

Eros That Never Arrives: A Phenomenological Ethics of the Erotic

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I develop in this paper a phenomenological ethics of the erotic. I do not attempt to establish norms for its proper practice, nor do I use the erotic as a portal to ethics, à la Levinas. Rather, I consider the perhaps more fundamental question of how an ethics of eros is possible, and suggest that any such ethics requires the capacity to respond to the beloved as truly other. Eros can easily succumb to the objectifying impulse to overcome otherness, because the erotic brings the irreducible alterity of the beloved to the fore with an urgency that most types of intersubjectivity do not—hence Kant’s stringent account of the objectifying tendencies of eros. After considering Kant’s lectures on sexual ethics, I argue that eros is not necessarily objectifying and employ the resources of phenomenology to do so. This requires a departure from traditional Husserlian phenomenology, since an eros that preserves alterity must relinquish intentionality and constitution of the other. The transcendental-phenomenological mirrors of analogy are insufficient to constitute the other as truly other, but instead render the other as another me.

Such is the contention of Levinas, whose ethical critique of phenomenology enhances our appreciation for the radical alterity of the other. We see this in Levinas’s account of eros in *Totality and Infinity*, which describes the experience of the beloved in terms of an “intentionality without vision.” I explore this notion further using Jean-Luc Marion’s work on the topic, incorporating his discussion of the counter-intentional gaze of the other, the saturated phenomenon, and his treatment of the distinction between *Leib* (flesh) and *Körper* (objective body). This distinction is essential to our discussion, for a non-objectifying erotic gaze requires one to attend to the beloved as irreducible, invisible, and invisible *flesh*. Seen in this unseeing regard, the other as flesh functions iconically, whereas the other as eroticized body functions idolatrously.

My ability to respond to the other non-intentionally, as flesh, depends on my personal character. As Paul Ricoeur shows, I can only hear, understand, and respond to the other’s call if I have developed a measure of ethical resources. My proper response to the specifically erotic call thus requires the development of an ethically and erotically sensitive character. This development, I argue, is better accounted for by Ricoeur’s ontology of the self-other relation than in Levinas’s asymmetrical ethics. This ethical response also reveals the fundamentally hermeneutical nature of the erotic. In order to encounter the beloved as irreducible flesh, I must have the ethical and hermeneutical resources to

do so.

Kantian Morality and Eros

In Kant's view, the sexual impulse is unique insofar as it is the only means by which one person can reduce an other to an "Object of indulgence" (*LE*, 163). This carnal desire is "an appetite for an other human being"—not for the other as a human being deserving of categorical respect, but for his/her sexuality (*LE*, 163–4). One desires a sexual partner, not another human being, and so reduces the other to a mere means rather than an end. The other becomes an object to be used, and once the appetite has been satiated, the objectified other "is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry" (*LE*, 163). Kant posits a clear disjunction: one cannot be an object and a person simultaneously, just as one cannot be at once property and person, "the proprietor and the property" (*LE*, 165). These distinctions hint at the difference between the objective body (*Körper*) and flesh (*Leib*). Sexual desire treats the other's body as property to possess rather than the locus of personhood.

The only moral and lawful context for sexual activity, Kant argues, is marriage. The marital covenant involves an exchange of rights in which each person grants the other rights over his/her entire person—"body and soul"—as the "property" of the other. In marriage "one devotes not only sex but the whole person; the two cannot be separated" (*LE*, 167). This marital bond ensures that neither partner can reduce the other to a mere sexual object since sexuality is inseparable from personhood within this relation. This is a curious claim, implying that by mutually granting the other complete rights over his/her person as property, spouses are irreducible to the status of an object. Marriage protects me from objectification because my entire person, rather than my sexuality alone, becomes the property of the other. Kant thus establishes a sort of dialectic: I yield myself as property of the other, the other reciprocates complete rights over herself, and I thereby "win myself back" through exchange in this *commercium sexuelle* (*LE*, 167). The mysterious union in which two become one ensures that neither partner is reduced to an object.

But is the situation as simple as Kant suggests? Does the marital bond accomplish all that Kant supposes? In Kant's view, sexual activity within marriage does not degrade those involved because it is not an exchange of objectified bodies, but rather an exchange of whole persons. But surely this does not eliminate the possibility that spouses might treat each other as sexual objects. Even within marriage one can aim at the other's sexuality while excluding her personhood.¹ A more nuanced phe-

nomenology of the erotic reveals that the difference between desiring the beloved as other and as object does not lie simply in marital status. Kant supposes that one can grant someone complete rights over her whole person, but this agreement does not abolish the fundamental alterity of the other. The *commercium sexuelle* does not bring the other into my horizon in transparent presence. Despite marital and sexual union, the other remains decisively opaque to me, marked by a difference that cannot be overcome. There are more complex factors that determine whether my treatment of the other is objectifying.

The alterity of the beloved is so complete as to be agonizing. Sitting beside her, seeing her there, so utterly there rather than here, her presence testifies to her otherness. Her words, her voice, her movements—all so unlike my own—issue from a place I can never go. The inaccessibility of this elsewhere crushes me. Nothing, no imaginative ingenuity, will allow me to see our world from her perspective. Yet what is so foreign to me is familiar and mundane for her. She takes herself for granted. After she has gone, the room still reverberates with her residual presence. The space she occupied only moments ago now echoes with her absence, as though the room is not ready, or not willing, to release it. In the words of Rilke, "Streets that I chanced upon,—/ you had just walked down them and vanished./ And sometimes, in a shop, the mirrors/ were still dizzy with your presence and, startled, gave back/ my too-sudden image."²

I look at the pictures on the wall, trying to see them as they might appear to her, but I can never see them as she sees them. I see them only as pictures that she has seen. I made a recording of songs for her. I listen to each one over and over again, in hopes of hearing them as she will hear them. I read and re-read the words I wrote for her, trying to read them as she might. I try to imagine how she will read them, the rhythms she will discover in them, the words that will stand out to her. I hope to find one thing that we can experience in precisely the same way and thereby establish some union between us. "Who knows? perhaps the same/ bird echoed through both of us/ yesterday, separate, in the evening...." Yet I despair, for as Rilke writes, she never arrived. She was "lost/ from the start."

The beloved never arrives in pure presence. I desire to experience her as I experience myself, but she always eludes me. Although this can create great anxiety for lovers, Levinas suggests that this irreducible difference is essential to eros. Unlike Aristophanes's myth in Plato's *Symposium*, in which the lover seeks to reunite with his other half, the soul mate to whom he was originally united, the erotic does not "presuppose a preexisting whole," in which case love would amount to fusion. But the

"pathos of love ... consists in an insurmountable duality of beings. It is a relationship with what always slips away.... The Other as Other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery" (70, 86). Eros excludes the relationship of possession; the beloved can never become my property, *pace* Kant, because the other's very person cannot be contained within this schema. Even if she yields herself to me as fully as she might, I never succeed in overcoming this difference. She never arrives, and always escapes.

This elusive alterity of the beloved goes a long way in explaining why the erotic impulse tends toward objectification. Kant is correct insofar as he recognizes that sexual desire often aims at the sexuality of the other, rather than at the other as a person. But he is mistaken in suggesting that sexuality always aims at the other as an object and is never an "inclination which one human being has for an other *as such*" (LE, 164). The tendency toward objectification can also be motivated by the radical alterity of the other as person, since this is precisely what cannot be adequately objectified. Because the beloved so effectively eludes any attempt to grasp her, the lover seeks some means of comprehending her, and this lust for complete comprehension is due to the alterity of the other as flesh, not merely as a sexual object. Objectification is derivative and a perversion of the desire for the other's person. Lust desires the other as an eroticized body (*Körper*), but this is not the whole story. Genuine eros desires the other as eroticized flesh, as an animated body (*Leib*) of another person qua person. Thus eros without objectification is not only possible, but one can only preserve the erotic by avoiding objectification. Eros that does not descend into objectifying lust requires the radical alterity of flesh. In order to situate this distinction between body and flesh within the phenomenological tradition, we must briefly consider Husserl's account of intersubjectivity.

Husserlian Intentionality and Intersubjectivity

Husserl's account of intersubjectivity is not specifically concerned with the erotic, but it establishes several points from which we might depart, and must finally distance ourselves, in order to arrive at our understanding of the erotic. In the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations* we find Husserl's response to allegations that transcendental phenomenology amounts to a transcendental solipsism. If the entire world of experience owes its constitution to the transcendental ego, Husserl must demonstrate how other subjects transcend the conscious processes of the subject. In other words, Husserl wants to show that other subjects are subjects in their own right, and not mere automata.

In the transcendental reduction, the ego finds itself "uniquely singled out." He is self-reflexive, experiences the world from a first-person perspective, and experiences himself as *Leib*, i.e., as "flesh," "animate organism," "psyche," or "psychophysical unity." The other, by contrast, only appears as *Körper* or objective body (CM, 97). Despite the fact that the other is given transcendently as body, the ego constitutes the other as flesh through an apperceptive transfer, drawing an analogy from his sphere of ownness to the body that appears. One form of this passive synthesis is pairing or association (CM, 110–2). The primordial psychophysical ego originally perceives itself as *Leib*, while the body of the other appears in the sphere of ownness as *Körper*. Because of the similarities between them, a passive, primordial pairing takes place in which the ego transfers the sense of his own *Leib* to the other's *Körper*.

This transfer of sense also takes place through appresentation (CM, 114). Those aspects of an intentional object that are originally given serve as transcendental clues, hinting at another side—an unrepresented side, so to speak. But this unrepresented side is not simply absent; it is appresented. While perceiving a cube at any given moment we only perceive three of its sides, while the other three sides are apperceived. The other side of the cube is absent at the moment, but at any other moment we can change our spatial relation to the cube and thereby render the absent side present. Similarly, appresentation is important to the ego's constitution of the other as another ego. Unlike a cube, one cannot perceive the other ego simply by altering our perspective, since one can never assume the first-person perspective of the other. That said, the ego's sphere of ownness has a self-reflexive spatiality that constitutes any space that it occupies as a Here, while every space other than its present location appears as a There. But since every There functions as a possible Here for the ego, when another body appears There, the ego can imagine itself experiencing that There as its own Here. This imaginative ability motivates an analogizing apperception, since the ego senses that this other body perceives its location over There as its own primordial Here (CM, 117). In other words, the other must be experiencing that location in the same way as I would if I were there. I apperceive another vantage point and thus another subject within the world, one inaccessible to me and existing in her own right.

We might ask whether these apperceptive transfers allow the other to appear as such, since she only appears according to the determinations of my consciousness. All that appears does so through its constitution by the ego. In an experiential sense, all that exists for him, by him, and through him (CM, 98). It would seem that if alterity is not abolished in this primordial ownness, it is certainly circumscribed. The other appears

as merely another me. Yet this is precisely what eros reveals as impossible: I can never truly imagine what the other's experience over There is like for her. I can never see the photos in my room as she sees them; I can never hear a piece of music exactly as she hears it. The crucial point is not that I can convert any There into my own Here, but that I can never experience a There exactly the way the other experiences it as Here.

We must acknowledge that Husserl does want to preserve the genuine alterity of the other, insofar as the ego can never directly perceive the other as flesh, but only as body. One can never perceive the subjectivity of the other as flesh; in the words of Jean-Luc Marion, "flesh escapes phenomenality as such" (*IE*, 114). Flesh is the locus of the other's subjectivity in the world, and is irreducible to my sphere of ownness. In recognizing this, however, we must also question whether Husserl successfully preserves the alterity of the other.

Ethics and the Ontology of the Self-Other Relation

Subsequent thinkers have criticized Husserl's account of intersubjectivity, charging that his analysis of transcendental apperception violates the alterity of the other and succeeds only in duplicating the ego.³ For Husserl the other functions as a mirror, reiterating the same rather than remaining open to the other as such. This is Levinas's critique, which alleges that phenomenology is essentially a philosophy of representation by which the other is assimilated by and included in the ego.⁴ Husserl recognizes that the other is irreducible, qua ego, to my own primordial sphere of ownness, but Levinas goes further than this: the other is not available to analogy, pairing, or appresentation: "The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us" (*TI*, 194). I cannot establish common ground with the other on which to understand him.

Levinas describes the face of the other as an epiphany, which presents something that resists representation and refuses any comprehension or possession. The epiphany is the appearance of that which cannot appear; it is the manifestation of that which lies beyond manifestation. The epiphany imposes from "above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form," yet without any representational mediation or image (*TI*, 200). The epiphany punctures the horizon of the ego, rupturing the sameness of its egoistic ownness, revealing that which is utterly other. It is unexpected, cannot be anticipated, and cannot be contained. The subject finds himself decentered, and "is utterly unable in its regard"

(*TI*, 78–9). The subject also finds himself obligated; prior to any understanding or description of the other—prior to ontology, phenomenology, or hermeneutics—comes infinite obligation, calling the subject to responsibility for the fate of the other. In other words, the epiphany of the other is the call to an ethics of responsibility.

As Ricoeur observes, Levinas's analysis here inverts Husserlian intersubjectivity. Both Levinas and Husserl assume that any movement between the ego and the alter ego is unilateral. Husserl grounds the movement to the other in the initiative of the transcendental ego, while Levinas counters this by insisting on the initiative of the other. Without the unexpected epiphany of the other's face, the subject would never initiate ethical action. But Ricoeur contends that we do not need to choose between these two options, arguing that "there is no contradiction in holding the movement from the Same toward the Other and that from the Other toward the Same to be dialectically complementary" (*OA*, 340). In supporting this claim Ricoeur challenges a fundamental assumption in Levinasian ethics: the identification of the subject with the same. Levinas stresses the radical separation between self and other ("The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not" [*TO*, 83]), but Ricoeur presents an ontology of personal identity that involves both the sameness of the person (*idem*) and the dynamic selfhood of the person (*ipse*). The dialectical interplay between constancy and change, between sameness and difference, results in a model of the subject not as a discrete, autonomous master of sameness and totality, but rather a person who is the subject of discourse, action, narrative, and ethical commitment. Personhood, rather than being the subject of traumatizing alterity, therefore entails a process of ongoing definition through its relations with otherness. I must stress that this interrelation between self and other need not amount to a truncation of alterity; the relation between myself and another does not reiterate the other in my own image. The other remains utterly irreducible, but this does not eliminate the possibility of interaction and a modicum of understanding. We are not, after all, monads.

Ricoeur's emphasis in this regard is important, for it applies a crucial corrective to Levinasian ethics. Levinas insists that the ethical injunction must originate with the other, assuming that my narcissism blinds me to the demands of others—hence the need for an epiphany to puncture my egoism. But we must also consider that this injunction nevertheless requires a recipient capable of responding to it. In other words, I require a measure of ethical and hermeneutical resources in order to respond to the other. Herein lies the importance of Ricoeur's distinction between ethics and morality: "ethics" is grounded in the Aristotelian heritage that

stresses the teleological nature of virtuous character, referring to "the aim of an accomplished life," lived "with and for others" (OA, 170, 180). Morality, on the other hand, is grounded in the Kantian deontological tradition which emphasizes obligation, referring to "the articulation of this aim in norms characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effect of constraint" (OA, 170). One cannot appreciate and respond to the imperatives of moral norms or injunctions if the self lacks the ethical resources of virtuous character.⁵ The development of *phronesis* in ethical and hermeneutical practice is consequently a prerequisite for response to the epiphanic injunction of the other.

Erotic Intentionality

Within the realm of eros the enigma of the other presses into us with an exigency beyond that of other intersubjective experiences. The erotic relation, while bringing people into closer contact than any other type of interaction, also leaves the most vivid impression of the radical difference between self and other. Rather than hindering eros, however, the enigma of alterity is its lifeblood. Levinas touches on this with his notion of the feminine, by which he refers not to a specifically gendered notion of sexuality but rather to the "contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other" (TO, 85). The feminine always eludes the grasp of the lover; it never arrives in full presence. This sort of concealing unconcealment is the essence of erotic profanation, which is "the revelation of the hidden as hidden." Profanation "constitutes a model of being irreducible to intentionality, which is objectifying even in practice" (TI, 260). Likewise with Levinas's use of the term voluptuousness, which refers to the profanation that "discovers the hidden as hidden." Voluptuousness profanes without seeing. It is "[a]n intentionality without vision, discovery does not shed light: what it discovers does not present itself as *signification* and illuminates no horizon" (TI, 260). Like the face, the feminine is a type of epiphany: "Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the I survives in it" (TO, 88–9). Unlike the face, however, the feminine offers no instruction. It inheres outside of signification and "presents a face that goes beyond the face" (TI, 260). Moreover, the erotic presents a face that goes beyond personality, fading into "ambiguity, into animality" (TI, 263). The erotic response to the other involves a reversal of roles, as Edith Wyschogrod observes; eros is not due to one's initiative, but in responding to the beloved the "asymmetry persists but is reversed. The Other becomes a plaything" (TI, 263).⁶ I will return to this point later, but for now it suffices to highlight the features of erotic intentionality. To

recall Levinas's words, it is "an intentionality without vision" that subverts the noesis-noema correlation and exceeds any possible intentional constitution. It is beyond possibility and actuality, because it exceeds any constitution as such.

Marion picks up Levinas's discussion of erotic excess and intentionality, accepting the difficulties involved in such a task, yet also challenging Levinas and moving beyond his analysis. First, the difficulty: Marion recognizes the paradox of erotic intentionality, asking "What can I ever love outside of myself, given that the progress of loving consists in reducing all alterity to myself, under the figure of represented?" (PC, 71–2).⁷ If love is a state of consciousness, who is to say that love for the beloved is not merely a love for my constitution of the beloved? It might seem so if the other is an intentional object, and thus a collection of my lived experiences. Perhaps this state of affairs is akin to idealization of the beloved, which typically amounts to a love of being in love. But according to Marion, the intentionality of love avoids narcissism when "it is a matter neither of objects nor appropriation. In contrast, it is a matter of the Other as such, irreducibly distinct and autonomous" (PC, 75). Although I begin with my lived experiences and consciousness of the other, love transcends pure interiority because the other is irreducible to my constitution of her.

Intentionality is not concerned with the immanence of consciousness, but with the intentional, alter object. "Alterity completes intentionality," and *a fortiori* the beloved completes erotic intentionality. As Marion writes, "love consists precisely in a dimension that intentionality opens, untiringly decentering the immanence of consciousness and distending without limit its lived experiences, in view of a vanishing point that is by definition always beyond what any intuition will reach" (PC, 79). In eros we do not merely seek intentional objects, but other subjects—hence the problem of intersubjectivity for Husserl. But intentionality never opens "directly onto an other subject" (PC, 80), and so the lover relinquishes hopes of intentional access to the other as subject. Eros depends on this. The erotic can only survive if the other remains invisible. This is the meaning of flesh; the invisible "appears" as flesh, yet is irreducible to my intentional gaze. Flesh saturates the intentional gaze, remaining irreducible to phenomenality. Characterized by excess, the non-appearance of flesh is what Marion calls a saturated phenomenon.

The Saturated Phenomenon

In contrast to Kant, with his *a priori* conditions for phenomenality, and Husserl, who also circumscribes phenomenal possibilities (despite his

radical aims), Marion outlines the possibility of phenomena whose intuitive excess ruptures the determinations of concepts, categories, and intentionality. Marion cannot understand why Husserl would champion a return to the things themselves only to qualify his battle cry with the conditions of intentionality, horizon, and the constituting ego, so he proposes the possibility of an intuitive *donation* that exceeds the limits of the horizon and remains irreducible to intentional constitution by the ego—an unconditioned and irreducible phenomenon, the phenomenon par excellence. Such phenomena are saturated with intuition, phenomena “in which intuition would give *more, indeed immeasurably more*, than intention ever would have intended or foreseen” (SP, 195). Intuition overwhelms the capacity of the concept; with the saturated phenomenon, “intuition is no longer exposed within the concept, but saturates it and renders it overexposed—invisible, not by lack of light, but by excess of light” (SP, 197). The saturated phenomenon gives more than we can ever receive.

This intuitive excess overwhelms any attempt to contain it. It is “*invisible*”—from the French *viser*, because the *visible* refers to that which can be aimed at, meant, or intended. It is unique, and resists any analogy to other experiences. It “refuses to let itself be looked at as an object,” since it frustrates attempts at constitution (SP, 209). It requires, in Levinas’s words, intentionality without vision, because it cannot be “regarded” or “looked at”—from the French word *regarder*, which suggests the ability “to keep the visible that is seen under the control of the one who is seeing and who is, consequently, a voyeur” (SP, 210).⁸ The absolute phenomenon saturates to the point of drowning voyeurism. The saturated phenomenon consequently leads to a paradoxical sight *sans* seeing. The constituting ego is unable to constitute the phenomenon, but instead “experiences itself as constituted by it.” The intentional relation is inverted, reversed, such that the constituting I becomes a constituted me.

This reverse or counter-intentionality opens a space in which one can truly love the other as other. Such an erotic intentionality is a saturated intentionality; my horizon overflows with the excess of the irreducible other, and I find myself constituted by the saturated phenomenon. Marion describes the erotic phenomenon as “the exchanged gaze.” When I gaze at the beloved, I discover a gaze that is directed toward me, yet which I cannot see. The gaze of the other is invisible and *invisible*, because I can neither see it nor aim at it, yet I experience myself as its aim. In Marion’s words,

[M]y gaze ... sees an invisible gaze that sees it. I do not accede to

the Other by seeing more, better, or otherwise, but by renouncing mastery over the visible so as to see objects within it, and thus by letting myself be glimpsed by a gaze which sees me without my seeing it—a gaze which, invisibly and beyond my aims (*invisiblement*), silently swallows me up and submerges me, whether I know it or not, whether or not I want it to do so (PC, 82).

This counter-gaze issues from the depths of the other, and so remains hidden from me. Yet it appears like an epiphany in the visible other, appearing while remaining invisible. In Marion’s description, we experience it in the face of the other. But unlike the epiphany of the face in Levinas, for whom “the whole body—a hand or a curve of the shoulder—can express itself as the face” (TI, 262), the locus of the invisible gaze resides in the invisible point in the center of the eyes. Although other features of the face might be more expressive, we gaze into the other’s eyes, “or more exactly the empty pupils of the person’s eyes, their black holes open on the somber ocular hollow.” The pupils are “the sole place where precisely nothing can be seen.” In the pupils “all visible spectacle is impossible” (IE, 115). In the pupils, “the living refutation of objectivity,” we learn to love by relinquishing our ability to see (PC, 81). The erotic gaze does not discover the other by imaginative ingenuity, apperception, or any other means of intentionality. I can only approach the beloved by giving up intentionality itself in favor of a non-intentional intentionality.

Relinquishment of intentional determination is a condition of genuine eros and is the appropriate response to the other’s gaze. The erotic intentional gaze is met by a counter-gaze of injunction—an injunction to respond to the beloved as other rather than object—resulting in a crossing of gazes: “two definitively invisible gazes (intentionality and injunction) cross one another, and thus together trace a cross that is invisible to every gaze other than theirs alone” (PC, 87). The other will likely not even realize that her gaze issues as an injunction; the injunction of the other “is not received by derived appresentation, in which the originary presence would reside in the other.... It actually arises in me, as one of my lived experiences.” This counter-intentional injunction is similar to iconic phenomena, which Marion treats extensively in his writings, since icons present the same challenge to my status as constituting ego. One cannot constitute the icon or derive a univocal meaning from them. In his words, “What I see of them, if I see anything of them that *is*, does not result from the constitution I would assign to them in the visible, but from the effect they produce in me” (IE, 113).

This suggests that the effect of the icon depends on my capacity to receive its injunction, which recalls our earlier point stressing the impor-

tance of ethical resources. Unlike Levinas's suggestion that the epiphany renders me "utterly unable," we must also stress the necessity of ethical character, which develops at least a modest level of ability. As Ricoeur has shown, while the call to response might originate in the other's initiative, the event of any response at all requires my own capacity to appreciate the call and respond, however feeble my response might be.

Eroticized Body and Flesh as Saturated Phenomena

The beloved saturates my intentional horizons with an excess of intuition. Nowhere do I experience the alterity of the other with greater urgency than in the erotic moment, for never do I desire to access another more completely. Yet in order to approach the beloved as truly other, an erotic intentionality must be an intentionality without vision, a sight *sans* seeing. Only by relinquishing my ambitions of accessing her intentionally can I begin to approach her as other, and recalling Husserl's distinction, as flesh rather than mere objective body. In the erotic I desire the other as flesh—as incarnate psyche, and as flesh she is *invisible*. Eroticized flesh is a saturated phenomenon. It is clear that in the erotic the other often appears as less than *Leib*, and more as eroticized *Körper*, and yet as eroticized body the other also exceeds my aims and intention. Even as an erotic object, she frustrates intentional constitution. She is *invisible*, and thus impossible to keep under my gaze, just like the face. The erotic gaze always seeks more, yet cannot aim at anything, cannot pin anything down. Like Levinas's description of the caress, it seeks without knowing what it seeks. The caress resembles "a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something Other, always Other, always inaccessible, and always still to come [*à venir*]." The seeking of the "caress is the anticipation of this pure future, without content" (TO, 89).

Both modes of being—*Leib* and *Körper*—act as saturated phenomena, but in different ways. This much is in keeping with Levinas's discussion of the ambiguity of eros, which consists in the play between transcendence and carnality. The beloved is both wholly other and carnal "plaything," akin to a "young animal," in Levinas's words. As perceptive as this description is, it is not entirely satisfactory. Levinas does not explore the ethical dimensions of the erotic relationship, but construes the erotic as a private refuge from the seriousness of the ethical and political,⁹ which then provides a portal to the ethical and political through fecundity. Taken in itself, erotic love is an *égoïsme à deux*, but the engendering of a child opens this private society to the larger concerns of the community. This assumes, however, a fundamental narcissism in eros, that love

simply loves being loved, and requires fecundity to rupture its closure. Although this might be true in many (even most) instances, must we conclude that it is necessarily so?

More pressing for our present concerns, however, is the ethical dimension of the ambiguity of the erotic. There is a deep yet ambiguous relation between the transcendence and carnality of the beloved, which is why she can appear both as *Leib* and *Körper*. One can approach the beloved as erotically saturated flesh, and as erotically saturated body. Eroticized flesh preserves the alterity of the beloved, saturating my horizons and rupturing my aim and reversing my intentional gaze. In this regard it acts iconically. Eroticized body, however, acts idolatrously; it too saturates my horizons, but it fills my gaze and acts like a mirror.

The difference between the idol and the icon, between eroticized body and eroticized flesh, is vital. Eroticized body, like *Körper* in general, is characterized by phenomenal appearance, but unlike other, non-erotic forms of *Körper*, it eludes a comprehensive gaze. It is unbearable, which is precisely why I embrace it. The overwhelming saturation of the erotic forces me to appropriate it gradually, yet as quickly as I possibly can. My intentional cycle races, and in each moment I find myself able to bear more of the unbearable, yet still grasping for more. In this sensual experience each successive moment washes over me, scarcely allowing me to recover before the next wave floods over and through me as I bear the unbearable. Every moment summons the hidden, calling it forth in the desire to complete the disclosure.

But I never succeed in uncovering the beloved entirely. She eludes my grasp, no matter how available she makes herself, no matter how complete or even perverse the disclosure becomes. This is because the eroticized body is never truly other, but is analogous to myself. Like the idol in Marion's description, the eroticized body functions as a mirror. Eros reduces to a search for an exterior site for my own pleasure, and is consequently confined to my own interiority. The body of another becomes the site of my attempt to experience my own pleasure outside of myself. But as Marion observes, an eroticism that aims at the other merely as *Körper* cannot avoid the decline to solipsism:

Bodies lack flesh, and this is why bodies cannot accede to any Other whatsoever, nor propose themselves as real Others—as bodies of flesh. Without flesh, no body can accede to love, for it remains unaffected by an Other person, or even any sort of Other. Restricted to bodies without flesh, contemporary eroticism slides inevitably into solipsism, an eroticism without Other (PC, 159).

Just as Husserl's transcendental intersubjectivity reduces the other to the same, when eros aims at the objective body, it only receives itself in return.

The eroticized body thus tends toward idolatry. Like the idol, it begins with the visible and attempts to ascend to the invisible, and always fails. It saturates, it dazzles the gaze, it is insatiable—but it ultimately functions as a mirror, reflecting the intentionality of my gaze. Eros returns to me as a graven image, like the idol, which Marion describes as a "god whose space of manifestation is measured by what portion of it a gaze can bear" (*GWB*, 92).¹⁰ No matter what portion my gaze can bear, the phenomenal, objective body permits no subject into the beyond of flesh.

One sees this explicitly in pornography. Pornography is eros reified and textualized, erotic solipsism formalized. As Marion writes, idolatry fixes the divine such that "the human gaze is frozen, and thus, opens the site of a temple" (*GWB*, 14). Pornography establishes a temple that aims at the complete disclosure of eros, hoping to frame it entirely—the more explicitly the better. It sets up a secular temple devoted to the absolute reduction of the other to the phenomenal, leaving nothing to the imagination.¹¹ But the flesh of the other never arrives. The other never arrives as flesh, never indwells this temple. Quite the contrary: the more complete this reduction, the more completely the other evacuates the scene. Pornography thrives on analogy, like the idol, for it creates a graven image of the other, cast in one's own image. The people depicted are not the embodiment of genuine others, but merely embody the subject's fantasies. The sex objects make themselves available, open, to fill any role and go by any name. The ego remains the master of ceremonies, for the objectified other will reflect and enact his desires.

As a type of idol, pornography begins with the visible body in hopes of ascending to the invisible, *invisible* flesh of the eroticized other. But "flesh can take body; body can never take flesh" (*IE*, 88). Pornography cannot give flesh to the eroticized body. It is precisely the absence of flesh that silences the injunction from the other. The injunction not to "kill" the other need not amount to a physical murder, as Marion observes. Killing also involves a reduction of irreducible humanity and objectification: "'To kill' thus indicates the destruction of the other person or thing, its objectivization into an insignificant term ... without force or proper value" (*IE*, 126). This is the murderous objectification that Kant describes in his lecture on sexual ethics, for it entails the loss of human dignity, the reduction of the other to the status of object. In other words, it involves the reduction of the other as flesh to mere objective body. Erotic objectification kills flesh.

When the beloved saturates my horizons as eroticized flesh, I experi-

ence a sort of phenomenality otherwise than in the eroticized, objectified body.¹² As Marion writes, "flesh escapes phenomenality as such," and we have just seen how eroticized flesh escapes all attempts to reduce it to phenomenal objectivity. We can now see more clearly why Marion insists on a non-intentional intentionality in approaching the beloved. Flesh has a non-appearing appearance, a non-phenomenal phenomenality, and is saturated such that I cannot "look at" or "regard" it. Flesh appears as body, so if I try to intend it I will consistently end up with *Körper*. Flesh cannot be kept under intentional control, so its manner of appearing is consequently similar to the epiphany of the face.

For this reason flesh also acts iconically.¹³ Unlike the eroticized body, which mirrors my gaze, the flesh of the other refuses my attempts to grasp it. It is not a case of "the visible advancing in search of the invisible," as with the idol, which we see taken to extremes in pornography. With the icon, and with flesh, "one would say rather that the invisible proceeds up into the visible, precisely because the visible proceeds from the invisible" (*GWB*, 17). Flesh is the manifestation of the other from beyond. Flesh is her incarnation; flesh is the "givenness of the self."

Also similar to the epiphany of the face, flesh is marked by radical singularity. As a saturated phenomenon, it eludes any sort of analogy to other flesh. One might contend that erotic relations with a variety of others admit or even invite analogies and comparison, but that would be a comparison of eroticized bodies, not flesh. Sexual activity of this sort permits analogy only because these others have become objective bodies, disposable and replaceable. Flesh, by contrast, is marked by its uniqueness, its *ipseity*: "Two *ipse* are never the same flesh, neither do they have the same flesh" (*IE*, 98). Nor does the erotic relation with the other as flesh permit any analogy that would act as a mirror of my own desires. I encounter the flesh of another with her own perspective and concerns, needs and desires, all of which issue from a place that lies utterly beyond me. The eroticized flesh of the other appears epiphanically, and I discover that the beloved transcends me completely.

It would seem that the erotic relation, while not involving the fusion or comprehension of persons, would nevertheless involve singular persons. Yet Levinas suggests otherwise, that eros is essentially an a-personal event. The face fades into an "impersonal and inexpressive neutrality," which prolongs into "ambiguity, into animality. The relations with the Other are enacted in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal" (*TI*, 263). In the erotic we do not travel via "a more detoured or more direct way, toward the Thou." Rather, the erotic as "hidden—never hidden enough—is beyond the personal" (*TI*, 264).

What are we to make of this? Should we interpret the notion of "be-

yond the personal" as a "disjunction" of personality and sexuality?¹⁴ We have seen that eros can tend toward the sub-personal, as in relations with the other as an objectified body, but when one is involved with the other as flesh, I would resist this description. Certainly the *ipseity* of the other's flesh always eludes me; the other's persona never comes to full presence, no matter how intimate the relation.¹⁵ But to borrow a phrase from Marion, this is due to excess rather than lack. The erotic escapes personality only insofar as personality escapes the erotic grasp; therefore the phrase "beyond personality" is misleading. One does not transcend personality in the erotic; personality transcends the erotic.

If Kant is correct and sexual desire aims at the sex of the other rather than the other person as such, we must ask why we desire particular others rather than anyone in general. When we desire the other as objective, interchangeable body we might desire one instead of another because of aesthetic preference, but this desire remains sub-personal. But what if I desire the beloved because of her personality? Perhaps there are bodies that are firmer or more shapely than hers, but I desire her as *flesh*, as the evanescent embodiment of her irreducible personality. As flesh, which "accomplishes facticity and assures individuation" (*IE*, 96), the beloved is not analogous to any other flesh. Perhaps the carnal roles we fill in the erotic game suggest a realm beyond personality, but it is precisely this particular other that I want to see fill that role. This carnal play is the carnality of flesh, not merely body, and eroticized flesh is a carnality saturated with personality.

The importance of personality is a factor common to both the erotic and the ethical. Marion argues that the radical singularity, or *haecceitas*, of the other is crucial if we are to hear the injunction of the other: "Love passes beyond responsibility only if the injunction reaches atomic particularity: love requires nothing less than *haecceitas*, which is also situated beyond essence" (*PC*, 95). Love moves beyond essence, beyond quiddity, but not beyond personality.

What sort of injunction might this be? The injunction that arises iconically from the other, as flesh, need not be a univocal communiqué. The injunction to responsibility, and to love, may vary as much as singular others vary. Marion expands Levinas's account of the injunction, extending the injunction of the face beyond the ethical command of "Thou shalt not kill" to

... other injunctions, just as strong, whether existentielle—'Become who you are!'; existential—'Determine yourself as the being for whom being is at stake'; religious—'Love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind'; moral— "Do not

do unto others what you would not want done unto you'; even erotic—'Love me' (*IE*, 118).

The eroticized other, as flesh, as icon, calls me to love her, though here we might consider using the term "invitation" rather than "injunction." I am called to concern for my beloved, called to love her responsibly, but the erotic call sounds more like an invitation than an injunction. But what of Levinas's suggestion that the face fades in the erotic? He contends that with eros, the signification of the face disappears into a lack of signification, into "an expression that ceases to express itself, that expresses its renunciation of expression and speech" (*TI*, 263).¹⁶ But is the ambiguous signification of eros due to a lack of signification?

No. As Marion argues, the face itself "does not know what it says, or, more exactly, it cannot say the meaning that it expresses, because it does not know it itself" (*IE*, 120). The face "never expresses a meaning or a complex of defined meanings" (*IE*, 121). This should raise little controversy, for its injunctions have no catalogued vocabulary, no formalized syntax. But this lack of determinate conceptual meaning "is not by default, but by excess. The face expresses an infinity of meanings at each moment and during an indefinite lapse of time" (*IE*, 122). Consequently, the face calls not for ignorance, but for an infinite hermeneutic, an endless task of interpreting in loving. The same would extend to the flesh of the other, for its iconic nature calls for an endless, erotic hermeneutic. This loving interpretation would not consist of attempts to constitute or capture the other's presence in a final, exhaustive understanding, but rather in an ongoing response to, and interpretation of, the carnal other who summons me.

This infinite hermeneutic is essential to the ethical practice of eros. Not only do I love through this endless hermeneutic, I also discern how not to love. Eros has tremendous power. It speaks volumes, and does so quite eloquently. But since this eloquent speech is also perhaps the most primal and carnal, its call can be overwhelming. The radical alterity of the other can initiate the lust for comprehension, the urge to objectify so as to contain or comprehend the other. Ethics consists in one's response to this radical alterity, and responding properly, I suggest, is a hermeneutical task. Our world shows many examples of inappropriate responses to the power of eros; I have considered but one of them in this paper (pornography). Our response requires interpretation and understanding.

Such a response also requires ethical character, which recalls Ricoeur's ontology of the self-other relation. Just as hermeneutics is necessary in one's erotic relations, so does my response to eros require a measure of ethical resources.¹⁷ I require sufficiently virtuous character if

I am to heed the call of the other. This is especially true in erotic relations, since my ability to attend to the beloved as eroticized flesh rather than an eroticized body requires the development of virtuous habits and virtuous ways of approaching her. If I am to learn to see the other as other, rather than using her as a mirror of my own desires, I must develop the erotic and ethical character to be capable of doing so. I must learn to relinquish the desires of intentionality, and trust her invitation to love her. I must learn how to love.

We began our discussion with Kant's account of the objectifying tendencies of eros in hopes of discovering the possibility of a non-objectifying, ethically sensitive phenomenology of the erotic. In doing so we distanced ourselves from Husserlian intersubjectivity and eventually from intentionality itself. An eros that is properly ethical, that preserves the alterity of the other as iconic flesh, requires that one give up intentionality and the constitution of the other. The transcendental-phenomenological mirrors of analogy are insufficient to constitute the other as flesh rather than objective body, and end up rendering a graven image of the other as idol. The beloved, like all others, never arrives with transparent immediacy, so an eros that is properly erotic likewise preserves the alterity of the other as iconic flesh, saturated with personality.

Although Levinas's insights have significantly shaped the structure of this argument, we have also had to distance ourselves from certain of his positions, most specifically his asymmetrical ethics. Levinas enhances our appreciation for the radical alterity of the other, and points to the epiphanic manifestation of the invisible, transcendent other manifest in the visible and phenomenal, while remaining irreducible to it. But as Ricoeur has shown, a certain reciprocity is necessary in ethics, for I can only hear, understand, and respond to the other's call if I have a measure of ethical character. My proper response to the erotic injunction thus requires the development of an ethically and erotically sensitive character. In order to see the beloved as flesh, I must become a person capable of doing so.

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Notes

1. Further, as Marion argues, this sexual commerce can never involve an exchange of whole persons, but by its nature interprets persons as objectified bodies. "The more I deliver my body in exchange for reciprocity (reimbursement, economy), the less I give it." *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 104–5.

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, "You Who Never Arrived," in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. and ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 131.

3. Or, as Marion suggests, "Husserl wrongly calls this operation intersubjectivity; in fact, it is only a matter of intersubjectivity mediated by common objects, which would be better named an inter-objectivity" (*PC*, 162).

4. "Representation consists in the possibility of accounting for the object as though it were constituted by a thought, as though it were a noema. And this reduces the world to the unconditioned instant of thought" (TI, 128). "A thing is *given*, offers itself to me. In gaining access to it I maintain myself within the same" (TI, 194).

5. Moral response requires "resources of *goodness* which could spring forth only from a being who does not detest itself to the point of being unable to hear the injunction coming from the Other." See OA, 189.

6. Also see Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 131.

7. This is why Levinas still understands love as a narcissistic relation: to love is to love the other's love for me, to love oneself, and thus to return to oneself; it remains a "dual egoism" (TI, 266). Thus Kant's construal of the *commercium sexuelle* is essentially egoistic, as it fulfills itself in a return to oneself. Kant's notion of winning oneself back through this exchange is a sort of *Aufhebung* premised on his belief in the fusion of two persons. Levinas does not believe that such fusion is possible, and so concludes that the return to self is destined for narcissism. Eros transcends this dual egoism, however, through fecundity, i.e., the engendering of a child.

8. "Confronted with the saturated phenomenon, the *I* cannot not see it, but neither can it look at it as its object. It has the eye to see it, but not to look after it [*pour le garder*].... It sees the overabundance of intuitive *donation*, not, however, as such, but as it is blurred by the overly short lens, the overly restricted aperture, the overly narrow frame that receives it—or rather, that no longer accommodates it. The eye apperceives not so much the appearance of the saturated phenomenon as the blur, the fog, and the overexposure that it imposes on its normal conditions of experience. The eye sees not so much an other spectacle as its own naked impotence to constitute anything at all" (SP 210).

9. Richard Cohen makes this point: "Precisely one of the virtues, if one may so speak, of eros, is not only its pleasures but its privacy, its dual solitude, permitting a temporary refuge, as it were, from the serious and unending tasks of ethics and politics in an unredeemed world." Richard Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 211.

10. Also see Marion's comments elsewhere: "my idol exposes the span of all my aims—what I set my heart on seeing, and thus also want to see and do. In short, it denudes my desire and my hope. What I look at that is visible decides who I am. I am what I can look at. What I admire judges me" (IE, 61).

11. This is similar to Marion's discussion of the idolatrous in painting, which "excludes absence and deception from the look. All is there to see, nothing is kept in absence or sheltered by appresentation.... The painting *adds* presence to presence, where nature preserves space and thus absence" (IE, 66). Later: "The painting offers us a saturated phenomenon—but it saturates as well as the natural visibles that our look imagines it sees by itself, although in fact it only sees something there starting from a painting and in the frame of an idol" (IE, 70). Compare with Levinas on the beautiful in art: "The beautiful of art *inverts* the beauty of the feminine face. It substitutes an image for the troubling depth of the future.... It presents a beautiful form reduced to itself in flight, deprived of its depth. Every work of art is painting and statuary, immobilized in the instant or in its periodic return.... Beauty becomes a form covering over indifferent matter, and not harboring mystery" (TI, 263). But in another discussion we might ask whether this is the only possible description of beauty in the aesthetic.

12. I do not wish to suggest that these two modes are so radically different that I experience the other exclusively in one of the two modes. It is quite possible that the two can intersect and alternate in an erotic encounter; hence the "ambiguity" of eros in Levinas's account.

13. Here I agree with Levinas's claim that the entire body can act as the face.

14. Cohen, 211 n. 12.

15. For another treatment of this and related themes, see Chapter 1, "Toward a Phenomenology of the *Person*" in Richard Kearney's *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

16. "The principle 'you shall not commit murder,' the very signifyingness of the face, seems contrary to the mystery which *Eros* profanes, and which is announced in the femininity of the tender" (TI, 262).

17. Note Ricoeur's response to Levinas, emphasizing the capacity "to distinguish the master from the executioner, the master who calls for a disciple from the master who requires a slave. As for the master who teaches, does he not ask to be recognized in his very superiority? In other words, must not the voice of the other who says to me: 'Thou shalt not kill,' become my own, to the point of becoming my conviction, a conviction to equal the accusative of 'It's me here!' with the nominative of 'Here I stand?'" (*OA*, 339).

For MFG