**Phenomenology of Religious Experience**

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# The Numinous, the Ethical, and the Body. Rudolf Otto's "The Idea of the Holy" Revisited

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I investigate the non-rational, affective dimension of religious experience that Rudolf Otto attempted to address with his notion of the numinous. I argue that this notion is best understood in terms of an atmospheric quality impacting on the subject's feeling body. Therefore, I draw on discussions in phenomenology and pragmatism, despite the fact that Otto's own epistemological framework is rooted in a different tradition. Drawing on those discussions helps defend some of Otto's claims about the relation between the non-rational, affective dimension and reason against the prevalent accusation of unscientific mysticism. I then illustrate the yet unexhausted potential of these very claims by arguing that the numinous in Otto's sense plays an irreducible role in the ethical reflections of such distinct authors as Kant and Levinas.

**Keywords:** Rudolf Otto; atmosphere; Dewey; Kant; Levinas; phenomenology

## Introduction

Among the classics in philosophy of religion is Rudolf Otto's 1917 book *Das Heilige* (*The Idea of the Holy*). It has influenced the work of Mircea Eliade, Max Scheler, Gerardus van der Leeuw, C.S. Lewis and many others. In his study, Otto gives detailed descriptions of a peculiar affective dimension of religious life. As the subtitle of his book, *An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, already suggests, Otto is interested in analyzing a particular affective dimension of religious experience that is at the same time supposed to be non-rational, non-conceptual or non-discursive. The affective dimension in question is called "creature-feeling" or, more precisely, "numinous" feeling, and can be preliminarily characterized as "the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures."[1]

In this paper I will introduce some of the central ideas in Otto's book, develop them further in light of later especially phenomenological and pragmatist research on bodily feeling, and consider their potential significance for moral theory. In section 1, I will set out Otto's claims concerning the object-relatedness of that feeling as well as its relation to the conceptual—or "rational"—dimension of human experience. First, I will present his claim that the various "rational" meanings in religious life and the specific doctrines related to it could not be properly understood without taking the non-rational element of "creature-feeling" into account. Then I will turn to Otto's view on what one could approximately label the *intentionality* of the relevant feeling: The "creature-feeling" would be misunderstood if it was construed as a mere state of mind without taking into account that it is "about" something other than the subject. This something is called the "numinous", and I will suggest that it is preliminarily conceived of as the specific "formal object" of the feeling in question.

**1** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

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Conceiving of the numinous as the formal object is, I think, appropriate and can also help dispel a plethora of criticism that accuses Otto of unscientific mysticism. However, the notion of formal object is not as informative when it comes to making sense of the full phenomenological potential in his descriptions, especially with regard to the implications concerning the non-rational or non-conceptual dimension of experience. For this reason, I suggest in section 2 that the concept of the numinous can be further enriched in the light of Dewey's notion of quality and the phenomenology of the bodily apprehension of atmospheres. As such, my focus will be more on the phenomenological and pragmatist aspects in Otto, rather than on the Kantian-Friesian perspective that is also at work in *The Idea of the Holy*.[2]

Against the backdrop of these specifications, I then set out the central traits of Otto's descriptions of the numinous as a felt quality in section 3. Finally, in section 4, I attempt to locate these exact traits in two influential accounts of moral obligation, namely Kant's answer to the question of how the subject can be motivated to act for the sake of the moral law itself and Levinas' theory of the subject's responsibility to the absolute Other. The upshot is that at the very least these accounts need—unwittingly or not—to refer to the numinous as a felt quality and thus to a non-rational or non-conceptual, affective dimension of experience.

# 1 Central claims in *The Idea of the Holy*

## 1.1 The non-rational dimension

In this section I wish to introduce two of the central claims in *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto's first claim concerns the relation between the affective dimension of religious experience and reason. It is related to his suggestion to conceive of the numinous as "'the holy' *minus* its moral factor or 'moment', and [...] minus its 'rational' aspect altogether."[3] Otto argues that religious experience involves a "creature feeling". This "creature-feeling" is conceived as a "non-rational" dimension of life.[4] This talk of a "non-rational element in the idea of the divine" is supposed to capture that the "creature-feeling" cannot be exhaustively explicated in terms of concepts and their logical association.[5] Rather, it is the other way around: Taken by themselves, "rational" or conceptual contents, such as the idea of a transcendent reality or the doctrine of original sin, are mere possibilities of thought, and the subject could consider them while remaining completely indifferent as to whether they apply in actuality. What is lacking in this case is the subject's intuition that something real is intended by those contents, and according to Otto, this intuition is achieved by the very "creature-feeling" that involves specific "feelings of abasement and prostration and of the diminution of the self into nothingness."[6]

Many will find this claim strange, and indeed, Otto has been much criticized for his discussion of the non-rational dimension. Feigel, one of Otto's earliest critics, regarded *The Idea of the Holy* as a "manifestation of a more general trend toward irrationalism."[7] Heidegger criticized that the "concept of the irrational, after all, is supposed to be determined from out of the opposition to the concept of the rational, which, however, finds itself in notorious indetermination."[8] More recently, Agamben has given the following withering assessment of Otto's approach: "Here, in a concept of the sacred that completely coincides with the concept of the obscure and the impenetrable, a theology that had lost all experience of the revealed word, celebrated

**2** Phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler or Hermann Schmitz have perceived a tension between a more phenomenological and a more Kantian tendency in Otto's work. See Almond, "Rudolf Otto and the Kantian Tradition", 52 f.; Gooch, *The Numinous and Modernity*, 161 f.; Schmitz, *Das Reich der Normen*, 155.

**3** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 6.

**4** This is, at least as far as I can see, a more appropriate way of putting it than the "irrational" in the German original text.

**5** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 61.

**6** Ibid., 53.

**7** Gooch, *The Numinous and Modernity*, 133 f. See Feigel, *Das Heilige*.

**8** Heidgger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 54.

its union with a philosophy that had abandoned all sobriety in the face of feeling."[9] These and many more critics take issue with Otto's attempt to investigate the non-rational dimension of religious life.

A closer examination of Otto's account, however, reveals that the substance of his position is more closely related to less disputed accounts than it might seem at the outset. Otto's claim about the non-rational dimension is, for instance, similar to William James' argument about temper and its influence on philosophical thought: Given a rather "tender-minded" background orientation towards the world, you will more likely be attracted to idealistic and optimistic theories, whereas the "hard-minded" may find a materialistic and pessimistic view more persuasive.[10] A similar correlation is acknowledged by Heidegger himself in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Heidegger presents a peculiar "homesickness" as the fundamental attunement of philosophizing in which we who philosophize are "driven" to "being as a whole".[11] According to Heidegger, the proper meaning of metaphysical concepts such as "world", "finitude" and "individuation" can only be grasped by those who philosophize in and out of that peculiar attunement.

Another, more recent framework to which Otto's talk of the non-rational dimension can be related is Ratcliffe's notion of existential feelings as specific ways of finding oneself in the world.[12] On the basis of phenomenological as well as pragmatist insights, Ratcliffe argues that an existential feeling provides the subject with what he calls a pre-intentional background orientation toward the world (or a specific situation).[13] Against the backdrop of specific existential feelings, particular intentional acts are supposed to receive—or lose—their intelligibility. Besides many other examples, Ratcliffe describes a radical form of hope that, unlike less radical instances of hope, cannot be interpreted as an intentional state of the form "I/we hope that *p*", even if one assumes a very general propositional content, such as "good will ultimately come of this".[14] Ratcliffe argues that the same feeling of radical hope can be explicated in terms of various propositions ("life will go on", "the world is ultimately good", etc.) whose contents cannot simply be reduced to one another. He claims, instead, that the content that those propositions aim to capture is different in form compared to the content of typical intentional states such as "I/we hope that *p*". With regard to the latter, it seems much easier to assume a single, core propositional content. Furthermore, Ratcliffe argues that if the pre-intentional orientation provided by radical hope was somehow lost, a person could not adopt the more specific attitude of hoping for anything in particular.

In short, I suggest that we interpret Otto's claims about the relation between the "creature-feeling" as a non-rational dimension of religious life and its conceptual articulation in a similar manner. Thus, to return to the two examples mentioned earlier, the idea of a transcendent reality or the doctrine of original sin should not be regarded as bizarre vagaries. Rather, they should be understood as explications of a specific way in which a subject finds herself in the world.

However, it is important to mention that this does not rule out that the "creature-feeling" as the non-conceptual, pre-intentional backdrop of particular religious beliefs and doctrines is co-shaped by concepts. To deny this possibility would be to misunderstand Otto's position. Indeed, Otto claims that, in the course of religious history (and, arguably, in the course of a religious person's lifetime as well), the "creature-feeling"—or what I will come to call the "numinous" feeling—passes through a process of development from a more primitive "daemonic dread" to more mature forms of worship, reverence and devotion.[15] This

**9** Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 50.

**10** James, *Pragmatism*, 3 ff.

**11** Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 5–7.

**12** Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 2; 38 ff.

**13** Ratcliffe's insistence on the background orientation being *pre-intentional* is, at least potentially, misleading as it seems to presume a very narrow sense of intentionality. In this narrow sense, intentionality simply amounts to a subject being directed to one or another particular object, say a person, a cup, or the fact that I owe you one hundred dollars, whereas the background orientations toward the world Ratcliffe has in mind cannot be said to be such forms of object-directedness. Being orientations toward the world, however, existential feelings can be said to be intentional in a somewhat broader sense, namely in terms of "intentionality as a pointing-beyond, as an openness to what is other than the subject" (Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 133). Put in the terminology that I will introduce in section 2, they disclose or are about the underlying and pervasive quality of the world (or a specific situation) in which the individual finds herself.

**14** Ratcliffe, "What is it to Lose Hope?", 603.

**15** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 113 f.

process is described as a rationalization and moralization of the more primitive forms. According to Otto, concepts—especially ethical concepts—enrich and refine the feeling in question.[16] So, for instance, the peculiar feelings of self-depreciation and absolute profaneness involved in the "creature-feeling", although they are originally not connected to the awareness of having transgressed a moral law, can appropriate "meanings derived from social and individual ideals of obligation, justice, and goodness" and take shape as sense of sin.[17] According to Otto, it is only where the "creature-feeling" is rationally enriched and/or ethically refined that we can speak of the holy in the proper sense. The enrichment of the relevant feeling is possible as those meanings from other spheres of life are just as dependent upon the affective dimension of human life as religious meaning is. I will return to this in section 4 and present two ways in which the numinous feeling is shaped by ethical concepts.

## 1.2 The "numinous" as "an object outside of the self"

Otto's second claim concerns the status of the creature-feeling: He rejects psychologism about religious feelings and ascribes to them an intentional structure (without using this terminology). Taken in itself, the "creature-feeling" can be regarded primarily as a self-conscious emotion, "a feeling concerning one's self in a special, determined relation, viz. dependence."[18] Yet according to Otto, this view is too restrictive. The "creature-feeling" is part of a more comprehensive affective dynamic involving a reference to something beyond or other than the subject: "Rather, the 'creature-feeling' is itself a first subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling-element, which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside of the self."[19] Otto calls this object "the numinous"[20] and explicitly draws on James' conjectures about the origin of the Greek gods: "It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call '*something there*,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed."[21] Whenever Otto wishes to highlight the affective reference to that "something there", he speaks of "numinous feeling"[22] instead of "creature-feeling".

What kind of object is that "something there" acknowledged by James and subsumed under the category "the numinous" by Otto? Is the numinous given in the same way as cups, trees, persons, states of affairs or other instances of what we generally call objects of consciousness? This somewhat rhetorical question implies that one would need to explicate a peculiar sense of objecthood in order to make sense of Otto's central claim that the numinous feeling "has immediate and primary reference to an object outside of the self."

To begin with, it may be useful to draw on the distinction between material object and formal object that goes back to a suggestion by Kenny.[23] Whereas the material object or *target* of feelings such as

**16** Ibid., 114.

**17** Ibid. 114, 54 f.

**18** Ibid., 10. Otto here refers to Schleiermacher's conceptualization of the feeling of (absolute) dependency as it is laid down in *The Christian Faith*.

**19** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

**20** Ibid., 11. In late versions of *Das Heilige*, Otto put the matter somewhat differently and identified the "object outside of the self" not with the "numinous", but with the "numinous object", i.e. the numen as the bearer of the numinous quality. See Otto, *Das Heilige*, 11. This change, like some other departures from certain views expressed in earlier versions of *Das Heilige* (see Gooch, *The Numinous and Modernity*, 167), may be connected with the late Otto's move towards an ethics of value. Whatever reason he might have had for changing the relevant passage, I doubt that it was supposed to imply that the numinous is no longer considered to be something beyond or other than the subject. As far as I can see, such an implication would ultimately render Otto's criticism of what he takes to be Schleiermacher's position pointless. In any case, the following interpretation aims to make sense of Otto's earlier intuition that the numinous is something out there, as it were.

**21** James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 58.

**22** "Numinoses Gefühl" in German, sometimes translated with "numinous emotion" or "numinous consciousness". See Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 137.

**23** Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, Ch. 9.

fear or anger consists in *what* is feared or *whom* one is angry with (a dog baring its teeth or an arrogant colleague), the formal object denotes the specific *evaluative property* attributed to the target by the relevant feeling.[24] So, for instance, in fearing the dog you evaluate it as being dangerous, as being the "bearer" of an evaluative property called danger, and in anger you evaluate your colleague as offensive, as being the "bearer" of offense as the formal object of anger. In the current discussions on the philosophy of emotions, this technical distinction between target and formal object is broadly accepted.

Within this framework, the numinous as an "object outside of the self" can be conceived of as the *formal object* of a peculiar kind of feeling in a similar manner as offense is the formal object of a feeling we call "anger" or danger is the formal object of fear. A more thorough description of the numinous will follow in section 3, but we can preliminarily think of it in terms of awefulness and mysteriousness. In fact, Otto suggests a distinction that is formally very similar to Kenny's:

> I shall speak then of a unique "numinous" category of value and of a definitely numinous state of mind [*Gemüts-gestimmtheit*, i.e. attunement –H.N.], which is always found wherever the category is applied. This mental state is perfectly sui generis and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined.[25]

> There must be felt a something numinous, something bearing the character of a numen, to which the mind turns spontaneously; or (which is the same thing in other words) these feelings can only arise in the mind as accompanying emotions when the category of the numinous is called into play.[26]

That is, the "numen" signifies the relevant target (material object) of the numinous feeling whereas the "numinous" signifies the specific and irreducible evaluative property (formal object) in terms of which the target is apprehended. Among the possible instances of a numen are, arguably, particular cups, places, stars, books, animals, persons, events, propositions, or complex ideas such as the Kingdom of Heaven.

Otto does not claim that all these instances necessarily evoke a numinous feeling in each and every person. Actually, a lot of persons may be said to be insensitive to the numinous, as he admits.[27] However, he indeed attempts to argue that the numinous is an a priori category which implies that there is a universal capacity in human beings to experience the numinous.[28] Focusing on the *phenomenologist* Otto rather than on the *Kantian* theologian (who believed his epistemological standpoint to be superior to that of James), his talk about the a priori category could be reinterpreted as a claim about the numinous feeling being irreducible to other feelings such as shame, guilt, fear or horror. That is, the numinous differs in kind rather than in intensity from the humiliating, accusatory, dangerous or horrifying qualities in terms of which the targets of those emotions may be apprehended.[29] Ultimately, the argument is a hermeneutical one: To be sure, the numinous feeling can be refined and shaped from more primitive forms such as "daemonic dread" to more advanced ones such as worship, but the more primitive form cannot be understood appropriately in isolation from the more complex, synthetic quality of which it is an integral moment.[30] This is supposed to mean that the proper meaning of "daemonic dread" and other early forms of the religious can only be grasped against the background of a more comprehensive sense of the numinous. Otto gives a couple of reasons for this view: For one, those more primitive forms are not entirely superseded, for more refined forms also occur in more "mature" religious life.[31] Secondly, however, when they occur in this latter context, they do so as something enriched by—or inextricably connected with—other elements, say further feeling-elements such as the mysterious or moral concepts such as truthfulness.

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**24** Deonna and Teroni, *The Emotions*, 78.

**25** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 7.

**26** Ibid., 11.

**27** Ibid., 8, 55.

**28** Ibid., 116 ff. See Almond, "Otto and the Kantian Tradition", 62.

**29** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 45.

**30** Ibid., 137.

**31** Ibid., 17. Throughout his book, Otto presents examples from a variety of religions in order to illustrate this claim. From all these examples, I pick only two for the sake of brevity: "He is the living God : … at His wrath the earth shall tremble and the nations shall not be able to abide His indignation" (Jer. 10:10). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

## 2 The numinous as atmospheric quality

So far, I have argued that we can make better sense of Otto's claim about the numinous being an object outside of the self if we understand it as referring to the formal object of an emotion. That is, the relevant feeling refers to the (correctly or incorrectly) perceived numinous quality of an object in the same manner fear may refer to the (correctly or incorrectly) perceived dangerousness of a dog. However, in the present context, the talk of "formal object" may cause a misunderstanding. Kenny himself introduces it in a context that has been labeled as a "disembodied stance" of cognitivism in which the body gets lost.[32] In current discussions on the philosophy of emotions, however, the term "formal object" is often used synonymously with the "evaluative property" that the analysis of an emotion ascribes to this emotion's target.[33] It is this evaluative property or, as I prefer to say, *quality* that is the point in the distinction between target and formal object as it is understood in current discussions.

Furthermore, some of the participants in these discussions argue that the apprehension of the evaluative quality in the light of which the target is perceived is a matter of feeling, or more precisely, bodily felt tendencies—not only "the tendency to move away, towards or against a given object, but also the tendency to attend to an object, to submit or to be drawn to it, to disengage from it, or even to suspend any inclination to interact with it, and so on."[34] As far as I can see, such accounts are viable, and this would imply that there is a constitutive link between the evaluative quality (often referred to as the formal object of an emotion) and bodily feeling. However, with regard to the rich phenomenological descriptions that Otto has to offer, further conceptual specifications are needed. For this reason, I suggest appealing to pragmatist as well as phenomenological findings concerning bodily felt qualities.[35]

Consider a proposition such as "God is transcendent". According to Otto, the concepts "God" and "transcendent" derive their meaning from the numinous feeling. Such a proposition, therefore, would be regarded by Otto as an attempt of giving a specifically numinous feeling, referring to "something there", a rational expression. In a more general manner, John Dewey argues that any existential proposition such as, for instance, "the native American was stoical" or "the stone is shaly" ultimately refers to what he calls a particular pervasive quality against the backdrop of which single objects alone and their attributes such as "native American", "stone", "stoical" or "shaly" can make sense.[36] Such pervasive qualities holistically define the scope and context—the "situation"—by the implicit clues of which any thought, insofar as it is methodic and distinct from the lose association of ideas, is oriented or even guided ("controlled").[37]

Dewey holds that the priority that situations and their unifying qualities have over objects and attributes is not only valid with respect to logic, but also with respect to experience: Our experience is originally about

**32** See Colombetti and Thompson, "The Feeling Body", 49.

**33** See, for instance, Helm, "Emotions as Evaluative Feelings", 251; De Sousa, "Emotional Truth", 251.

**34** Deonna and Teroni, *The Emotions*, 80. On this account, shame of oneself, for instance, "is an experience of oneself as degraded, precisely because it consists in feeling one's body ready to act so as to disappear into the ground or perhaps from the view of others" (ibid., 81). See also Helm, "Emotions as Evaluative Feelings", 249: "[T]o feel fear is to be pained *by danger*, whereas to feel anger is to be pained *by an offense* [...]. In short, emotions are pleasant or painful precisely in that they are feelings of these evaluations impressing themselves on us." Helm himself is skeptical about the bodily dimension of these feelings, but this seems to result from a rather narrow perspective on bodily feelings as if they could have only the body and its states as their object (ibid.). For an alternative approach to bodily feeling see Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 93 ff.; 106 ff.

**35** One may wonder about the compatibility of these two theoretical frameworks. Is not pragmatism embracing what phenomenological investigation seeks to "bracket", namely a somewhat naturalistic attitude? However, recent works suggest that, especially in the broader domain of embodiment, phenomenology and pragmatism are not only compatible, but that a dialogue between both traditions looks very promising. See Gallagher, "Pragmatic Interventions into Enactive and Extended Conceptions of Cognition", 23 f.; Mulligan, "How to Marry Phenomenology and Pragmatism"; Hills, "Pragmatism and Phenomenology. A Reconciliation"; Krueger, "James on Pure Experience"; Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 219 ff.

**36** Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization*, 94 f., 97 f.

**37** Ibid., 96 f. There are some interesting congruencies between Otto and Dewey. For instance, in a manner similar to Otto's talk of a refined understanding of the numinous, Dewey assumes that the situation characterized by a pervasive quality may in the first place be intuited in a "relatively dumb and inarticulate and yet penetrating" manner (ibid., 100 f.). It is the felt pervasive quality that provides the faculty of reflection and rational elaboration with subject matter, whereas reflection and rational elaboration can articulate, make explicit and also abstract from that matter (ibid., 101).

situations and thus ultimately about such pervasive qualities underlying them.[38] The qualities in question are "felt rather than thought", and they are felt in a similarly anti-psychological manner as the numinous is felt in Otto.[39] These qualities, Dewey further argues, are not experienced in terms of a static state of affairs, but in terms of active forces. Thus, he claims, with regard to that kind of experience, that rather than stating "that thing... is... red", it is more accurate to say that "this reddens"—"either in the sense of growing, becoming, red, or in the sense of making something else red."[40] Indeed, in a similar vein, Otto would argue that propositions such as "God is transcendent" refer to an experience that, among other things, includes the apprehension of some activity on the part of the numen as an essential aspect, for instance the sense "this withdraws from my grasp".[41]

However, in this context Dewey does not mention a more direct aspect of experiencing active forces, and this is where findings from the phenomenological tradition come in. "This reddens" may also implicate a certain impact on the experiencing subject. Those who study the psychological effects of colors maintain that colors "do" something to those who behold them. For example, red is supposed to appear somewhat aggressive: red, then, is supposed to "penetrate" the eye, to have a "rending", "decentering" effect, etc., whereas blue "retires" from the perceiver, "drawing" him or her after it, calling one to "contemplate" it.[42] Probably, many would agree that, independently from individual preferences, certain blue tones communicate something cooling and constricting, certain "red-yellow" tones something warming and relaxing, whereas some red tones come across as exciting. I think such kinds of impact on the subject are close to what Otto has in mind when discussing the numinous quality in terms of active forces.

The point, however, is not to find one culturally invariant and eternally valid description of what, for instance, red and blue exactly do to us. The point is that we need to understand that apprehending Deweyan qualities underlying "that thing is blue", "this reddens", but, arguably, also "God is transcendent" intimately involves finding oneself exposed to certain pressures, pulls, tensions, and relaxations. According to some phenomenologists, we may call these *atmospheric* qualities or *atmospheres*.[43] Rather than being sensations in the body and having the body as their sole object as it would be the case with, say, pain, atmospheric qualities can be sensed as forces that are manifest in the feeling body's environment. More precisely, they characterize that dimension of the surrounding space that is apprehended by way of bodily feeling rather than by way of vision, audition, straightforwardly tactile experience, etc.

Detailed accounts of the feeling body and its sensitivity to atmospheric qualities have already been proposed.[44] Rehearsing the arguments would exceed the scope of this paper, so I restrict myself to some of the most important points arising from this discussion. Examples of atmospheric qualities in the sense intended here include the tension in the air you immediately sense when entering the room before even being aware of the particular circumstances, the spontaneous collective embarrassment from which you hardly can escape,[45] or walking across the platform at a public meeting feeling the "eyes" of a number of strangers "fixed" upon you.[46] In all these situations, the respective qualities diminish your sense of being

**38** Ibid. 105 f. In other words, Dewey defends anti-psychologism about qualities.

**39** Ibid., 99.

**40** Ibid., 106.

**41** See Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 29 f. The idea in question is expressed more explicitly in one of Otto's later revisions of the original German text: "The *mirum* as the 'wholly other' is initially the ungraspable [das Unerfaßliche] and incomprehensible [Unfaßliche] [...] that evades our 'grasp' insofar it 'transcends our categories'." (Otto, *Das Heilige*, 35 f.; my translation).

**42** Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 310; Goldstein and Rosenthal, "Zum Problem der Wirkung der Farben auf den Organismus", 23 ff.; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 244.

**43** Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 244; Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 32 f.; Schmitz, *Atmosphären*, 67 ff.; Griffero, *Atmospheres*, 5.

**44** Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*; Slaby, "Affective Intentionality and the Feeling Body"; Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*; Böhme, *Atmosphäre*; Schmitz, *Der Leib*; Griffero, *Atmospheres*.

**45** Nörenberg, "Elementary Affective Sharing".

**46** The latter example comes from James, "What is an Emotion?", 195. Here, James himself seems to be more concerned with "the bodily modifications wrought in us by the awareness that our fellow-man is noticing us" (ibid.) than with the sense of the environmental quality involved in such an awareness.

unencumbered in the course of your dealings with the world.[47] This sort of diminishment is something you can feel bodily, though the body itself is no more the sole object of the feeling than the touching hand is the only thing felt when touching a shaly stone.[48] Rather, the bodily felt inhibitions are specific ways of relating you to the world around you, or, in Otto's words, an "immediate and primary reference to an object outside of the self", where, as I submitted, the "object outside of the self" is understood as the pervasive atmospheric quality of a situation.

Atmospheric qualities can also be invoked by concepts. Here is a simple but instructive example adapted from Lipscomb:

> Suppose I tell a student that he may not make up an examination on which he has done badly. [...] What I articulate to him—the words, or the quasi-legal reality they represent—is not itself feeling. But because the words, or the reality they represent, dash his hopes, they will have a felt force for him.[49]

This felt force can be described not only in terms of "frustration" (Lipscomb), but arguably also in terms of a momentary sense of losing footing in the situation. Until the student regains his composure, the world will probably show him a very different character, perhaps involving a sense of the world becoming unfamiliar and slipping away from him. In other words, the relevant speech act, insofar as it is appropriately understood by its addressee, introduces an atmospheric shift to the situation.

Before I turn to Otto's rich and nuanced descriptions of the numinous in terms of atmospheric quality, it must be noted that a theory of atmospheric qualities and bodily feeling is certainly not on his philosophical agenda. However a lot of claims implicit in his descriptions make more sense if we interpret them as being about atmospheric qualities. For instance, Otto claims that the numinous quality implicates what he calls an "abdrängendes Moment".[50] This has been translated as "daunting character", whereas a more literal translation would be something like "pushing-away character". To be sure, the "daunting" element is clearly also implicated in the relevant quality and, therefore, the translator's decision is reasonable. Furthermore, one would have had to make sure that something like "pushing away" would not be understood in the generic sense of removing physical objects, for this is certainly not what is intended by "abdrängend" here. However, what I think *is* intended by it is precisely a particular atmospheric force in terms of which the numinous quality is felt. Thus, I assume with other commentators[51] that Otto's phenomenological descriptions refer to the numinous as an atmospheric quality, despite the fact that his conceptual apparatus of Kantian-Friesian lineage seems ill-prepared to accommodate that notion.[52]

In this perspective, something—a person, an object or a reality represented by words—qualifies as a numen, if it is apprehended as the appropriate thematic center of the subject's attention while the subject is affected by a numinous atmosphere. That is, if that something is apprehended as that from which the numinous atmosphere emanates like, for instance, a tension in the room may "emanate" from the persons present there; or as that something in which the numinous atmosphere "condenses", like the stoicism which affects you bodily (and that is in contrast to your own state of mind) may condense in another person (who may not even be aware of it).[53] Unlike the targets of the relevant emotions, atmospheres are not straightforwardly intentional objects, though they are experientially present as something beyond or other than the bodily subject. Most often, they are present as something in which the subject finds herself—and, as the example of the tension in the room suggests, sometimes they are so even before their thematic center is correctly identified. In the context of this paper, we may regard an atmosphere as the more or less implicitly co-intended, but nevertheless deeply orienting bodily dimension of what in cognitivist accounts goes under the name "formal object".

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**47** Of course, other sorts of atmospheric qualities have different effects on the subject. The jolly atmosphere dominating a party communicates something uplifting that is, by the way, not only felt by those who are actually entrained by it, but also by that old grouch who balks at its impact and deems it foolish. See Griffero, "Who's Afraid of Atmospheres", 206.

**48** See Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 93.

**49** Lipscomb, "Moral Imperfection and Moral Phenomenology in Kant", 62.

**50** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 19, 31.

**51** Schmitz, *Das Reich der Normen*, 155; Lauterbach, „*Gefühle mit der Autorität unbedingten Ernstes*", 80; Wolf, *Krop og Atmosfærer*, 133.

**52** Schmitz, *Das Reich der Normen*, 155.

**53** See Schmitz, *Das Göttliche und der Raum*, 133; Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 33; Griffero, "Who's Afraid of Atmospheres?", 201.

# 3 Traits of the numinous quality

It is now time to turn to Otto's more detailed descriptions of the numinous quality and to further explore the numinous' specifically atmospheric character. As we will see, Otto describes the various traits of the numinous quality in terms of bodily feelings aroused in relation to "an object outside of the self", strengthening the comparison between the numinous and atmosphere. Otto distinguishes several elements or characters according to their relevant effects on subject: *tremendum, maiestas, energicum, mirum, fascinans, augustum* (or *sanctum*). After all that has been said in the previous sections about Otto's irreducibility-thesis about the numinous and the specifically holistic notion of quality further delineated with some help of Dewey, it should come as no surprise that we should not conceive of these "elements" in terms of isolated units that would simply have to be added up in order to make up the numinous quality. Rather, we should conceive of them as integral parts of a synthetic whole, that is the numinous quality.[54] And just as one particular trait of a more comprehensive gestalt can be distinguished from others that are temporarily receded into the background[55], the various characters of the numinous may—"under definite conditions"[56]—come to the fore or recede.

## 3.1 *Tremendum, maiestas, energicum, mirum, fascinans*

The *tremendum*, the awful, has already been touched upon in the previous section as the daunting, repellent, forbidding, abherent, uncanny, unapproachable character implicated in the numinous quality. Where this character outbalances the others or—what is often tantamount to this—remains rather crude instead of being shaped by rational concepts, it can provoke instances of awe and daemonic dread. However, according to Otto, it is also recognized in more refined forms of awe, for instance, as the "Wrath of Yahweh" as a devastating force impending to "discharg[e] itself upon any one who comes too near".[57] Whether the *tremendum* appears in its cruder forms or whether it comes synthetically enriched with moral ideals that "become the 'will' of the numen, and the numen their guardian, ordainer, and author", those who are sensitive to it tend to tremble, shudder, halt and are rendered speechless.[58] Otto also argues that the awe as the bodily felt impact of the *tremendum* can be clearly distinguished from other, more "natural" instances of dread or fear:

> It is a remarkable fact that the physical reaction to which this unique "dread" of the uncanny gives rise is also unique, and is not found in the case of any "natural" fear or terror. We say: "my blood ran icy cold", and "my flesh crept". The "cold blood" feeling may be a symptom of ordinary, natural fear, but there is something non-natural or supernatural about the symptom of "creeping flesh". And any one who is capable of more precise introspection must recognize that the distinction between such a dread and natural fear is not simply one of degree and intensity. The awe or dread may indeed be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man's hair bristle and his limbs quake. But it may also steal upon him almost unobserved as the gentlest of agitations, a mere fleeting shadow passing across his mood. It has therefore nothing to do with intensity, and no natural fear passes over into it merely by being intensified. I may be beyond all measure afraid and terrified without there being even a trace of the feeling of uncanniness in my emotion.[59]

The element called *maiestas* characterizes the numinous quality further in terms of its "overpowering" effect on the subject. Where it is in balance with the daunting character of the *tremendum*, Otto speaks of the "aweful majesty" of the numen.[60] This character provokes religious humility:

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**54** *The Idea of the Holy*, 137.
**55** Think, for instance, of William E. Hill's *My wife and my mother-in-law*. See Roberts, *The Emotions*, 70 ff.
**56** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 129.
**57** Ibid., 18.
**58** Ibid., 114, 16 f.
**59** Ibid., 16.
**60** Ibid., 20.

> Thus, in contrast to "the overpowering" of which we are conscious as an object over against the self, there is the feeling of one's own abasement, of being but "dust and ashes" and nothingness.[61]

Among other things, the German text offers "Versinken"[62] (sinking down) as a further characterization that again emphasizes the bodily dimension of the relevant feeling: The overpowering force to which the subject is exposed reveals itself in a specific instance of felt pressure with a downward "vector", related to the proprioceptive character of sinking down and curling up as well as to the felt readiness or even prompting to bow or kneel down. It is a character of irresistibility which also induces an obtrusive sense of powerlessness, "impotence"[63] or, more specifically, an inability to compete.

The *energicum* refers to the energy and urgency that is felt in the numinous quality. It is recognized, for instance, when people talk about Yahweh being a "jealous" god or as the urgent, compelling and activating character of whatever normative content is currently identified as the "will" of the relevant numen.[64] The *energicum* character may eventually encroach on the individual in terms of a vitalizing effect and sweep her away. In that case she herself becomes highly vigorous, zealous and rigorous with regard to the normative content in question.[65] The effect is quite conspicuous in proselytes and has its most extreme forms in religious fanatics. The vitality and vigor induced by the numinous' *energicum* character, however, does not simply replace the felt impotence induced by the *maiestas* character. The latter remains valid with respect to the subject's position "face to face" to the numen, whereas, where the *energicum* is taken up in subjective feeling, the vector of the powerful force is, so to speak, converted and prolonged into the world as the subject is turning her face toward others.

The *mirum*, then, is the mysterious or, more precisely, that character of the mysterious that is not already exhausted by the *tremendum*.[66] Otto claims that the *mirum* ultimately presents the subject with something having the quality of the "wholly other" in the sense of being beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, the familiar, outside the limits of the canny.[67] This quality, Otto claims, is related not to what *we do not know* but to *what we cannot grasp*: The *mirum* character conveys a sense of there being more than one can "digest" or get hold of in our usual engagement with the world ("something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one"), and predicating incompatible propositions may be one way of expressing this.[68] It invests the relevant numen with the sense of being "incommensurable with our own" so that we "recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb".[69] At the same time, the quality of being "wholly other" "arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind".[70]

Let us consider a famous example from Husserl as a first approximation of what Otto may intend here: Husserl describes the episode of seeing a figure in a store window, "something which at first we take to be a real man", but then, "however, we become hesitant and ask ourselves whether it is not just a mere mannequin."[71] Before the doubt is resolved in favor of one side or the other, the subject boggles. It is easy to see that this conflict can only seize those who have concepts such as "human being" and "mannequin". However, the core of the phenomenon is, according to Husserl, that the "halo" of kinesthetically felt possibilities for interaction afforded by the object in question irritatingly fluctuates so that it now establishes the sense "human" and then again "clothed mannequin".[72] In a similar manner, the "halo" of the numen affords more than the subject can consistently accommodate in those contexts she is at home in.

**61** Ibid.
**62** Otto, *Das Heilige*, 23.
**63** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 21.
**64** Ibid., 19, 24.
**65** Ibid., 19.
**66** Ibid., 25 f.
**67** Ibid., 26.
**68** Ibid., 29. Otto even argues that relative to more refined conceptual apparatuses the *mirum* character can occur in exponentiated forms as the paradoxical or even the antinomical. See Otto, *Das Heilige*, 36.
**69** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 28.
**70** Ibid., 29.
**71** Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 92.
**72** Ibid.

In contrast to Husserl's example, she cannot ultimately resolve or reduce the complexity with time. Elohim in the 38th chapter of the Book of Job, the "kingdom" as it is purported in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth or the way in which Allah's will is accomplished despite the freedom of human will are bearers of a *mirum* character.[73] Something is apprehended as "wholly other" precisely in virtue of its capacity to draw the subject's attention and to simultaneously escape her grasp.

The capacity to draw the subject's attention, however, is tied to another specific character of the numinous quality, the *fascinans*. By virtue of this character the numen "shows itself as something uniquely attractive and fascinating"; it "entrances", "captivates" and transports the subject "with a strange ravishment" or calls forth an experience of bliss.[74] Moreover, the *fascinans* implicates the "overabounding" character apprehended in experiences of "grace, conversion, second birth", "the breaking out of the saving 'Bodhi', the opening of the 'heavenly eye'", the negatively conceptualized, but positively felt Nirvana, or redemption from guilt and bondage to sin.[75] As in the case of *energicum* and *maiestas*, the *fascinans* does not simply replace or supersede the *mysterium tremendum*. Rather, both combine in a "strange harmony of contrasts"[76], arguably in a comparable manner as relief still implicates an adumbration of a previous pressure or some kinds of hardship also involve a felt anticipation of ease. Otto argues that a glimpse of the *fascinans* must already have been present in early forms of daemonic fear, if indeed the increasing tendency of desiring and yearning for the numinous object for its own sake is to be explained.[77]

## 3.2 *Augustum*

Finally, the *augustum* is that evaluative character implicated in the numinous quality in terms of which the numen is apprehended as something that demands and is owed the most respectful recognition.[78] In the *augustum* character, a value "precious beyond all conceiving" is supposed to be recognized in terms of which the relevant numen is invested with "the supremest right to make the highest claim to service". In other words, the *augustum* is supposed to imply something "absolutely" or unconditionally binding. Being aware of one's exposure to a bearer of this character consists in a "self-depreciating feeling-response [that] is marked by an immediate, almost instinctive, spontaneity".[79] The feeling-response in question is supposed to underpin the doctrine of original sin.[80] It shares some important bodily characteristics with shame and embarrassment which have a peculiar "centripetal" or "contractive" character manifest in the subject's "slumped posture, downward head movement and gaze avoidance, covering of the face" as well as in the peculiar bodily feeling of being vulnerable to the "piercing" force of the others' gazes.[81] Otto offers "Zunichte-werden"[82], that is "becoming nothing" or "vanishing into thin air", as a circumscription of the, arguably, bodily felt response to the *augustum*.[83]

However, with respect to this character, it is difficult to maintain Otto's claim about the non-rational or non-conceptual nature of the numinous quality, for it seems impossible to make sense of the *augustum* without any reference to the conceptual capacities of persons. To be sure, Otto argues that the *augustum* is

**73** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 81 ff., 85 f., 92 f.
**74** Ibid., 31.
**75** Ibid., 37 ff.
**76** Ibid.
**77** Ibid., 32 f.
**78** Ibid., 54.
**79** Ibid., 52.
**80** Otto, *Das Heilige*, 67.
**81** Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 222; Schmitz, *Das Reich der Normen*, 67.
**82** Otto, *Das Heilige*, 66.
**83** He also offers "sinking down" here which, as far as I can see, would be more suitable in the context of the *maiestas*. We actually find "Zunichtewerden" also in the context of the *maiestas* (ibid., 23), but having Otto's subtle distinction between *augustum* and *maiestas* in mind (*The Idea of the Holy*, 53 f.), I suggest to associate the vanishing aspect with the former and the aspect of sinking down with the latter.

not reducible to the predications of perfection, beauty, sublimity or goodness.[84] As well as that, the feeling-response of "vanishing into thin air" is not primarily connected with the sense of having done something wrong: To those who are sensitive to it, the feeling in question "comes with piercing acuteness, and is accompanied by the most uncompromising judgement of self-depreciation, a judgement passed, not upon his character, because of individual 'profane' actions of his, but upon his own very existence as creature before that which is supreme above all creatures."[85] While this seems at least arguable, Otto's discussion of the *augustum* sometimes suggests that the evaluative quality in question could be apprehended in absence of any claim or demand connected to it. In this respect, his critic Baetke hits the mark: "A holy that does not oblige to anything is not holy; at best, it is a 'finer awe' ['Edelspuk']."[86] However, it is possible that Otto simply wanted to highlight that no moral concepts in any stricter sense need to be connected with the apprehension of the numinous quality in the first place, whereas his reference to a "claim to service" seems to indicate that the *augustum* character never comes in isolation from *any* normative claim or demand. Yet even in this case it would be very hard to make sense of the *augustum* character as a wholly non-rational or entirely non-conceptual element.

This concern is even more pronounced if we consider Otto's claim that the *augustum* implicates not only the "claim to service"—however one should further specify what this amounts to—but also the "supremest right" to make that claim. For recognizing the right and, a fortiori, the *supremest* or unconditional right to make a claim seems also to imply that the relevant person's conscience is involved and that this person has been able to more or less carefully distinguish the claim in question from other claims less compelling to her conscience.[87] If this is correct, then, insofar as the *augustum* is a genuine character implicated in the numinous quality, the conceptual dimension would be necessarily involved in the numinous feeling and not merely a later add-on that gives it further shape.

However, I think one can still hold a moderate version of the non-rationality claim. According to this version, one can distinguish a more or less non-conceptual dimension of bodily feeling from the conceptual or rational aspects involved in the recognition of the *augustum* character. Both the conceptual as well as the non-conceptual bodily dimension are involved, and, for the reasons that I have already discussed, it does not make sense to claim that the latter precedes the former. Nevertheless, I submit, we can, at least conceptually, distinguish the respective roles of both dimensions in the constitution of the *augustum* character's meaning and will find that the non-conceptual bodily dimension's role is irreducible in the sense that the conceptual elements alone cannot exhaust that character's meaning.[88] More precisely, one could argue that when a person feels compelled to comply with a given normative demand after having carefully reviewed it, she has not only conceptually understood that demand and its consistency with other normative premises or with what other minds are assumed to expect from her: Where she actually feels bound to the demand, this also involves a felt incapacity to prevail with one's own desires over it.[89]

Importantly, this is not just the *maiestas* character of overpowering or overwhelming, "before which there is no alternative to blind, awe-struck obedience".[90] Rather than simply succumbing to what leaves the subject limp, it is, at least in the context of the numinous, the recognition of a claim to service as binding "in an absolute sense" on pain of that global negative self-assessment manifest in the feeling-response circumscribed above as "vanishing into thin air". That is, the *augustum* is a peculiar character not only in terms of conceptual distinctions, but also with regard to its effects on the bodily dimension. In the absence of those effects, Otto seems to suggest, a person is, of course, still able to review demands and to feel

**84** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 53; Gooch, *The Numinous and Modernity*, 119.

**85** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 53.

**86** Baetke, *Das Heilige im Germanischen*, 44.

**87** Schmitz, *Das Reich der Normen*, 155; 141 f.

**88** Otto calls this "participation" (*The Idea of the Holy*, 31) or—more literally—"wefts" of "non-rational elements" (*Das Heilige*, 49).

**89** See also Schmitz, *Das Reich der Normen*, 16: "A norm is *binding* in the perspective of that person from whom it exigently compels a willingness to conform. The compulsion is *exigent*, if the one compelled is able to escape from conforming only in an ambivalent, faltering, inhibited, precarious manner without being in agreement with himself." (my translation)

**90** Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 54.

committed by them, but she would not evaluate any of those demands as deserving an "absolute", that is unconditional, acknowledgement.[91] Therefore, I think, one can hold a more moderate version of Otto's non-rationality claim also with regard to the *augustum* character.

If my analysis is correct, then the various characters implicated in the numinous quality arouse bodily feelings very much in the way that atmospheres are supposed to do so. Therefore, it seems appropriate to regard the numinous as an atmospheric quality as it has been introduced in section 2. Otto provides us with an account of how this atmospheric quality underpins, guides, or "controls" (Dewey) conceptual operations in the domain of religious experience. In the next section, however, I attempt to show that it, at least in some cases, also "controls" ethical reflection.

# 4 The numinous in Kant and Levinas

In the years before his death, Otto worked on his version of a value ethics that should have presented a distinct alternative to the relevant accounts of Scheler and Hartmann. In this context, the numinous value would have been interpreted as the foundation of more "mundane" moral values.[92] One example is the increased or deepened significance of a person's dignity: One's fellow human being, then, is not only esteemed as a moral person, but also as being "there from God, and thus with a power of entitlement, of obligation and, at the same time, of interest, that would otherwise never be possible."[93] Unfortunately, Otto did not complete this account and thus a lot of questions concerning particular claims remain unanswered or at least call for a careful reconstructive interpretation.[94] Scholars such as Jack Stewart Boozer and Todd Gooch, just to name two, have made remarkable contributions to this enterprise that is, as far as I can see, worthwhile to pursue.[95] In this section, however, I wish to take a different route and make the point that, whatever Otto's definite account would have eventually looked like, it would neither have been the first nor the last one to introduce an appeal to the numinous quality into (meta-) ethical discourse. I give two examples, namely Kant's and Levinas' accounts of moral obligation.

Before I proceed, I wish to clarify the status of the following argument. I am neither aiming at a detailed comparative study of the ethical approaches in question nor claiming that the respective theoretical frameworks are compatible with one another—or with Otto's own, for that matter. What I wish to demonstrate is that the numinous quality as I have reconstructed it here is in play in the respective systems of thought and that the phenomenology of the numinous can enrich the discussion of those approaches.

## 4.1 Kant and the reverence for the moral law

To begin with, we find a phenomenological description of the numinous quality in the third chapter of the Analytic in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. In Kant, the numen characterized by the quality in question is precisely the key element of his moral philosophy: the moral law.[96] Before I present this claim, let me briefly sketch the role that this chapter is supposed to play in Kant's moral theory.[97]

The moral law according to Kant presents a demand that can be said to have an "objective" as well as a "subjective" dimension. On the one hand, the moral law demands us to act in such a way that it is rationally

**91** Ibid. 55.
**92** Gooch, *The Numinous and Modernity*, 179.
**93** Ibid., 176.
**94** Ibid., 180.
**95** See also Almond, *Rudolf Otto*; Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness*, Ch. 5.
**96** See Schmitz, *Das Reich der Normen*, 151 ff. As far as I can see, Schmitz in his 1977 book *Das Göttliche und der Raum* (74 ff.) is the first to point out the numinous character of the moral law in Kant.
**97** For excellent discussions on this chapter and its function in Kant's overall argument see Lipscomb, "Moral Imperfection and Moral Phenomenology in Kant", 61–71; Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 92–110.

consistent with a universal legislation.[98] Making a promise while at the same time intending not to keep it, for instance, as a normative principle for universal legislation would be ultimately self-defeating as the institution of promise-making is undermined if everybody counted on the intention of breaking it whenever it seems opportune. This is why, according to Kant, such a principle is not good for the maxim of a moral action and, correspondingly, is why actions based on such a principle cannot be called "good". This is, very roughly, what the objective dimension of the moral law amounts to. On the other hand, in terms of its subjective dimension the moral law demands us to act for the sake of the moral law itself. For instance, it demands keeping one's promises because this is an unconditionally good thing to do, rather than keeping them in order to demonstrate one's trustworthiness and prudently calculating the beneficial effects it is likely to have on one's social relations. It is only in the former case that the subject actually recognizes that one is under an obligation in the stricter sense. In the latter case, in contrast, the action might well be legal, i.e. in mere conformity with the law, but would lack genuine moral worth. This is precisely the problem with which the third chapter of the Analytic opens: "What is essential to any moral worth of actions is *that the moral law determine the will immediately*."[99]

The question now is: How can the moral law do that? Kant sees some fundamental problems that prevent him from giving a satisfactory answer.[100] However, Kant essentially argues that the moral law itself bears an affective force by way of which the subject is motivated to act for the sake of the law itself, that is, without the action's potential benefits for oneself playing a role in the determination of the intention to act:

> Now, if by *incentive* (*elater animi*) is understood the subjective determining ground of the will [...], then it will follow [...] that the incentive of the human will (and the will of every created rational being) can never be anything other than the moral law, and hence that the objective determining ground must always and quite alone be also the subjectively sufficient determining ground of action, if this is not merely to fulfill the *letter* of the law without containing its *spirit*.[101]

The "incentive" in question is a peculiar feeling of respect ("Achtung") that is evoked by and directed at the law itself. The *phenomenology of respect* that Kant offers in this chapter is supposed to corroborate this claim.[102] It has already been observed that Kant's descriptions of the relevant feeling suggest that "reverence" ("Ehrfurcht") would be a more appropriate name for it.[103] Further, if the analysis in the previous sections of this paper is by and large correct, it is even a form of reverence that is analogous to the numinous feeling, for all the relevant characters of the numinous quality can be found in the way Kant apprehends the moral law.

First of all, the law, insofar as its full meaning is apprehended, has a dreadful-tremendous and overpowering-majestic character as it thwarts "all our inclinations" and "*strikes down* self-conceit altogether" which has a humiliating effect on the subject's self-esteem.[104] "Respect" for the law in terms of the *tremendum* and *maiestas* characters would amount to some sort of awe or intimidation in view of its superior power to remove the self-conceit that hinders our acting for the sake of the law alone.[105] As this feeling in itself is clearly not pleasant, the moral law "in its *solemn majesty* is exposed to [our] striving to resist respect for it."[106] However, apprehending the full meaning of the moral law adds a further character that combines with the urgent *tremenda maiestas* in the manner of Otto's "harmony of contrasts":

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**98** "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law", as it is formulated in the *Groundworks*, 4:402.

**99** Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:71.

**100** "For, how the law can be of itself an [sic] immediately a determining ground of the will (though this is what is essential in all morality) is for human reason an insoluble problem and identical with that of how a free will is possible." (ibid., 72)

**101** Ibid.

**102** Lipscomb, "Moral Imperfection and Moral Phenomenology in Kant", 61.

**103** Roberts, *The Emotions*, 268.

**104** Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:73.

**105** Ibid., 75, 77.

**106** Ibid., 77.

> But, in turn, *so little displeasure* is there in it [i.e. respect for the moral law – H.N.] that, once one has laid self-conceit aside and allowed practical influence to that respect, one can in turn never get enough of contemplating the majesty of this law, and the soul believes itself elevated in proportion as it sees the holy law elevated above itself and its frail nature.[107]

This is clearly an instance of the *fascinans*. Kant even includes what Otto calls the *energicum*, the urgent, compelling and activating character in terms of which the content of a demand is apprehended: By crushing self-conceit, the "hindrance to pure practical reason is lessened" which is supposed to give the objective law a stronger influence on the will.[108] Moreover, "reason" represents the incarnation of virtue in our fellow human beings as their achievements ("a fruit of cultivation and so as merit") and "imposes on us the following of such an example in the way suitable to us".[109] Additionally, the specific rigor that characterizes Kant's discourse is a further trace of the *energicum*.

Moreover, the moral law exhibits a mysterious character, and this relates to Kant's recognized inability to give a straightforward answer of "how reason can directly determine the will".[110] According to Kant, it is impossible for human reason to grasp "the ground from which the moral law in itself supplies an incentive".[111] What in this quote sounds like a complex philosophical problem, however, is later on positively—or even happily—acknowledged as one of the various essential characters of the "phenomenology" of the moral law:

> There is something so singular in the boundless esteem for the pure moral law stripped from all advantage—as practical reason, whose voice makes even the boldest evildoer tremble and forces him to hide from its sight, presents it to us for obedience—that one cannot wonder at finding this influence of a mere intellectual idea on feeling quite impenetrable for speculative reason.[112]

From this perspective, Kant's moral law has not only the character of the *mysterium tremendum* (impenetrability and daunting voice), but also that of *augustum* ("boundless esteem"). In his "phenomenology" of the moral law, Kant alludes to all the characteristics of the numinous. Thus, the law as Kant conceptualizes it in order to explain what it means to act for the sake of the law itself qualifies as a numen in the sense of being a "bearer" of the numinous quality.

To be sure, Kant never explicitly conceived of his account as being dependent on the numinous as a bodily felt quality. He himself occasionally relates the moral law to the category of the sublime.[113] However, the reverence in terms of which the law is apprehended is much more a feeling response to the numinous than it is to the sublime. Insofar as my argument in section 2 is by and large correct and we can make better sense of such responses by conceiving of them as bodily feelings, we would have to take propositions such as the one about the law's voice making "even the boldest evildoer tremble and forces him to hide from its sight" not as fancy metaphors, but as attempts to explicate what is also bodily felt.

## 4.2 Levinas and the demand of the absolute Other

Another numen with meta-ethical relevance is the absolute Other as it is intended in Levinas.[114] Again, I shall briefly outline the context of Levinas' discussion of the Other before turning to the numinous quality to which it refers. As in Kant, the problem in the background of the relevant discussion is that of subjective motivation for morality. Especially in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, it is Levinas' aim to conceptualize the individual's freedom in terms of an absolute responsibility for other individuals or groups

**107** Ibid.
**108** Ibid., 75 f.
**109** Ibid., 78.
**110** Lipscomb, "Moral Imperfection and Moral Phenomenology in Kant", 61.
**111** Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:72.
**112** Ibid., 79 f.
**113** Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 5:270 f., 274 f.
**114** In the following I refer to the discussion in Nörenberg, *Der Absolutismus des Anderen*, 123–172.

that provides the ethical subject with reasons and motives for acting in favor of those others. As in Kant the premise is that the subject is by default self-conceited and self-assertive and that the task is to point out how the subject comes to feel obliged in a morally relevant sense. However, the responsibility in question is conceived of as being bound to an utterly superior power in the face of which the subject feels "unworthy", abased and overwhelmed, as it were.

The pivotal element in this conception is the subject's experience of shame and guilt that emerges in the encounter with the Other as the other person, an experience that presents the Other purely in terms of such superior power. From this perspective, genuinely sovereign self-assertion is no longer located in the egoistic subject, but in the face of another person who appears precisely as the victim of the subject's violent egoism. More precisely, the face of her victim imposes the demand of an unconditioned solidarity upon the ego that in turn identifies itself as the perpetrator:

> The invisible offense [...] is produced as judgment itself when it looks at me and accuses me in the face of the Other—whose very epiphany is brought about by this offense suffered, by this status of being stranger, widow, and orphan.[115]

By appearing as "stranger, widow, and orphan", the Other "provokes my shame and presents himself as dominating me".[116]

> Discourse and Desire, where the Other presents himself as interlocutor, as him over whom I cannot have power, whom I cannot kill, condition this shame, where, qua I, I am not innocent spontaneity but usurper and murderer.[117]

The setting envisioned here is such that it results in the subject's confession of guilt with respect to the Other: In shame, the subject conceives of herself as a violator to whom the offense suffered by the Other is traced back. In analogy to instances of religious conversion, this confession of guilt is supposed to reconstitute the ethical subject in terms of genuine solidarity with the Other. The formerly self-sufficient ego experiences the Other as an irresistible authority for her conscience in the face of which she feels small and shattered:

> The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement—glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.[118]

In this brief and, admittedly, somewhat oversimplified sketch of Levinas' account, some characters of the numinous already shine out. The offending judgment, the Other imposing himself and his humiliating effect on the subject are articulations of the *maiestas* apprehended in the encounter with the Other.[119] Yet the Other is also *augustum*: Precisely in terms of his being innocently abased he appears in "glory", as "situated in a dimension of height", as "the master called to invest and justify my freedom", but also to provoke a consciousness of "unworthiness" in the subject.[120] In Levinas, I submit, the latter is very similar to what Otto has described as the feeling of being abased and overwhelmed by one's own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme to oneself.

As in Kant, the *mysterium* character has to do with the fact that that the Other cannot be grasped by our concepts, though this impossibility is not described purely negatively as if the Other would simply escape our gaze, but rather positively as the Other's "overflowing" of our categories.[121] In other words, the Other is wholly other.

The *tremendum* comes to the fore when Levinas conceives of the subject as the Other's "hostage", but also when he ascribes to the face of the Other the power of a "firm and insurmountable" resistance that

**115** Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 244.
**116** Ibid., 84.
**117** Ibid.
**118** Ibid., 251
**119** Ibid., 244, 200.
**120** Ibid., 83.
**121** Ibid., 87, 200.

may be derived from the "severe seriousness" in terms of which Levinas understands goodness and which is supposed to "freeze all laughter". [122] On the other hand, this hard reality of the wholly other is desired: The subject is *fascinated* by a being καθ'αὐτό, that is a being independent from and resistant to the subject's attempts to control her world.[123]

Last but not least, the *energicum* is manifest in the way the subject is called to solidarize with the Other in disinterested goodness: To recognize the Other's gaze means giving.[124] Further, it also shows itself in Levinas' hyperbolic style by which he presents the ego as "hostage" as well as "'usurper and murderer" and about which he says at the end of *Otherwise than Being* that "nothing less was needed for the little humanity that adorns the world, if only with simple politeness or the pure polish of manners."[125] Again, all these elements together seem to qualify the Other in Levinas as a numen.

Let me address a potential worry regarding the application of the phenomenology of the numinous to Levinas' discourse. Compared to Kant's theory, the Levinasian framework is much more compatible with the phenomenology of bodily felt qualities.[126] However, Levinas also stresses that his notion of the absolute Other is supposed to be distinct from the numinous which he takes to implicate the "violence of the sacred" and which is supposed to "hold the I in invisible meshes", to "annihilate the I" in favor of the ego being unified with the absolute.[127] Yet this is not exactly what Otto's phenomenology of numinous amounts to, to say the least. Even though Levinas could be right about attributing a violent character to the numinous if this was supposed to mean that the subject is painfully humiliated or that it is made tremble and forced to hide, his own account, too, is haunted by a violent character in precisely this sense, as his remarks on the Other as provoking and dominating the subject's shame and taking her hostage suggest.

For all these reasons, I think that Levinas' dismissal of the numinous is a bit premature, though a thorough argument surely would require another paper.[128] It is debatable to *what* extent the numinous "controls" Levinas' ethical discourse or *what* exact role the numinous plays in it, but the point I wanted to make is *that* he, at least implicitly, refers to a specific manifestation of such a quality when explicating his claims about the irresistible authority of the absolute Other.

Though both Kant and Levinas strongly diverge with regard to the conceptual dimension of their respective accounts, in each of them the reference to a specifically numinous feeling seems to systematically contribute to the full meaning of moral obligation. The meta-ethical significance of the analysis of the numinous quality, then, is not restricted to Otto's own version of value-ethics, but is also relevant to other approaches, at least to such as those of Kant and Levinas. This should encourage us to turn our attention to the role affectivity plays in traditionally rational notions.

## 5 Concluding remarks

I have sketched Otto's claims about the "non-rational" dimension of the numinous feeling and its potential to disclose "something there" and suggested to conceive of them in terms of pragmatist and phenomenological discussions on bodily felt qualities "controlling" or organizing the intelligibility of the "rational" or discursive dimension of human life. I then outlined the various characters that, according to Otto, are implicated in the numinous quality: *tremendum*, *maiestas*, *energicum*, *mirum*, *fascinans*, and *augustum*, each of them designating an integral element of the peculiar force on the subject's body in which the non-rational dimension of the relevant quality mainly consists.

**122** Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127; *Totality and Infinity*, 199, 200.

**123** Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 64 f.

**124** Ibid., 75.

**125** Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 185.

**126** Krueger, "Levinasian Reflections on Somaticity and the Ethical Self", 609 ff. In this passage, Krueger also makes valuable observations on the relation between Levinasian somaticity and Deweyan qualities.

**127** Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

**128** For an attempt of using the phenomenology of the numinous as a heuristic tool for describing the affective force imposed on the subject in ethically relevant situations according to such distinct authors as Gogarten, Levinas or Agamben, see Nörenberg, *Der Absolutismus des Anderen*.

I suggested, furthermore, that one of the contemporarily most interesting implications of Otto's account concerns the nature of obligation. To be sure, I did not advocate the view that the numinous is the irrational ground of every axiology as Otto would have claimed or that it is a necessary constituent of every moral feeling. I rather attempted to demonstrate that the numinous quality "controls" at least two highly influential ethical discourses, namely the respective accounts of Kant and Levinas. In both accounts, the specific characters implicated in the numinous quality systematically contribute to the full meaning of what being morally obliged amounts to, though they differ widely in terms of their respective conceptual framework.

Thus, Otto's analysis can be regarded as an important contribution to what I, in the style of Ratcliffe's discourse on existential feelings, would call a phenomenology of "deontological" feeling: The numinous feeling is a specific way of finding oneself in a meaningful situation against the backdrop of which alone particular forms of practical reasoning, at least those according to Kant, Levinas and maybe some others, can function. This is so, insofar as the relevant normative content that these forms of reasoning seek to convey would ultimately be unintelligible without the subjectively binding character being apprehended by the addressee of that content. Additionally, as I tried to argue, in the mentioned cases the relevant apprehension comes with specific manifestations of the numinous feeling. Therefore, the numinous has irreducible import on the evidence of these forms of practical reasoning.

Of course, these ideas need further elaboration. For instance, in which sense the "sensus numinis" is or is not at the heart of *any* sense of obligation, or in which sense more ordinary moral feelings do or do not implicate it in terms of sedimentation or anticipation will hopefully be established by future research.

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