What Is an Imperative?

by Dorothea Olkowski

The Vortices

Each morning we wake up to an ongoing miracle. Light is there for us and it forms a level. Along this level I see the color-contrasts of the Western mountain range’s phosphoresce. Sounds awaken too. They awaken out of the level that is the murmur of nature from which the cry of hawks, the whining of coyotes fill the air. And close by, the harsh colored billboards stick up in the level of the light as the cars and trucks roll by, hurried and noisy, emerging from the level that is sound, the sound of the strong winds blowing up a storm heading east to the plains where they meet the Gulf moisture, twisting it into tornadoes. These levels, as Alphonso Lingis calls them, “form in a medium without dimensions or directions: the luminosity more vast than any panorama that the light outlines in it, the vibrancy that prolongs itself outside the city and beyond the murmur of nature, the darkness more abysmal than the night from which the day dawns and into which it entrusts itself.”

This medium is the world, but how are we to characterize it, how to make sense of the way in which it gives rise to lev-
els? And do we understand in what manner levels give rise, not only to competent bodies able to negotiate the practicalities of life, bodies for which seeing and seeing the true are one and the same, but also to all the rest, “the monocular phantasms, mirages, and depths of floating color and shadow, tonalities and scents, erotic obsessions, nocturnal phantasms, mythogenic and magical realms.” To the extent that we do not yet understand these things, we will begin by positing a world that is neither coherent nor incoherent, neither real nor imaginary. Instead, in an époque, a suspension of understanding and reason, even further removed from the subject than that of Henri Bergson, who asks us to begin our reflections on the world with nothing more than images, let us begin, following Lingis, with the sensible intuition of a world set in depths and uncharted abysses.

In the world of depths and abysses, Lingis tells us, sensibility can be drawn in and drawn in imperatively to the vortices that populate these depths. In physics, vortices have been described variously as “the sinews of turbulence,” [and] “the voice of fluid motion.” Unlike solids, which do not manifest vortices, “the essence of fluid is vortices,” especially insofar as fluids at rest cannot stand shear stress, the tendency of a fluid to be “pulled apart” (sheared) by a differential force. Shear stress puts fluid elements into spinning motion, causing rotational or vortical flow. Fluid motion produces vortices via the rotation of fluid elements. Vortices are manifest in spiral galaxies, hurricanes, tornadoes, and in the vortex rings of the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. Let us not assume however that the presence of a vortex signals the lack of a coherent structure. The study of vortices is central to understanding the functioning of aerodynamics, as well as to the understanding of the formation and evolution of large-scale vortices in the ocean and atmosphere, both of which play a crucial role in geophysical fluid dynamics.

Such vortices, Lingis posits, are precisely what occur in
the depths of the world. Although they first form us, we find them only where the body lets loose its hold on the levels that provide perceptual consistency and coherence revealing “apparitions made of light, voices of the abyss, enigmas made of darkness.”

Where Immanuel Kant posited a universe of three faculties: intuition, understanding, and reason, in which reason determines and makes intelligible the other two, and together, the three produce God, the World, and the Self, Lingis seems to turn the Kantian thesis on its head. The universe—the world preexists our faculties and is the medium in which our sensibility first finds itself—first takes shape in the vortices of the world which is the medium that shapes our sensitivities and sensibilities and eventually shapes our understanding and our reason.

In the vortices of the medium, we are not in the realm of what can be done but in the realm of appearances where no thing, no object according to a concept, appears. It is the realm of phantoms, caricatures, doubles floating over the contours of things, and planes in the world. And, of the utmost importance, it is the realm where the imperative first makes itself known to us as to all the phenomena of this world. The visionary eye obeys the imperative to shine, to light beyond every and any specified direction. Vertigo obeys the imperative to deepen endlessly. Hearing obeys the imperative to become vibrant beyond every and any situation. And eventually, all phenomena obey the imperative to let go of the world forever, to become elemental, returning to the vortices out of which all things and beings emerge.

No longer maintaining ourselves, letting loose our hold on things, unholding the levels that give us a grip on the world transports “us” or what is left of “us” to an infantile and phantasmal existence wherein other bodies materialize as forces and powers that belong to enigmatic imperatives without which our world is nothing but tasks, objectives, competence, and agency. But what is it that we let loose of, what grip do
we have on the world and things, or is it that the world and things have a grip on us? To understand this, let us examine the idea of levels.

**The Levels**

When we pass from light as immersion in radiance to light as it penetrates space, outlines contours, rests on surfaces, the light has become a level. We see according to the level that is the light leading us to things, just as we hear a piece of music according to the dominant chord when the band or orchestra begins to play.\(^1\) Likewise, smell or taste function only in a medium of odors or tastes, just as everything touchable forms a level of pattern, grain, smoothness, hardness, softness—all of this taking place in a temporal level that directs our movements, visibility, resonance, looking, listening, touching.\(^2\) Thus, levels—according to which we perceive—are purely sensory phenomena and for this reason impossible to measure and difficult even to conceptualize.

All the particulars of our sensory organs take place on the levels. Sounds, colors, tastes, contacts are not properties of things nor ideas of agents but characteristics acquired in relation to a level. As such they are “salients, contours, contrasts, inceptions and terminations,” and as sensible characteristics, they play diacritically in the levels where they appear.\(^3\) Thus the red flower invades the light and contrasts with it, it *greens* the leaves on the stem and *whitens* the sheets of the hospital room where it appears.\(^4\) Unlike the Kantian object, which appears in the mathematical grid of the a priori space-time manifold, determined by a concept, and delimited by reason’s rational order, “the sensory flux does not present itself as so many space-time points successively filled and emptied and filled again, but as a sphere in which points pivot, edges extend levels, spaces open paths, colors intensify themselves by playing across a field, tones thicken and approach and thin
out and recede and send their overtones into one another.”

When this happens, when there is no a priori space-time manifold, then it seems that the contours of a figure do not take shape, a visible goes unseen, a sound unheard, a substance is not felt. Yet that is precisely when the sensorial medium called a level persists and asserts itself as a directive that weighs on us. It is a directive to us to mobilize! Our look is led by the directive, but we must focus and move our eyes. The music takes shape for us only when we start to dance; and to feel soft or hard surfaces, we must move our fingers and hands and adjust our bodies so as to hold our arms in the right position. Sensations take form in the vortices, but we must conduct our moves in accordance with their characteristics. The visible, audible, and tangible unfold in the field even in mirages, in pianissimo, grazing our skin, for our bodies are such that they can “catch on” to even the slightest sensations and transmit motions to the entire body. So we sing as we swing our arms and turn our heads in the direction and rhythm of the music. In our bodies, nothing is isolated, everything is transmitted from one muscle to another as we follow the directives, the imperatives coming to us from the levels.

It is these directives, these imperatives, that are also the basis of our coexistence, our community with others. Long before we engage with the understanding and the reasoning faculty of others, we come upon one another in the levels of sensibility, the elements that direct us as we sense sentient bodies seeing and touching in the levels, accompanying us, our sensibilities displaced into those others, and theirs also onto ours, variants of one another. Their ears hear what we hear so that when we have left the room, the forest, the oceanside, and they stay, the levels, the sensory elements, the reliefs and contours, the sonorities and tangibilities that direct them and us remain operative, so sight, hearing, touch, smell all continue, open to directing all of us, should we re-
Given the elemental nature of levels that provide directives, it makes sense that things call to our bodies so profoundly. “A perceived this is a pole which draws the convergent surfaces and organs of our bodies like a telos, a task. The reality of things is not given in our perception, but orders it as in imperative.” It is not we who judge the intelligibility of things but things that “try out their reality in indecisive and inconclusive appearances.” Recent studies in the physiology of perception indicate that when sensory messages are available, chaotic, collective activity involving millions of neurons is essential to rapid recognition. What is relevant here is that when cortical neurons are excited, their output increases until they reach a maximal rate. If, for example, an odorant is active such that the neuronal collectives are generally aroused, the information spreads “like a flash fire through the nerve cell assembly. . . . so that the input rapidly ignites an explosion of collective activity throughout the entire assembly,” spreading until it ignites a “full blown burst.” Such nearly instantaneous activity allows for novel activity patterns and implies that the brain seeks information.

Adapted to Lingis’s model, we may say that the imperative to seek information comes not only from the “brain,” but initially from the levels, from the environment of things. Things are not dead matter. They push back and push aside other things and “clamor for our attention” as our senses sink into the depths of things, not content to remain on the surface. This is why Lingis states that on the levels of sensuality, the levels along which we move, our enjoyment is not distinctly our own, but the night, the light, the air, the earth are all depersonalizing. Everything open to us is first open to others, open to anyone in their range with the ability to perceive or use them.

Thus, language is not first. Language, the symbolic realm, is not the first medium of communication. The ability to
use concepts, to reason about space or time, the ability to universalize our acts such that any one, at any time, in equivalent circumstances would act in the same way, none of these are the basis of our communication with and affinity for others. Rather, wherever we go, whatever we perceive, someone else has been there first and their inhabitation of that level and its perceptibles will inevitably have entered that level and will inform our engagement with that level and whatever things emerge in it.

**Free Will**

For Kant, the whole point of moral law is to free us from nature’s causal forces. Newtonian science, with its laws of motion governing the motions of physical bodies, seemed to have made this a difficult goal. The possibility of what Kant calls “free will” is radically undermined. So we must think our way out of this. We know that we are causal phenomena in nature, but nevertheless, we think that we are free, that our actions are intelligent, that we do not follow blind impulse. How is this done? Autonomy, freedom from nature’s mechanical causality, which is to say, from our own bodily pleasures and pains, is taken to be an imperative. Although nature is mechanical, each subject feels its effects differently. Some like the feeling of beaches and ocean, others prefer cold mountain tops, but no one can remove themselves from some feeling, thus there is always a subjective incentive to choose one or another object.

If freedom means that there is an unconditioned first cause of our actions, then subjective preferences will not yield this; they remain subject to nature’s causal forces. Yet, we do feel something that informs us that we are free. We feel the check on our self-love. This feeling alerts us to the existence of freedom because we ask ourselves, what is it that is putting this check on self-love? We first examine our maxims
of subjective desire and find only self-love there; so then we abstract from all empirical conditions, all particular objects and goals that are motivated by self-love. What we are left with is the form of giving the universal rule, freedom in the strictest, transcendental sense, the form of all possible imperatives to act. We harmonize this transcendental law with our subjective desires by checking inclinations, and we feel the pain of rejecting every sensible condition, every “I desire,” leaving us, in the end, with the negative feeling which is respect for moral law, respect for our ability to cease to be subject to nature’s mechanical causal forces. We abstract from our subjective inclinations leaving only objective rules for the will.

But subjective humiliation yields objective respect, the so-called a priori or intellectual feeling of respect for moral law, because it blocks subjective feeling, a block caused by our intellectual recognition of freedom from nature’s causal mechanism. The blockage, the pain, the humiliation, is the subjective, sensible incentive to never act on sensible, subjective motives and, therefore, to act only on the basis of freedom. This is what is called, by Kant, moral law. For the sake of freedom, all inclinations are limited, choked off. Our recognition of freedom constrains us, makes it a duty, a rule characterized by an “ought,” that we ought not to act on subjective motives and that this law must completely determine the will, and not just mine, but everyone’s, anyone who thinks. When freedom alone determines the will, its laws are categorical imperatives; they are thus necessary, unconditional, free of inclinations, and thereby universal.

It seems that Lingis agrees with Kant that an imperative is a practical necessity arising with and out of respect. But as Lingis notes, for Kant, “the immediate effect of the rational activity of the will is the reduction of sensuous impulses and appetites to impotence.” Negatively, this is something like fear; positively, it is something like inclination, that is,
respect for law. Kant’s imperative, Lingis continues, constitutes a typology according to which the person is constrained in three ways. First, we are constrained to represent the sensible world as surface effects of bodily physiology and physico-chemical natural forces. Second, we are constrained to view our sensory and motor powers as solely in the service of the the rational, practical faculty. And third, we are constrained to imagine ourselves as wholly obedient to the commands of reason.\textsuperscript{35} And of course, the commands of reason, the law, is a set of properties drawn from logic, the logic that was validated by Newtonian physics.\textsuperscript{36} But as Lingis points out, in the current era, mathematics and the logics utilized in mathematics make use of a vast array of idealized conceptual models. Mathematics is not unified but divided into a plethora of mathematical disciplines.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, what is needed now is not representations of our nature, of our faculties as instrumental systems and ourselves as microsocieties, but something else, some other imperative that accounts for our sensuality, sensitivity, perception, thought, and motility.\textsuperscript{38}

**The Imperative of the Other**

Why something else, why another sort of imperative? Perhaps the urgency of this other imperative emerges for Lingis in the analysis of the other, which he formulates in terms borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas. Hands that touch others “do not move with their own goals in view; they are moved, troubled by the touch of the other with which they make contact, afflicted with the pleasure and the torment of the other.”\textsuperscript{39} The imperative is formulated in this manner because the hands now “make contact with a vulnerability that summons them, a susceptibility that puts demands on them.”\textsuperscript{40} So, it is the case here that the ethical imperative is not subjectively motivated, but neither is it a rational imperative to respect universal law. The imperative comes instead from the
depth where vortices form levels according to which phenomena are perceived. “We greet the other as a depth structure of forces, and recognize community with him or her, in the handshake that seals the pact.”

Nevertheless, the sounds of wind or traffic or the sight of forests or cities is not the same as the encounter with others who speak and act, who look into our own eyes with their eyes, whose words call up or respond to one’s own speaking and hearing. Without the other who speaks to me, gestures at me, looks into my eyes and acts in the world, without this other, I have no world. The imperative of the other, the demands of the other that are put on me, the appeals made to me are all necessities for me, indications that the world they inhabit is also the the world open to me. “For it is before the face of the other that I first entered speech.” And even if I interpret or identify the other, represent the other, that other—all those specific and unique others moving through the world, perceiving that way they perceive, inhabiting levels in the manner that they do this—contests my manner of perceiving and inhabiting, my manner of moving and seeing, my speech and actions. Not an other me but a persistence that challenges my speech and actions, my perceptions and movements. The gaze, the skin, the anxiety, the laughter, the arrogance, the suffering, the age, the voice, the gait, the vulnerability, all belong to the other, all contest me with their very existence. This is now the sense of the imperative. It “weighs on us with the force of exteriority,” such that we cannot but look, touch, caress or torment, except as an answer to the demand, the imperative to attend to the other.

Yet, the question remains as to whether or not this is enough, whether it is adequate or not. That is, is the imperative addressed to us in the face of the other adequate to promulgate respect—or is it not just as easy for us physically or economically, psychologically or politically to not respect the imperative that comes from the other? Will this keep us from
harming and destroying the other, taking away their land, their children, their futures, and their pasts? And if not, then given the disintegration of the universal, rational moral law, then what now, what next?

1 Alphonso Lingis, *Foreign Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 23 (italics added).
7 Wu, Ma, and Zhou, *Vorticity and Vortex Dynamics*, 2.
8 Wu, Ma, and Zhou, *Vorticity and Vortex Dynamics*, 1.
9 Wu, Ma, and Zhou, *Vorticity and Vortex Dynamics*, 5.
10 Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 23.
12 Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 23.
17 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 27.
19 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 29.
22 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 63.
23 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 64.

24 Walter J. Freeman, “The Physiology of Perception,” *Scientific American* 264.2 (February 1991): 78–85. Freeman, like most cognitivists, emphasizes the activity of the “brain”; nevertheless, we can extrapolate from his perspective to Lingis’s.

25 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 69.

26 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 125.

27 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 127.


33 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 174–175.

34 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 184.

35 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 195.

36 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 207. I have also discussed the idea of the logical basis of Kant’s practical reason in chapter 4 of *The Universal (In the Realm of the Sensible)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

37 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 208.

38 Lingis, *The Imperative*, 211.


40 Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 171 (emphases added).

41 Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 185.

42 Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 169.

43 Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 177.