stop making the Other the same, an invitation to stop and look more attentively?

Certainly, one could consider attentiveness for this dynamic more difficult since it is more subtle. As Levinas notices, it is not “the thou [vous] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but ... the tu [you] of familiarity.” The tu of familiarity is by nature more self-evident, while the discrete Other, in her discreteness, comes less to the foreground. She attends her own manifestation, as absence. In a “silent language”, the conditions for an ethical response are less visible. Such an “expression in secret” entails the risk that the event may pass by unnoticed. The teaching can easily be misunderstood or ignored, much more so than the teaching of the indiscrete other.¹⁷ And yet, it is this very teaching that engenders an ethical response.

¹⁶ As I understand this, shame is supposed to be on this pre-ontological level (also according to Heidegger) but I believe this to be related to the part of the dynamics of ethics where I come to ‘realize’ that I am incorporating the Other into my totality, making him my own. If by contrast, in the case of the discrete other, there is only an invitation to follow the example, shame does seem to be around.

¹⁷ Yet, as Levinas (2002:172) points out, even the command of the Other is no warranty, because one can forget the transcendence of the Other.

Breaking up totality

Let us now further consider this interruption as a breaking up of totality. How does an invitation by the discrete other brings this about? As discussed, Levinas says that the alterity of the discrete Other 'is situated on another plane than language and by no means represents a truncated, stammering, still elementary language'. He continues by saying that the dimension of interiority "is a new and irreducible possibility, a delightful lapse in being and the source of gentleness (*douceur*)."

Although Levinas does not say that of the discrete feminine Other directly¹⁸ - she is the condition of possibility for the dimension of interiority - I think it can be understood as such. Hence, whereas a shock breaks up totality, a delightful lapse does not. The condition for an ethical response rather lies in exploiting the weak spots in the hermetic circle of totality or significance. Indeed, the *douceur* causes the wall of totality to become transparent and soft, like a membrane that absorbs and lets through. This lapse is not a disaster; on the contrary, it is delightful, for if we are attentive, very attentive, we can come to understand - by containing more than is possible to contain - the one sense orienting the multiplicity of significance. This is not a command not to kill, but a gentle invitation, a gentle reminder to be aware, again and again, of openness.

In other parts of the book Levinas says that, like the indiscrete other, the discrete woman is outside totality; she does not manifest herself as a being, in the light but "at the limit of being and non-being". More specifically, Levinas says so when referring to the notion of "tenderness" and "the tender", exploring the Eros. To him, the way of the tender consists in an extreme fragility, a vulnerability, manifesting itself "at the limits of being and non-being" (2002:256). With regard to the discrete invitation, we can also wonder if it is not because we come to the limit of being and non-being that we sense it as impossible?

Whereas the Other's face breaks up totality, with sense coming from the outside, in the case of the invitation to be attentive, sense is within the boundaries of significance, or more precisely, at the limit of being and non-being, this evading the distinction between form as significance and the one sense. It is an additional reason why we have to be even more attentive

¹⁸ "On the contrary, the discretion of this presence includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationships with the Other. It is comprehensible and exercises its function of interiorization only on the ground of the full human personality, which, however, can be reserved so as to open up the dimension of interiority". Levinas (2002: 155).

to the one sense, for both form and sense seem to (but do not) merge, making it easy to overlook the sense and only notice significance.¹⁹

Being taught the secrets

In the feminine condition for an ethical response to nature, next to a higher attentiveness for a discrete invitation (instead of a higher attentiveness for injustice), there is the teaching of the very secrets of hospitality. We are not only welcomed by the discrete Other, we are welcomed into the intimacy of the moment. And whereas Levinas claims that the discrete Other's language is a "language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret," we believe it is a language teaching a secret. What does the secret reveal? Again, the earlier examples are telling. In the first example, about a sunbeam illuminating a mushroom, the student says she was "appeased by this feeling of insidedness". The second example, about the fawn, mentions a coming close to an intimacy. What we seem to approach here is the dynamic of the secret, which is first of all an invitation to be "at home." The "tu" of familiarity extends an invitation to an intimacy. We may come near to it, this providing a feeling of "insidedness". The secret of hospitality thus is first of all this very experiencing of intimacy, a sharing of what it means to be "at home". And yet, this invitation is in a subtle way accompanied by a gentle request not to come all too near, not to make it all too much my own home. The second student makes this very clear in paradoxical terms, saying that coming "close to a distance I was not able to bridge (...) to an intimacy that one does not or cannot appropriate." Both students also refer to contradictory feelings when expressing what this does to them. It leaves them with wonder and restraint, while the second student adds the notions of "intrusion" and "reticence."

So the secret is not only about a coming close to an intimacy and about understanding what this means. We seem to be extended a double invitation, one to be at home, making the Other ours, and another subtle one not to do so. This double invitation of appropriation and non-appropriation is inherent in hospitality. In a sense, hospitality always implies an invitation to someone's secret, to the intimacy of her world, her thoughts, her aspirations, her home. Yet the secrets of hospitality tell us that an invitation into the intimacy of others is not self-evident

¹⁹Although the face breaks up totality, Levinas says about this ethical happening, ".. for the Infinite is in the finite, the more in the less," in the sense that "expression (sense) breaks through all the envelopings and generalities of Being to spread out in its "form" the totality of its "content", finally abolishing the distinction between form and content" (2002: 50f). So it seems that even here, Infinity is within Totality, evading the distinction.

and does not involve settlement.²⁰ It is about grasping the boundaries through a higher degree of attentiveness, receptivity, which does not simply come down to tacit knowledge. Both mentioned examples show this in their own particular way.²¹

Hence, the hospitality that Others offer to share their secret is likewise the secret of their hospitality. This is not just wordplay, for the secret is that which one has access to, the intimacy of the other, while we likewise understand that we cannot make it ours. This invitation to be attentive to non-appropriation, to the non self-evident, time and again, is something that, at a very early stage, we are “taught” in the context of dwelling,²² and that we probably recognize in “impossible” events. While the discrete Other is familiarity, a familiarity we can then spread over the world, it has the embedded possibility also to be attentive to the impossibility of appropriation. In a very literal way, the I cannot take up all the place, it cannot take up the place of the person that is welcoming him, for that would neutralize the act of welcoming altogether. If we are not attentive to it, we kill the secret of hospitality, and with it, hospitality as our own family dwelling, home. Or as Levinas puts it, “Our being, as separated, is produced in localization as a first appropriation, without being this localization” (2002, 168).

We can now return to the position from which we started. Some authors argue that an ethical relation to nature only is possible the moment we are faced with the impossibility of reducing it to the same, the predictable, the thematizable. The experience is unapproachable in that it defies full verbalization. Despite its short duration, the experience is deemed central. It does something to us, it breaks through the present and calls on us to respond.

In this article we have considered in-depth how to understand the condition for an ethical response to come about. We have explained how the teaching and breaking up implied in Levinas’s notion of the Other’s face or the indiscrete Other cannot be applied in these contexts, but his feminine discrete Other could offer an alternative. Using two examples of

²⁰ This interpretation of hospitality seems to echo Jacques Derrida’s *Of hospitality* (2000), even though it differs considerably from his ideas about absolute hospitality.

²¹ Here we can come to perceive a distinction in dynamics between the examples about the sunbeam and mushroom and the deer and its fawns. In the former, there is really a total absence of a face, so no shame, no height and no hunger are visible here. In the latter example, this can be somewhat more the case. One is more likely to feel like an unwelcome guest, in this sense feeling a non-conscious shame, making up the unease that is part of the awe. We find a possible explanation in the above-mentioned paradoxical sentence, i.e. that the discrete other is “simultaneously with this presence, in its withdrawal and its absence.”

²² I believe this teaching to be ‘on a same level’; that is, non-maieutical.

being moved,²³ we have explained that, rather than commanding, the discrete Other invites. This “softer” way does not break totality or significance, but makes the wall of totality transparent. Inviting us, she paradoxically presents herself as absence, at the edge of being and non-being, at the margins of our awareness. There, she teaches us the secrets of hospitality. This revelation opens as a twofold moment. On the one hand, it is the possibility of being ‘at home’; we are taught (at least reminded of) the very experience of intimacy. We are taught that we are inherently embedded in nature. We realize that nature is where we belong. To put it in more radical terms, we cannot escape it. On the other hand, it is likewise a teaching of the limits of familiarity, the secret of the limits, the secret of the non-appropriable. At the very moment of intimacy, we are put at a distance we cannot bridge. Our reflection on the discrete Other thus shows that for an ethical response to come about, there is not only a dimension of irreducibility involved. Intrinsically linked to it is a coming closer. Apparently, the condition for this ethical response in nature is this paradoxical status of both coming closer and being put at a distance.^{24 25}

²³ It is not clear to me how Noel Carroll (2008) understands being moved in nature. He alternately writes “being moved’ and ‘emotionally being moved”. From my perspective, being moved is essentially a dynamic, which immediately provokes an emotion (and often also reflection). Though the dynamic of being moved and the emotional reaction happen virtually at the same moment, it is important to build in a theoretical distinction in order to achieve a better understanding of this moment. Being moved consists of this double and paradoxical moment of a coming closer while being placed at a distance.

²⁴ A larger diversity of examples of being moved by nature need to be analyzed in more systematic ways, probably including examples of nature as disaster. Here, only a first start has been made and the insights provided are still tentative and premature.

²⁵As indicated in a footnote at the beginning, in environmental ethics, and more in particular in environmental aesthetics, non-anthropocentric stances have been discussed at length. In her article “Appreciating Nature on its own terms”, Yuriko Saito (2008a) follows an interesting path, coming close to the one we have developed here. To the question of how to appreciate nature appropriately, she answers that we should try to listen to nature without humanizing it. Non-anthropological forms of appreciation are to her those where we do not rely on human categorization or conceptualization, and can have an immediate experience of nature. She refers to Zen Buddhism and Neil Everden and differs from Godlovitch, who includes a sense of alienation. However, to her, these encounters with nature ultimately render nature story-less. There is only reality here and now. Even the most sensitive kind of such approaches would, from a moral perspective, be lacking in ecological sensitivity, for it deprives us of our sympathy. So in order to facilitate a sympathetic understanding, we need to have at least some beliefs- some relevant significance. Saito introduces ‘scientific’ information, more particularly the kind of historical /geographical science that makes it possible for nature to tell its story.

I believe that the discrete Other of Levinas reveals that at least certain kinds of encounters in the here and now are nevertheless characterized by their having ‘content’, a content we can only capture through higher attentiveness and not through conceptualization. Being invited, we gain access to an intimacy

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that nonetheless has an embedded limit. As a two-fold moment, both the secret of the limit as non-appropriation and the invitation to an intimacy seem to me crucial to build on for environmental ethics. Decidedly, such encounters only happen in cases in which we consider nature scenic or otherwise beautiful. Being moved and aesthetic appreciation go hand in hand. And yet, one can argue that being moved can, if not aroused, at least be influenced by the history of nature and thus by scientific information. This might also influence our perception of what to consider aesthetical in nature, although probably not to the extent that we will be moved by the supposed beauty of a dead elk covered with maggots.

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