

Ideal Value and Exemplary Experience

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Abstract

This chapter examines ideals and the role that concrete exemplary value experiences play in both shaping the models through which we are oriented towards ideals, and our understanding of the ideals themselves. It considers how the existentialist emphasis on negative value experiences – specifically, Sartre’s notion of the ‘slimy’ – plays a role in viewing the ideal self-world relationship as one of dominance and the corresponding ideal self-relation as one of autonomous self-grounding. The suffocating horror of the slimy gives one a taste of the Sartrean ontological anti-ideal, whereby freedom is consumed by being but still retains the awareness necessary to experience its own dissolution. This experience of suffocation and exile in the midst of hostile being correspondingly grounds Sartre’s understanding of the ontological ideal – namely, freedom’s triumphant self-grounding. The chapter concludes by considering the implications of a different kind of exemplary value event – namely, one in which self and world are experienced as existing in a harmony that challenges the hostile model on which Sartre’s understanding of the ideal is founded. Positive value experiences such as beauty suggest a different way of understanding the ideal relationship between self and world. By emphasizing the import of such positive value experiences, the sharp divide between autonomous and heteronomous approaches is put in question, and with it, the nihilism and decisionism that continues to haunt existentialist ethics.

Ideal Value and Exemplary Experience¹

Irene McMullin

The concept of the good is largely absent in existentialist thought, with thinkers tending to speak instead of *values*, which are characterized as being in some sense dependant on the agent's act of valuing, the capacity for which – often specified as freedom – is taken to have a unique value status.² Jonathan Webber (2018: p. 2) argues that 'as originally defined by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values.' Talk of 'foundation' can be read in different ways – as the origin of value in an otherwise valueless world, or as the mechanism through which independently valuable things come to be normatively binding in someone's life. The former conception – of a kind of 'heroic' freedom – is often equated with existentialist thought. But if the free capacity for valuing is itself taken to be intrinsically valuable and hence possessing a value status independent of being valued, the latter interpretation also becomes plausible. A common move in existentialist thought is to try to combine the two approaches, whereby it is a certain manifestation of valuing that creates us as valuers. In 'choosing to choose,' we create ourselves as the authentic, resolute, autonomous beings capable of creating (derivative) value through our free valuing (See, e.g., Heidegger 1962: 268/313; Han-Pile 2008; McMullin 2013: 294–6).

Here we can see existentialism as an heir to Immanuel Kant's moral revolution, which locates value not in human nature or God's will, but in the good will of rational autonomy. But the shift to emphasizing free/authentic/autonomous choice as the ground of all value brings with it worries about nihilism and 'decisionism' – the view that we must ultimately decide for decision's sake alone and "without recourse to any [ultimate] reasons or evaluative standards" (Burch 2010: 211; see also Burch & McMullin 2020). Kant's model famously avoids these worries by specifying that free valuing only counts as such if it is constrained by universal rational (specifically formal) limits. In other words, Kant stipulates that, on pain of incoherence, we should only endorse claims that are formally consistent with reason, which is itself conceptualized as universal and hence as making the same demands on all of us. Kant thereby accommodates our sense that no individual is the origin of the good; things make a claim on universal reason independently of any individual's decision to be so claimed. But by making these limits intrinsic to free rational choosing itself, Kant can ostensibly avoid the worries about heteronomous views. Namely, that they make us out to be passive in the face of goods understood as independent of our cares and projects – making it difficult to see how we can be responsible for these goods in our lives. On the heteronomy model, we become little more than objects conforming to laws that bind us from without.³ Existentialists agree with Kant in rejecting a picture of the moral subject as entirely passive and irrelevant to the possibility of value.

But by understanding normative bindingness solely in terms of autonomous endorsement, the threat of arbitrariness looms. Critics argue that existentialist thought is

¹ I am grateful to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation's support during the writing of this paper.

² The concept of 'values' has itself been the target of critique, however. See, for example Heidegger (2002b: 77) and Heidegger (2002a: 169–170, 192–193). 'How can being be more highly esteemed than through its express elevation into value? And yet, by being appreciated as a value, being is deprecated as a mere condition set by the will to power itself. For ages now, through having been esteemed at all and so appreciated, being has been robbed of the worth of its essence. When the being of beings is stamped as value and its essence is thereby sealed, then within this metaphysics (i.e., constantly within the truth of beings as such during this age) every path toward the experience of being itself is obliterated' (Heidegger 2002a: 193).

³ Nietzsche (2001: 33) criticizes the categorical imperative for doing the same thing in disguise, since it gives people 'unconditional confidence in themselves on the basis of some ultimate, indisputable and inherently sublime commandment, and they want to feel like and pass themselves off as its servants and instruments.'

especially prey to this threat.⁴ Since it abandons Kant's universal conception of reason, it appears to abandon any constraints on what one can or should freely endorse. On traditional readings of existentialism, we are simply 'condemned' to choose – and the choosing is up to each individual alone. Individual agents are responsible for bestowing normative standing on claims that would otherwise get no normative purchase on their agency. Here the worries about arbitrariness and decisionism become pressing, since nothing appears to constrain the agent's free ability to bestow the status 'valuable' on anything she wishes.

Like Kant, then, existentialist figures point to limits intrinsic to the act of valuing or to the structure of freedom/agency itself, and it is *this* demandingness that has ultimate normative priority. But this solution to the decisionism worry also helps to fuel it, since it doubles down on Kant's move inward and the seeming lack of genuine constraint that results (see Braver 2012: 263). No longer is it a universally shared reason that is responsible for value, now it's a solitary freedom. Indeed, being an anxiety-fraught loner responsible for all possibility of value is, according to Sartre (1956: 508), the core meaning of human life: 'exile in the midst of indifference' is the foundational meaning of human existing and is the 'support of all others.' Such a foundational meaning is conducive to the heroic conception of the valuing will as alone in a valueless world, condemned to choose in anxious solitude.

But this foundational meaning includes not simply a self-relation but also endorses a particular understanding of the self-world relationship; namely, with the latter understood as to be overcome by a self that is able to become its own foundation instead, answerable to nothing but itself. Indeed, insofar as existentialists emphasize certain experiences – anxiety, despair, nausea, and (as we will see) encounters with 'the slimy' – they seem to stack the deck in favour of this model of the heroic solitary self, condemned to freely and resolutely choose what counts as valuable from out of the 'vast rubble of the world' (Murdoch 1992: 341). In other words, by emphasizing certain concrete experiences over others – namely, ones in which a hostile, alien, and uncertain world threatens – they justify a worldview in which all hope of value resides in freedom's ability to master this condition.

But we should question this tendency. In what follows, I will consider the ideal structure of value experiences to uncover ways in which they resist this picture of human beings as exiles in the midst of an anxiety/despair/nausea-inducing world. The nature of value experiences is such that in them some good is present to us as objectively real; a meaning constituted through at least three features, which might be named the demandingness, shareability, and worldliness of the good. Each aspect contributes to the possibility of experiencing some good as transcending the act of valuing. The existentialist emphasis on the first feature – interpreted as the demand to be answerable to oneself for one's answerability – tends to occlude or cover over the latter two ways in which the ideality of value makes itself manifest: in the shareability⁵ and world-dependence of value experiences. In what follows, I will question the emphasis on demandingness by turning instead to the third feature. That is, by examining the worldliness of the good as manifest in value experience.

⁴ For example, Murdoch (2014: 78–9) argues that 'The centre of this type of post-Kantian moral philosophy is the notion of the will as the creator of value. Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality. The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it up. The sovereign moral concept is freedom, or possibly courage in a sense which identifies it with freedom, will, power. This concept inhabits a quite separate top level of human activity since it is the guarantor of the secondary values created by choice.' For discussion of whether this is an accurate portrayal of Heidegger, see Burch and McMullin (2020), Burch (2010), and McMullin (2013); for discussion of whether this is an accurate portrayal of Sartre and Beauvoir, see Webber (2018).

⁵ Key existentialist thinkers here are Emmanuel Levinas (2007), Simone de Beauvoir (2004), and Gabriel Marcel (1950), who all challenge the possibility of experiencing the good in isolation. Levinas, in particular, emphasizes how the presence of the other breaks one out of narcissistic self-enclosure, transforming the self and calling on one to share the world. This radically disruptive or transgressive element of the ethical encounter attests to a limit that cannot be located within the self but, while being radically external, nevertheless makes the subject capable of moral agency at all. For discussion of Levinas as a 'transgressive realist' in this way, see Braver (2012).

THE IDEALITY OF VALUE

The close relationship between ‘values’ and the activity of ‘valuing’ makes the former seem easy to understand as just whatever object or state an individual desires or chooses or ‘projects.’⁶ A warm jacket is valuable to the person who is cold, a friend is valuable to the person who is lonely. But if we think instead about ideals, the limit quality of the value experience becomes clearer. Though ideals bear a relationship to agency – one strives to act in conformity with an ideal – it’s not as easy to think of them as products of agency. Rather, they are conditions of normative perfection that serve as aspirational guides and goals for imperfect agents; they act as a kind of measure or limit on one’s agency.

But is this right? Isn’t ‘idealising’ – the setting up of an ideal – something that we *do*? After all, idealisation can be understood as a method – one whereby we abstract from irrelevant contingent features to isolate an essential core present in multiple diverse particulars. This method generates models of reality that help us compare ostensibly different particular circumstances and so navigate a complex world more efficiently. They do so by abstracting away from the contingency and partiality of experience to isolate essential features that apply across multiple contexts and agents. For example, scientific modelling leaves behind the specificity of the perspectival dimension of perception to operate on the plane of mathematical models uncontaminated by that specificity (See Husserl 1989: 80–95/75-90; for discussion see Crowell 2016 and D’Angelo 2019).

On traditional accounts, as found in figures like Plato, Kant, and Edmund Husserl, ideals are only available to reason, which aspires to a completeness, unity, and intersubjective shareability of understanding that is ruled out for concrete experience in all its contingency, particularity, and diversity. Since ideals represent a kind of purification of imperfect reality, they are not fully compatible with the ‘real’ and can only ever be approached asymptotically. And insofar as ideals represent a state of epistemic or practical perfection, they bring with them a critical orientation to the given as in some sense *lacking*.⁷ They point us, through this critical stance, toward how we might best know and act in the world. Ideals serve as reliable organizing principles for making sense of the messy buzz of our lives, and they do so because they are shared across agents, they purport to isolate the core features of the world on which we are dependent, and they make normative demands about how it is best to proceed. They display, in other words, the three features of value objectivity mentioned above.

The above comments are a standard way of understanding what we mean by ‘the ideal’ – namely, as standards that organise and enable our projects of knowing the world and thriving with others. This might seem to suggest that ideals are little more than useful fictions created for pragmatic purposes. But the modelling work that we do is not arbitrary or grounded in sheer will – though this picture of value can be found in the Existentialist tradition⁸ – rather, it is answerable to the purpose for which we seek these ideals: to achieve true knowledge and plan well for the future in concert with others. In this sense, ideals are

⁶ See Taylor (1989: 53–62) for his critique of this view that values are something that we ‘project’ onto an otherwise neutral world. I agree with Taylor that ‘good and right are not properties of the universe considered without any relation to human beings and their lives...But from there, it is an unjustified leap to say that they therefore are not as real, objective, and non-relative as any other part of the natural world’ (1989: 56).

⁷ Idealisation can also have a negative connotation in this regard, insofar as it can indicate a kind of wilful blindness towards the particularity and texture of the real, an insistence on seeing unity, perfection, or simplicity where there is none. The abstraction and modelling at work in idealising can give us insight but it can also mislead.

⁸ As Heidegger (2002a: 173) puts it, for Nietzsche, ‘values are the conditions, posited by the will to power itself, of the will to power itself. It is not until the will to power comes to light as the fundamental trait of all that is real, i.e., only when it becomes true and is accordingly conceived as the reality of all that is real, that we see where values originate from and by what means all value-estimation is supported and directed...the will to power, as this principle that has been discerned and therefore willed, is at the same time the principle of a new dispensation of value – new because it is now achieved for the first time knowingly, in the knowledge of its principle. The dispensation of value is new because it itself makes its principle secure and at the same time holds fast to this securement as a value established on the basis of its principle.’

answers to our most essential questions about how best to go on (Taylor 1989: 50). And the degree to which these ideals succeed in answering those questions – i.e., the degree to which they succeed in orienting us toward what is best – is not up to us but is, rather, answerable to the reality that we are attempting to navigate well with their help. As Husserl points out in the *Crisis* – perhaps his most existentialist work – we tend to forget the fact that any modelling work we do is answerable to the lifeworld in which it plays its role.⁹ Though we call the models ‘ideal’ it is in fact the conditions of theoretical and practical excellence the models are meant to embody that are the true ideals – and which serve as limits on our valuing. Though idealising is work that we do, it is work in which we take ourselves to be uncovering some deeper truth about the best way to understand self-world, self-self, and self-other relationships. And what is best depends on constraints intrinsic not only to the nature of our agency, but also intrinsic to the others and the world on which we rely in order to be valuing selves at all.

It is the self-world relationship – or self-being, as Sartre puts it – that is at stake in Sartre’s famous account of the ontological ideal in *Being and Nothingness*, which he understands as a condition in which the nothingness of freedom experiences itself as at one with the plenitude of being, but without losing its status as free consciousness. This impossible state of a completion and fullness that can nevertheless be experienced as such is what Sartre (1956: 566) calls ‘the in-itself-for-itself; that is, the ideal of a consciousness which would be the foundation of its own being-in-itself by the pure consciousness which it would have of itself.’ He famously characterizes the desire for this state as a ‘useless passion’ wherein we strive futilely towards being gods: ‘perpetual surpassing toward a coincidence with itself which is never given’ (1956: 139). Specific values are to be taken as different ways in which this ultimate project of ideal self-being unity finds expression in concrete form in particular lives: ‘Value haunts the for-itself as the totality of being which is lacking’ (Sartre 1956: 565). For Sartre, this is a self-being unity that maintains the integrity of each by enabling the self to take the place of being in becoming its own ground. Hence the ideal in question is one that specifies what the relationship between self and being ought to be; it is a normative picture of how it would be best for the self’s dependence on the world to be managed. On Sartre’s conception of this ideal, the relationship that ought to be – the state of excellence to which he thinks we ought to be oriented – is one in which we overcome our dependence on contingent being through heroic self-grounding.

And a key reason that the ontological ideal takes the form it does, for Sartre, is because it is anchored in certain value events that are taken to be the exemplary cases around which the model is built. Understood as models, ideals have a kind of generality and averageness available to reason but at odds with the specificity and particularity of concrete reality. But we might also think of the way that certain concrete experiences can manifest the ideal (or its opposite) to intuitive givenness in exemplary form. Some may be loose approximations of the ideal to which they point, but others may be experienced as direct and complete encounters with the good specified by the ideal or the evil that is its opposite, the experience serving as an anchor point around which the core meaning of the ideal model then turns. Such instances can take on a symbolic role, giving meaning and direction to the development and application of the model itself. Value experiences of this kind are not fully pre-delineated by the model but are rather transfigurative encounters – meaning events that

⁹ Much more could be said here about Husserl’s (1970) account of idealising – understood as movement from asymptotic approximation to theoretical perfection via the act of infinitisation – and why some objects can be idealized in this way (and hence are suited to scientific study) while others cannot. Of particular interest is Jacques Derrida’s (1989: 133-4) suggestion that Husserl does not explain the origin of this ability to idealize – to make the leap from the given to the infinite – but rather presupposes it. See Girardi (2019: 82–84), D’Angelo (2019), and Crowell (2016).

can transform or enrich old models or found new ones by giving to immediate intuitive grasp the state of perfection (or deficiency) in terms of which the model is meant to orient us.¹⁰

In this sense, ideal models can be understood as grounded in or answerable to certain paradigmatic value events that give us a kind of immediate access to the ideal or anti-ideal condition itself. In the next section, I will consider Sartre's description of one kind of experience as just such a paradigmatic value event, and one that shapes his understanding of the ontological ideal. In this case, it is a negative value experience of what he calls the 'slimy': a powerful, concrete experience of being as both loathsome and as threatening to engulf us – an experience that prompts the understanding of the ideal self-being relationship as one of dominance.

THE WORLD AS SLIME

At the end of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre engages in a bizarre and fascinating analysis of 'the slimy.'¹¹ This analysis takes place within the broader context of a discussion of 'qualities,' which are ways that the modes of being of particular things or states are experienced as indicative of a certain fundamental relationship between the in-itself and the for-itself. Qualities 'translate symbolically to our perception a certain way which being has of giving itself, and we react by disgust or desire, according to how we see being spring forth in one way or another from their surface' (Sartre 1956: 599). Qualities like 'sliminess' are concretely experienced particulars that bear a symbolic ontological import intuitively given to experience in the encounter. Insofar as they provide a taste of the ontological ideal of a self-world unity that can be experienced as such, qualities are value experiences that manifest the ideal in concrete form. What is revealed in the experience of 'the slimy' is an ontological category or region of possibility made manifest by the world through an exemplary concrete particular: 'In one sense it is an experience since sliminess is an intuitive discovery; in another sense it is like the discovery of an adventure of being' (Sartre 1956: 611).

In the case of the slimy, what is intuitively given to experience is what Sartre (1956: 565, 611) calls an 'anti-value' – a repugnant manifestation of the totality that the for-itself is lacking; a danger haunting consciousness which it rejects and from which it flees. The slimy communicates an ontological possibility – an 'adventure of being' – whereby 'the for-itself is swallowed up by the in-itself' (Sartre 1956: 614); in which 'the foundationless In-itself has priority over the For-itself' (Sartre 1956: 611). This priority manifests in experience as terror of suffocation and contagion. Consciousness fears being invaded by 'a thousand parasites until finally it [has] completely lost itself' (Sartre 1956: 610). The slimy in essence represents the self's failure to resist the dissolution of its boundaries into a distinctionless goo. The danger made real in the encounter with the slimy is a condition in which the for-itself is both consumed by the in-itself and yet knows itself to be so. This force of dissolution and assimilation manifests as a kind of hostile intentionality: 'The slime is like a liquid seen in a nightmare, where all its properties are animated by a sort of life and turn back against me. Slime is the revenge of the In-itself' (Sartre 1956: 609). The ontological adventure represented by 'the slimy' is, in other words, a condition in which 'the In-itself would draw

¹⁰ With Lee Braver (2012: 272), we might characterize such experiences in terms of the idea of a 'transgressive realism,' wherein 'aporetic experiences enter our awareness not through pathways prepared by our Active Minds but in spite of them, short-circuiting our anticipatory thought processes and violating the recollective model of learning that has haunted philosophy since Meno's slave learned a little math.'

¹¹ Sarah Richmond's more recent translation of *Being and Nothingness* does not follow Hazel Barnes in translating '*le visqueux*' and '*la viscosité*' in terms of the notion of slime, but rather as 'the viscous' and 'viscosity.' She does so because she thinks the Barnes translation is too negative, while Barnes thought 'slime' would better track Sartre's figurative meaning (Sartre 2021: lxxv). I follow Barnes here since it is precisely the value valence of the experience that is of import for my account.

the For-itself into its contingency, into its indifferent exteriority, into its foundationless existence' (Sartre 1956: 609).

There is of course something attractive to us in the possibility of sheer being without the self-distance constitutive of consciousness. The eternal desire to 'be ourselves' – as sheer being is – manifests in the face of the slimy as a sick fascination; an inability to look away in our simultaneous desire for and revulsion at the sheer contingent indifferent thereness of being – an indifference so alien to our striving that we are haunted by the fear that it's not simply indifferent, but hostile. As we have seen, Sartre holds that at bottom our fundamental project is aimed at being 'gods': i.e., achieving a condition in which we maintain the consciousness and agency necessary to experience the condition of thing-like completion and self-identity. Such a state would allow us to experience ourselves simultaneously as fully self-aware consciousness and fully realized being. Though achieving such a condition permanently is impossible, in Sartre's idea of 'sliminess' we can see the possibility of an exemplary momentary realisation of a version of this condition, wherein one is conscious of – but not free to escape or control – the submersion of freedom in brute being. Such encounters are a suffocating taste of the anti-ideal; freedom is paralyzed in a kind of fascinated horror before a world in which freedom is consumed. Sartre's (1959: 180-1) most famous example of this kind of encounter comes in his novel *Nausea*:

Had I dreamed this enormous presence? It was there, deposited on the garden, tumbling down in the trees, all soft, sticky, soiling everything, all thick, a jelly. And I, was I inside, with the garden? I was frightened, furious, I thought it was so stupid, so out of place. I hated this ignoble messiness. Piling up to the sky, spilling over, filling everything with its gelatinous slither, and I could see depths upon depths of it reaching far beyond the limits of the garden... I was nowhere, I was floating. I was not surprised, I knew it was the World, the naked World revealing itself all at once, and I choked with rage at this gross absurd being... I shouted, What filth, what filth! And I shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless.

The language used here is extraordinary in its efforts to generate in the reader a sense of suffocating disgust and horror in the face of a world ungoverned by human concepts or projects. It makes use of both moral concepts (being is 'ignoble') and visceral, evocative description (being is 'filth' – and elsewhere, 'flowing larva' (1959: 181)) – to evoke for the reader an all-consuming and immediate event in which sheer being is experienced as such, despite the seeming ontological impossibility of that occurring: 'I was the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it — since I was conscious of it — yet lost in it, nothing but it' (1959: 177). It is an immediate experience of the realized anti-ideal: consciousness undergoing its own dissolution into Being and living to tell the tale.¹²

Such an experience serves as a negative anchor point around which the Sartrean ontological ideal takes shape; it animates the understanding of what self-being unity should look like: namely, as a state that avoids the suffocating horror of the slimy. Hence it promotes mastery of the former over the latter in such a way that being's character as threatening is neutralized, while keeping the benefits of completion and closure that it offers.

Another kind of exemplary experience offers a more positive anchor point, but grounds a similar understanding of the ideal: Kant's notion of the sublime, which – taking

¹² There are clear similarities here with Heidegger's notion of existential death, wherein we can grasp a possibility – in this case, Dasein's wholeness – that is in principle not possible to grasp.

inspiration from Iris Murdoch – can be understood as a kind of ‘inverted’ slime.¹³ In Kant’s sense of the sublime, we encounter a terrifying manifestation of something vastly bigger or more powerful than ourselves – the threatening presence of reason-less nature/being – and yet are able, via the power of reason, to overcome. In the sublime, we simultaneously experience ourselves as at the mercy of being, while also smugly appreciating reason’s dominance of it: ‘Kant’s sublime is...a movement of proud withdrawal into a fortress of unconquered rationality as our high reaction to the vast rubble of the world’ (Murdoch 1992: 340–1). In contrast, the experience of the slimy is one in which we are unable to master the threatening power of being but are rather choked by its unavoidable, horrifying plenitude.

In both experiences – the slimy and the sublime – the plenitude, indifference, and power of being are experienced as a terrifying threat of being overwhelmed, a threat that we do or do not feel able to master. In this sense, both are concrete experiences that promote Sartre’s claim that ‘exile in the midst of indifference’ is the foundational meaning of human existence, and the ‘support of all others.’ Both are, in other words, taken as exemplary manifestations of a deeper ontological reality wherein freedom is fundamentally under threat from a hostile being that seeks to consume it – a loss of self momentarily experienced as such in the fascinated paralysis characteristic of both the slimy and the sublime.

Such experiences help justify the conception of the ontological ideal as dominance of freedom over being. And since, at least for Sartre, it is the very contingency of being – its lack of order or justification – that prompts these feelings of disgust and horror, the imposition of order is taken to be our highest priority. On such an understanding of being – namely, as a hostile and disgusting force threatening to suffocate us – the appropriate response can only be to assert mastery; to undertake freedom’s heroic work of meaning-creation, hoping thereby to achieve the ideal self-being relationship by eradicating being’s contingency via freedom’s self-grounding.

THE WORLD AS PROMISE

We might consider another type of encounter and, consequently, another way of conceptualizing the relationship between self and being. Namely, one in which the intimation that ‘the foundationless In-itself has priority over the For-itself’ (Sartre 1956: 611) – namely, recognition of our *dependence* on the world – is not met with revulsion, paralysis, and suffocation. In this alternative type of value experience our dependence on being is not manifest as a terrifying ‘exile’ to be overcome but is rather given as a sense of being fully at home in the world, immersed in an arena of meaning that underwrites our striving but is in no way our responsibility or the result of our agency. Sartre (1959: 181–2) himself hints at this possibility in the passages immediately following Roquentin’s famous encounter with the chestnut:

I got up and went out. Once at the gate, I turned back. Then the garden smiled at me. I leaned against the gate and watched for a long time. The smile of the trees, of the laurel, meant something; that was the real secret of existence. I remembered one Sunday, not more than three weeks ago, I had already detected everywhere a sort of conspiratorial air. Was it in my intention? I felt with boredom that I had no way of understanding. No way. Yet it was there, waiting, looking at one. It was there on the trunk of the chestnut tree ... it was the chestnut tree. Things — you might have called them thoughts — which stopped halfway, which were forgotten, which forgot what they wanted to think and which stayed like that, hanging about with an odd little sense which was beyond them. That little sense annoyed me: I could not understand it, even

¹³ Murdoch (1992: 340) speaks of the absolute contingency described in Sartre’s *Nausea* as a kind of ‘inverted Sublime.’

if I could have stayed leaning against the gate for a century; I had learned all I could know about existence. I left, I went back to the hotel and I wrote.

This is a striking passage insofar as it appears to undo all that came before – the long, and at times overwrought, descriptions of suffocation and disgust characterizing Roquentin's encounter with the tree roots are replaced by a sense of being not as hostile slime but as smiling conspirator, inviting us to... what? The conspiratorial intimations smiling at us from the laurel and the tree are not explicit communications, they offer not so much meanings as promises of possible meaning: they 'forgot what they wanted to think' and yet they are characterized as quasi 'thoughts' with a symbolic or communicative mode: 'an odd little sense which was beyond them.' Roquentin's response, concerned as he is with mastery, is bored annoyance at their inability or refusal to offer themselves up to complete knowing: 'That little sense annoyed me: I could not understand it.' Hence he concludes that he has 'learned all [he] could know about existence' and leaves the smile of the world unanswered.

But we should not be so quick. Encountering the conspiratorial smile of existence suggests a radically different understanding of the ontological ideal: one wherein freedom recognizes in the world an arena of possibility conducive to the good and supportive of its projects – but not thereby reducible to mere dross for arbitrary shaping. It is, on the contrary, a 'co-conspirator' in the possibility of meaning but not one that can be colonized by reason. This is a situation in which freedom experiences itself as claimed by and answerable to the world in a way that does not call for dominance but rather reverent stillness; a momentary condition of being at peace with a world revealed as the only location in which the good could be realized.

Here we might make use of Alexander Nehemas' (2010: 72, 63) discussion of beauty as that which is experienced as a kind of 'pledge for the future'; an 'overwhelming feeling, that sweeping sense that all will be well.' In the *Symposium*, Plato (1961: 210a-211d) characterizes beauty as the principle of unity itself – a unity, I suggest, that applies not solely to the beautiful object, but also to the sense of rightness or fit – of belonging in the world – to which encountering it gives rise. Whereas we take the slimy to be animated by a hostile will, we take encounters with beauty as signs that the world is ordered and welcoming in a way that resists viewing it as threatening or indifferent matter to be dominated by we ontological exiles. It provides the momentary experience of self and being as at one in generating possibilities of value. In encounters with beauty the world winks as a co-conspirator; we encounter a kind of order that's experienced as found, not made by us – indeed, as being so irreducible to our projects and aims as to warrant being called objects of 'disinterest' (Kant, 2000). Such experiences enable us to see ourselves not as exiles alone in a hostile world, responsible for creating goodness ex nihilo, but rather as participants in and enablers of the good, answerable to and dependent on the world that makes it possible. In such experiences, the world is made manifest in exemplary or symbolic form as the home of the good, as a general background condition brought to intuitive givenness. The result – a kind of elemental trust in the world¹⁴ – does not promote the heroic decisionism of Sartre's model, but rather encourages a different understanding of the relationship between freedom and being: not a masterful imposition but a responsive and respectful humility.

¹⁴ See McMullin (Forthcoming), for a discussion of Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup's account of our elemental trust in the world. One might also think of Kant's account of the highest good here: namely, the idea that belief in the world as conducive to virtue is necessary for its pursuit. But rather than focusing on the motivational role that such a belief plays – and consequently giving rise to worries about its instrumental origins – we might instead suggest that built into value experiences is some acknowledgement of the fact that our valuing work is dependent on a world in which the good can be encountered at all. See also McMullin (2020). Charles Taylor's (1989: 17) discussion of disenchantment is also important here.

Heidegger's later work should be understood as an attempt to get just such a possibility in view; to shift our understanding of the ontological ideal by showing us how the relationship of dominance and self-grounding fails to capture the truth of the self-world relationship. We can see this, for example, in his account of the artwork, which represents something that resists our ability to understand it via the categories of mastery and control through which we ordinarily carve up the world (see Heidegger 1993b; Thomson 2011). Instead, the artwork is a concrete manifestation of the possible unity of self and being (in Sartre's sense) – or what Heidegger calls world and earth. As in Sartre's account of being, Heidegger (1993b: 172) characterizes 'earth' as that which is fundamentally at odds with knowability: 'The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up.' But also like Sartre's characterization of being as co-conspirator winking at us with a smile, Heidegger (1993b: 168) characterizes earth as 'the sheltering agent' that 'shelters everything that arises.' And in *Country Path Conversations* – where he is struggling to articulate the relation to being he names 'letting be' (*Gelassenheit*) – he speaks of 'something healing' that comes out of the 'rustling of the expansive forest'; an 'open and yet veiled expanse' that 'carries us to what is objectless [*dem Gegenstandlosen*], and yet also keeps us from dissolving into it'; a something that never 'bends our essence back on itself' or 'confines it to a narrowness by means of which it is made rebellious in itself' (Heidegger 2010: 132).

This self-concealing condition can itself become evident in intuitive givenness, however – a condition that Heidegger (1993b: 32) also understands in terms of beauty: 'In this way self-concealing being becomes illuminated. Light of this kind sets its shining into the work. The shining that is set into the work is the beautiful.' Here we might turn to the Romantic tradition's contributions to this approach, or the impact that Hölderlin had on Heidegger's thinking in this regard, prompting him to shift from Idealism's understanding of 'intuition as *Anschauung* to intuition as analeptic *Ahndung*' (Pfau 1988: 28). As Richard Eldridge (2014: 135) puts it,

'Ahndung' is Hölderlin's archaic Swabian spelling of Ahnung – presentiment, foreshadowing, or intuitiveness. 'Analeptic' indicates that such a presentiment is animating or restorative. That is to say, orientation in life is achieved, if it is achieved at all, only through an unpredictable, restorative moment of receptivity.

The struggle to escape understanding the ontological ideal as mastery comes most sharply to the fore in Heidegger's (1977) critique of technology and its imposition of frameworks that occlude all possibility of encountering the 'unpredictable, restorative moment of receptivity.' With the notion of *Gelassenheit* we see him conceptualizing receptive and enabling modes of being in which reverent delight in the world, rather than the mastering or totalizing stance of technology, becomes possible.¹⁵

As was evident in Sartre's account, being's resistance to knowing and mastery can prompt in us a deep fear and corresponding hostility. But by emphasizing, instead, encounters in which the beautiful world calls forth loving reverence in the face of its healing presence, we can recognize how our fear of dependence and vulnerability might be quieted. Understanding the world as an infinite horizon of potential goodness – and hence as a home to us in which self and being, earth and world, can find harmony – is not primarily achieved via concepts but is rather given to us in unlooked-for experiences of restorative hope and awe. This, I think, is the best way for us to understand Heidegger's (1993a) suggestion that 'only a god can save us.' Namely, that the 'god' in question is an overwhelming encounter

¹⁵ For example, Heidegger (2010: 99) discusses the need for 'an indwelling releasement [*inständige Gelassenheit*] to the worlding of the world.' For discussion see Wrathall and Lambeth (2011) and Davis (2014).

with a manifestation of the good – a paradigmatic experience that prompts a new understanding of the ideal self-world relationship.¹⁶

Though this approach cannot fully address the value scepticism that gave rise to the Kantian/Existentialist turn inward, it reminds us of the transformative events of beauty, dignity, and meaning given to us in a world that makes them possible – challenging the view that all value is attributable to ourselves alone. Though we should not forget the slime, nor should we allow it to suffocate us.

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¹⁶ The role of divinity in the late Heidegger's work is especially helpful here. As Wrathall and Lambeth (2011: 166-7) describe it: 'an experience of something independent of our wishes or desires, something upon which we depend but which we cannot control, something which can show us the limits of the current world order, and call us to disclose a new form of life.' See also Wrathall (2003), Crowe (2007), and Young (2002). See Tengelyi (2003: 9) for an important discussion of how such meaning-inaugurating events are possible, how a 'new sense emerging in experience cannot be reduced to any sense bestowal by consciousness. That is what Hegel brings to light by insisting that experience takes place, at least partly, *behind the back* of consciousness.'

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