

Bruce Young: Emmanuel Levinas and “the face of the Other”

The following consists of quotations that help illuminate what Levinas means by “the face of the Other.” Two comments first, though:

(1) “Other” (sometimes capitalized, sometimes not) usually translates the French word *autrui*, which means “the other person,” “someone else” (i.e., other than oneself). It is thus the personal other, the other person, whoever it is, that each of us encounters directly or experiences the traces of every day. Of course, we encounter a multiplicity of others, but Levinas more often uses the singular “other” to emphasize that we encounter others one at a time, face to face.

(2) By “face” Levinas means the human face (or in French, *visage*), but not thought of or experienced as a physical or aesthetic object. Rather, the first, usual, unreflective encounter with the face is as the living presence of another person and, therefore, as something experienced socially and ethically. “Living presence,” for Levinas, would imply that the other person (as someone genuinely other than myself) is exposed to me and expresses him or herself simply by being there as an undeniable reality that I cannot reduce to images or ideas in my head. This impossibility of capturing the other conceptually or otherwise indicates the other’s “infinity” (i.e., irreducibility to a finite [bounded] entity over which I can have power). The other person is, of course, exposed and expressive in other ways than through the literal face (e.g., through speech, gesture, action, and bodily presence generally), but the face is the most exposed, most vulnerable, and most expressive aspect of the other’s presence.

QUOTATIONS FROM LEVINAS (short version):

The face is a living presence; it is expression. . . . The face speaks. (*Totality and Infinity* 66)

Expression, or the face, overflows images. (*Totality and Infinity* 297)

The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure. . . . It expresses itself. (*Totality and Infinity* 50-51)

. . . the face is present in its refusal to be contained. (*Totality and Infinity* 194)

The face resists possession, resists my powers. (*Totality and Infinity* 197)

. . . the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation . . . (*Totality and Infinity* 198)

[T]he face [is] a source from which all meaning appears. (*Totality and Infinity* 297)

The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation. (*Totality and Infinity* 201)

[T]he Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me. (*Totality and Infinity* 207)

[T]he face is what forbids us to kill. (*Ethics and Infinity* 86)

In front of the face, I always demand more of myself. (“Signature” 294 in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*)

The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. . . . [T]here is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced. . . . (*Ethics and Infinity* 86)

The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity--its hunger--without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. (*Totality and Infinity* 200)

[T]he Other manifests itself by the absolute resistance of its defenceless eyes. . . . The infinite in the face . . . brings into question my freedom, which is discovered to be murderous and usurpatory. (“Signature” 294 in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*)

. . . the face presents itself, and demands justice. (*Totality and Infinity* 294)

In the face the Other expresses his eminence, the dimension of height and divinity from which he descends. (*Totality and Infinity* 262)

QUOTATIONS FROM LEVINAS (long version):

What we call the face is precisely this exceptional presentation of self by self. (*Totality and Infinity* 202)

Expression, or the face, overflows images. (*Totality and Infinity* 297)

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. . . . The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure. . . . It expresses itself. (*Totality and Infinity* 50-51)

The face is a living presence; it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. He who manifests himself comes, according to Plato's expression, to his own assistance. He at each instant undoes the form he presents. (*Totality and Infinity* 66)

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. (*Totality and Infinity* 194)

The face resists possession, resists my powers. (*Totality and Infinity* 197)

. . . the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation . . . (*Totality and Infinity* 198)

. . . the face brings the first signification (*Totality and Infinity* 207)

[T]he face [is] a source from which all meaning appears. (*Totality and Infinity* 297)

Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language. (*Totality and Infinity* 206)

The face, preeminently expression, formulates the first word: the signifier arising at the thrust of his sign, as eyes that look at you. (*Totality and Infinity* 178)

The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation. (*Totality and Infinity* 201)

[T]he Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me. (*Totality and Infinity* 207)

[A]ccess to the face is straightaway ethical. . . . There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill. (*Ethics and Infinity* 85-86)

The first word of the face is the "Thou shalt not kill." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. (*Ethics and Infinity* 89)

In front of the face, I always demand more of myself. ("Signature" 294 in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*)

[T]he Other manifests itself by the absolute resistance of its defenceless eyes. . . . [i.e., “The other person manifests himself by the absolute resistance of his defenceless eyes.”] . . . The infinite in the face . . . brings into question my freedom, which is discovered to be murderous and usurpatory. (“Signature” 294 in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*)

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one “puts the things in question in giving”)--this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as “You” in a dimension of height.

It is in generosity that the world possessed by me--the world open to enjoyment--is apperceived from a point of view independent of the egoist position. The “objective” is not simply the object of an impassive contemplation. Or rather impassive contemplation is defined by gift, by the abolition of inalienable property. The presence of the Other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world. (*Totality and Infinity* 75-76)

[An] infinite resistance to murder, . . . firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. (*Totality and Infinity* 199)

. . . the face presents itself, and demands justice. (*Totality and Infinity* 294)

The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity--its hunger--without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness. . . . The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no “interiority” permits avoiding. . . . The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself; it is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced it. (*Totality and Infinity* 200, 201, 218-19)

The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. (*Totality and Infinity* 215)

In the face the Other expresses his eminence, the dimension of height and divinity from which he descends. (*Totality and Infinity* 262)