

# *Levinas on Face*

## *— A Preliminary Exploration of Levinas's Ethical Phenomenology*

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**Abstract:** According to Levinas, there exists a totalizing characteristic within the Western philosophical tradition that reduces the other to sameness. This subjectification of the other implies a violence towards the other. In resistance to this totalizing violence, Levinas endeavors to construct a theory with ethics as the first philosophy. By introducing an absolutely external other and shifting the focus from the "self" in phenomenology towards the absolute heterogeneity of the "other," Levinas establishes an ethics of the other. This is built on the foundation of a "face-to-face" relationship, creating a framework where "the ego" bear an infinite responsibility towards "the other". On one hand, the other disrupts my exclusive possession of the world through the presence of their face, rejecting my conceptual grasp. On the other hand, through discourse, the other makes an ethical plea to the ego, and the ego bear an absolute responsibility towards the other, becoming a "hostage" to the other. The central theme of Levinas's ethics is the other, focusing on the primal experience of face-to-face encounters where the other precedes my understanding of existence and knowledge objects.

**Keywords:** Levinas, face, ethics, phenomenology

### 1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, humanity has grappled with a profound philosophical dilemma concerning the legitimacy of values and morality. Faced with ethnic conflicts, terrorism, and two world wars, moral convictions have seemed hollow in the face of catastrophe, with the objectivity of morality and values challenged by nihilism, moral relativism, and skepticism. The impact of World War II, in particular, left an indelible mark on Emmanuel Levinas, prompting a lifelong reflection on the violence inherent in Western traditional spiritual civilization. Levinas sought to reconceptualize ethics by embarking on a phenomenological approach, establishing an ethical phenomenology that argues for the height of the other and posits my absolute responsibility towards them. In his work *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas inverts subjectivity, reconstructing it from the external other, making the other, not the self, the starting point of ethics.

Within the framework of this ethical relationship, Levinas seeks to address moral issues in interpersonal relationships, emphasizing our unconditional responsibility towards others. His theory has profoundly influenced the development of ethics, presenting an ethical perspective as the first philosophy.

## 2. Face to Face

### 2.1. Face

Face is undeniably a central concept in Levinas's ethics of the other. Levinas emphasizes the absolute exteriority of the other, connecting with the "self" solely through the "face." Face is often understood as an intermediary between the "self" and the "other," through which the subject forms cognition of the other. However, this appears contradictory to Levinas's emphasis on the concept of the other as incomprehensible and unattainable.

Levinas asserts, "It (the face) cannot be comprehended, that is, it cannot be included. It is neither seen nor touched." [1] The face, through its refusal to be encompassed, presents itself. Levinas refers to the face as a non-objective quality. It is the concrete presence of the other, like the other, does not exist as an object that constitutes the subject's cognitive world.

The unrepresentable nature of the face also reveals its relation to the infinite. In Levinas's view, the idea of the infinite is contained within the other. It differs from the traditional idea that places the infinite and finite within the same whole and associates the infinite with the finite. This perspective blurs the externality of the infinite concept. In contrast, Descartes, after subdividing ideas into things, mathematical concepts, and moral concepts, retained the mystery of the infinite concept. He mentioned that the finite self derives from the infinite God, and the infinite God is not comprehensible by finite existence. The infinite concept, "its ideatum (the conceptualized) surpasses its concept." [1] This is common with Levinas's idea of the infinite as the other. The face is the concretization of the infinite concept as it surpasses the infinite idea, making it tangible.

As finite subjects attempt to understand the infinite idea, this desire is stirred by love. However, this desire "is not a desire that can be satisfied by possession of the desirable but is a desire for the desirable, incited by the desirable. It is a completely disinterested desire—a good one." [1]

In a situation where finite subjects and the infinite other have absolute difference, it is impossible to comprehend the infinite idea with all the subject's cognitive concepts; only language can establish a connection between the two separate entities. Speech "is to speak, not to 'let be' but to arouse the other. Speech transcends the visual." [1] Through speech, the subject attempts to understand the other; however, there is always a gap between the other constructed by the subject through speech and the actual other, indicating that the other can never be fully comprehended by the subject. Face establishes a relationship between the subject and the other through speech but refuses to place itself within the same field as the subject. It is the infinite.

For this reason, face reminds the subject of the ethical responsibility they have toward the other. Face rejects the subject's homogenizing possession and negation of the other, at the same time, there is an original absolute command within the face: "Thou shalt not kill." This is the ethical resistance of the face. Guo Yu proposed, "Husserl's theory of intentionality emphasized the conscious subject and neglected the other." Levinas, through his phenomenological analysis of the other's face, imparts the feature of intentional transcendence. This transcendence implies, on the one hand, that the other can always remain the absolute other and cannot be comprehended, and on the other hand, the self can only exist as an ethical subject bearing responsibility in a face-to-face relationship with the other." [2]

### 2.2. Subjectivities

As previously discussed, face is the presence of the other, revealing to the subject the other's infiniteness and transcendence, prompting the subject's ethical responsibility towards the other. However, regarding the heterogeneous other, how does it awaken the subject's ethical responsibility, and why is it always through its gentle plea that it stirs goodness within people rather than through a

harsh confrontation? This requires an analysis at the level of Levinas's perspective on the relationship between the ego and the other to provide an answer.

Concerning the possible relationships between the other and the ego, Hobbes believed that human nature leads people into a state of war without external coercion in a natural state, where individuals confront each other. In this view, the other offers real resistance, using all their power and freedom to resist the ego. However, under despotic rule, if the subject is part of the ruling class, the other, as the ruled, becomes completely exposed to my power, yielding to my cunning and wrongdoing.

In Levinas's view, the manifestation of the other's face, though irresistible in its infiniteness, is always in a naked form. This implies that the relationship between the ego and the other is fundamentally an ethical relationship, even if the other can be physically conquered, the ethical resistance remains permanent. "The other's resistance flashes within the naked vulnerability of the other's unguarded eyes, shining in the absolute openness of the transcendent." [1] Levinas often specifically mentions the face of vulnerable groups, such as orphans, widows, and the impoverished and hungry. However, this does not mean that the other includes only these groups, but even apparently powerful others present their face in a naked form to the ego, revealing the potential suffering and misfortune they might face. Rudolf Bernet argues that: "This appeal coming out of a lack makes me in turn lacking." [3]

However, when it comes to powerful others, it does not equate to those with ill intent who threaten the ego. Those who demand violence and control over others lack face. Levinas points out that the executioner is the one who threatens my neighbor, in this sense, the executioner demands violence, and they lack face. However, for animals, even if we cannot fully categorize an animal's face within the realm of human face, due to the extension of our ethical responsibility toward the other and the obligation we possess to perceive suffering, animals, assuming they have the capacity to feel pain, also convey a vulnerable plea through their face. Here, the face of animals generates from an understanding based on human face.

Face appeals to the ego with a naked plea, evoking a sense of ethical responsibility. While this ethical responsibility towards the other is absolute, it does not limit my freedom. Assuming responsibility and enjoying freedom are inherently unified, "this command of responsibility is such that in it, freedom is awakened irresistibly, to the extent that the unbearable weight of existence makes my freedom emerge." [1] Choices made after appealing to one's conscience are not due to external pressure but are choices from within, constituting a kind of responsibility, perhaps a responsibility for freedom. Furthermore, Marcus suggests that in Levinas's view, "the psyche, at least in part, is only "healthy" (to use a psychoanalytic term) to the extent that its responsibility-driven search for the Good takes precedence over its freedom-driven search for the True." [4]

In summary, face issues an absolute command to the ego, appealing and pleading with the ego, and the ego cannot evade it. Ouyang Qian believes, "Ethical relationships or ethical experiences arise from encounters between the self and the 'other.' Because ethical experience is transcendent and beyond the self, ethics should precede ontology." [5] Therefore, in Levinas's view, ethics comes before ontology and serves as the first philosophy.

### 3. Face and Discourse

#### 3.1. Discourse and Revelation

In this section, the author will focus on how face reveals itself to the ego and how the absolute other establishes a relationship with the ego. Levinas explains this through the concepts of "discourse" and "revelation." John Llewelyn argues, "For Levinas, the significant is primarily the speaker in the first person singular subjectivity of its me, in the accusative case – except that the word 'case' is misleading.

Before being a case, the speaker is a face, the face that speaks. And what the face primarily says, its signifié', is nothing but its saying." [6]

Levinas first emphasizes the autonomy of existents, meaning that the metaphysical (absolute other) cannot be objectified by metaphysicians (separate existents). The knower's knowledge of the known cannot bridge the absolute distance of the metaphysical, and the two ends of discourse always remain separate. However, the unique nature of discourse allows this maintenance of an absolute separation.

Discourse is a form of self-expression that, through itself, enables us to form knowledge about the other. But this knowledge cannot bypass the other's existence, and the other will not change because of any stance the ego takes. In Levinas's view, we can have a thematic knowledge of history without considering the existence of real historical objects, focusing solely on their traces, written words, and records, and summarizing them. This is because historical objects are already absent from historical records. However, discourse is a form of presence, and face is a form of living presence; it is an expression.

Moreover, discourse is an original expression, presenting itself in the way it signifies, which is speaking. The experience of the other that we gain from discourse is not a demystification of the other's existence but a revelation. Discourse is the direct presentation of the other. "It comes from above, is unforeseen; it teaches by its novelty itself." [1] Therefore, it has the privilege that even in a dialogue, even if one lies or conceals themselves, language always confronts the ego through its naked face, and the speaker is always in a state of absolute frankness. In contrast, behavior is not the direct expression of the other; the ego can form a certain thematic knowledge of the other through their behavior, similar to understanding a historical figure because it is not the other's expression but only related to the other. If we were to imagine discourse as mere behavior, reducing it to the physical movement of lips, it would ignore the essential nature of language as revelation.

Revelation implies a high degree of correspondence between the expressed content and the expresser. In this sense, the other cannot be demystified. The demystification of the objective other from my perspective has already missed the true subject of knowledge because the pure experience about the other is only related to the other; the other always maintains their absolute nature as they enter into a dialogue with the ego, and complete knowledge of the other, the "objectivity" we seek, exists only on the other side of the other's existence. Unlike objective knowledge, revelation originates from the absolute exteriority of the other to the ego, and the ego passively accepts it. This is the mode of dialogue between the ego and the other, a process of complete passive acceptance. Thus, revelation exists in a space of mutual isolation while connecting the ego and the other. Levinas believes, "Face to face, it both anticipates society and allows the maintenance of a separate self." [1]

Therefore, discourse establishes an ethical relationship beyond cognitive meaning. Even if the ego prohibits communication with the other, physically murders their existence, the ego cannot make the other an object to be controlled or categorized by him. Gu Hongliang emphasizes this ethical relationship in "Another Subjectivity." Gu Hongliang argues, "The other with alterity constitutes the premise of the true concept of subjectivity. This subject is not 'the ego' in confrontation with objects, but 'the ego' in interaction with others, in speech ('saying'). Levinas, through ethical analysis and argumentation, has made his view of the subject distinct from the pre-modern thinkers who talked about excessive responsibility (responsibility for the group, obliteration of individuality), different from modern thinkers who talked about responsibility based on rationality and self-interest, and different from post-modern thinkers who talk about fundamental irresponsibility, even the ignorance of responsibility." [7]

The other cannot be reduced to a totality or entity. The subject is an ethical, responsible subject toward the other. In this context, Levinas affirms Plato's description of constructive discourse, the "living, activated word." The internal logic of discourse entirely depends on the freedom of the other. It contains complete contingency. "The connectedness of language presupposes transcendence,

complete separation, the otherness of the interlocutors, and the revelation of the other to me." [1] In such a constructive dialogue, discourse is absolutely oriented towards the other, coming from a completely unfamiliar and irresistible other, and the revelation it brings is traumatic because it breaks my insistence on sameness.

### 3.2. Discourse and Significance

Revelatory discourse brings a form of trauma, which is an instructive experience. It is the presence of the other that disrupts my joyful possession of the world. And precisely through discourse, the ego relinquish his exclusive possession of the world. The world becomes a meaningful world shared between the ego and the other. The presence of the other is a prerequisite for the emergence of discourse. Discourse is not merely a tool for communicating with predefined objective thoughts and consciousness; it arises from the other, it is the embodiment of the other's infinity, and it cannot be reduced to consciousness. In other words, "in comparison to constructed intentionality and pure consciousness, discourse possesses a primordial nature." [1] Through discourse, the interiority of my consciousness is shattered, allowing for transcendence and surplus beyond my limited consciousness.

Levinas believes that the essence of language lies in the relationship with the other. Therefore, discourse creates significance, meaning that it is the relationship with the other that creates significance. Beyond visible appearances, there exists content that is unknown to the ego. Levinas states, "Significance is the infinite, that is, the other." [1] In the process of facing the other, we are led towards the infinite. Thus, in relation to constructive consciousness, language has an absolute primacy. Language is not a reproduction of consciousness.

My ethical relationship with the other, along with the primacy of discourse, imparts meaning to the world. A meaningful world is one in which the other is present. Because language introduces the other into my relationship with things, it is through "words that indicate things that prove things are shared between me and others." [1] Things are no longer exclusively available for my use, thereby acquiring their objectivity. Through speaking, the ego offer the world to the other, and the world is no longer a solitary, closed home where only the ego exists.

## 4. Conclusion

Levinas argues, "This is all the more true that we belong to a generation—and to a century—for which was reserved the pitiless trials of an ethics without consolation or promise; and because it is impossible—for us, the survivors—to witness against holiness, in seeking after its conditions." [8] Bernet argues, "For Levinas, all ethics is necessarily rooted in a face-to-face relation with an Other who is unique and singular, that is to say, not comparable to a third Other." [3] Levinas demands that ethics return to a state of everydayness, where the absolute exteriority of the other requires our recognition and reverence for the other, refusing to treat the other as a plural entity and thus preserving respect for each individual, where each individual represents the infinite and requires equal ethical care.

Therefore, all of Levinas's efforts are not aimed at formulating specific moral rules but at seeking the establishment of ethics. Based on the absolute exteriority of the other as the foundation of ethical existence, the face of the other resists all efforts to objectify it, speaking to the ego always from the infinite, offering constant revelations. The other summons my existence, and through their infinite surplus, constitutes my subjectivity. The other disrupts my exclusive possession, and through discourse, the ego offer the world to the other. His indebtedness and inherent passivity toward the exteriority make the ego bear an inescapable ethical responsibility to the other; the ego is the hostage of the other. This unconditional responsibility to the other is precisely the manifestation of the transcendental nature of Levinas's ethics, and this utopian ethical ideal, the pursuit of the impossible

possibility of ethics, restores reverence for moral commandments, rendering them sacred and worthy of belief.

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