

Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility

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According to the French-Jewish thinker Levinas (1905–1995), ethics begins with the appearing of the other person, or, as he calls it in his first major work, *Totality and Infinity* (1961), with his or her “face.” Let us follow Levinas in his attempt to describe this central ethical phenomenon. In this way, we will be led to pay special attention to the problem of violence, hate, and murder, since every ethics is ultimately concerned with the difference between moral good and evil. Through this analysis—which of course can explain only some aspects of Levinas’s many-sided and at the same time single-minded thinking—we still hope to make clear the power and importance of his ethics for, among other things, the contemporary discussion on racism.

From the Human Countenance to the Face of the Other

If we go in search of what Levinas means by the term “face,” we immediately encounter a great, but obvious misunderstanding. When we hear the word “face,” we spontaneously associate it with “countenance,” with the physiognomy, facial expression, and, by extension, character, social status, situation, and past, that means the “context” from which the other person becomes visible and describable for us. The face of the other thus seems to coincide perfectly with what his appearance and behavior offers to “seeing” and “representing.” By taking literally an “option” regarding the other person, we suppose ourselves able to “define” him, whereupon we then also delimit our reactions and behavior. Likewise, in all sorts of forms of counseling (medical, psychological, therapeutic), we begin from a “diagnosis,” from a methodically and technically professionalized “observation” through which, based on our foreknowledge of symptoms—the images of sickness—we can propose a diagnosis with an eye to prognosis and treatment.

What Levinas really means by the “face of the other” is not his physical countenance or appearance, but precisely the noteworthy fact that the other—not only in fact, but in principle—does not coincide with his appearance, image, photograph, representation, or evocation. “The other is invisible” (TI 6). According to Levinas, we therefore can not properly speak of a “phenomenology” of the face since phenomenology describes what appears. The face is nonetheless what in the countenance of the other escapes our gaze when turned toward us. The other is “otherwise,” irreducible to his appearing, and

thus reveals himself precisely as face. Surely, the other is indeed visible. Obviously, he appears and so calls up all sorts of impressions, images, and ideas by which he can be described. And naturally, we can come to know a great deal about him or her on the basis of what he or she gives us “to see.” But the other is more than a photograph, or rather not only is he factually more—not only more in the sense where there is always more for me to discover—but he can never be adequately reproduced or summarized by one or another image. The other is essentially, and not merely factually or provisionally, a movement of retreat and overflowing. I can never bind or identify the other with his plastic form (EI 90–91). Paradoxically, the other’s appearing is executed as a withdrawal, or literally, as *retraite* or *anachorese*. The epiphany of the other is always also a breaking through and a throwing into confusion of that very epiphany, and as such the other always remains “enigmatic,” intruding on me as the “irreducible,” “separate and distinct,” “strange,” in short as “the other” (AS 81). The other is insurmountably otherwise because he escapes once for all every effort at representation and diagnosis. The epiphany of the face makes all curiosity ridiculous (TI 46).

Still, for Levinas it is precisely in this insurmountable irreducibility of alterity that is the vulnerability of the face (TI 275), and through which the lighting up of its ethical significance is made manifest. As “countenance,” the other is vulnerable, and can very easily be reduced to his appearing, as social position, “accomplishments,” and image of health or illness. The appearance of the face as countenance, as it were, invites the “I,” or “ego,” to reduce the other to that countenance. This “invitation to reduction” depends not only on the vulnerability of the face but also on the way of being of the I to whom the face appears. Borrowing an expression from Spinoza, Levinas describes the I as *conatus essendi*—as effort and tension of existing (AE 4–5). As an individual being, the I is persistent in its concern with its own existence, and tries obstinately to maintain itself (AS 63–64). The “natural” or spontaneous being of the I is self-interest: its *esse* is *interesse*. This implies that the I also approaches the other person from an “interested” position, which is to say that it tries to integrate the other into its project of existing as a function, means, or meaning.

This also goes with the manner in which I approach the face of the other. On the basis of my perception—whether spontaneous or permeated by method—“vision” in the literal sense of the word—I strive to grasp the other in an image and to keep him in my sights. And this perception takes place not out of “contemplative” consideration that wishes only to respectfully “mirror” the other or “let him be seen,” but according to self-interested concerns. When I thus succeed in discovering or “dis-closing” the other person, I can also know how I can interact with him, and how I can include him in the realization of my autonomy and right to freedom. Hence does the face appear as preeminently vulnerable, in so far as it can be reduced—based on its appearing and on the ground of my perception—precisely to its countenance. In this respect, Levinas takes the paradoxical position that the other presents himself to me as the “temptation to murder” (EI 90). In its appearing, the face presents itself to me naked; it is, as it were, handed over defenseless before the “shameless gaze” that observes

and explores it. The nudity of the face is an “uncomfortable” nudity, one that testifies to an essential destitution. The proof of this is in the fact that the other tries to camouflage his poverty by taking on airs, by posing or posturing, making and dressing himself up, grooming and preening. This makes it clear that the other is naked, and by its appearing the basic onlooking—literally “voyeuristic”—I is as it were invited to violence. By its “countenance,” its visibility, the face challenges my self-interested effort of existing to imprison the other there, in what I see, or, to invoke a play of words, the other who is seen, “*is seen*” (AE 113–15).

But in this very fascination, says Levinas, there lies the ethical significance of the face. At the moment in which I am attracted by the naked “countenance” of the other to reduce him to that countenance, I simultaneously realize that that which can be actually must not. This is the core of the fundamental ethical experience beginning from the face—namely, the prohibition against committing the other solely to his own countenance (LC 44). Levinas expresses this as a categorical imperative emanating from the face: “Thou shall not kill.” In my self-sufficient effort of existing, which on the ground of perception and representation aims to become the expression and realization of individual freedom, I am not merely limited from the outside but at my deepest—in the very principle of my freedom—shocked and placed in question: “Do I not kill by being?” (EI 129).

An Ethics of Goodness

It is through its countenance and its naked poverty that the face can be killed. And the fact that this is not only a possibility but an everyday—or even banal—reality is abundantly clear from our newspaper and television reports of violence, homicide, and war. In this sense, the face as an ethical appeal is not an ontological or natural “necessity,” like an object that, when let go, must fall, according to the law of gravity. The “must” that asserts itself in the face—and by which the face is precisely a face—is not the “cannot be otherwise” of natural necessity, but to the contrary a “can be otherwise” that, on the other hand, must not. The commandment against murder does not make murder impossible, even when its “authority” is maintained in bad conscience over evil committed (NLT 22–23). In this respect, the ethical “must” is absolutely opposed to “compulsion” or “inevitability.” The face as command does not force compliance, but only appeals. The face presents itself to me as an “authority,” but one that cannot compel me to anything, but can only ask and appeal, an authority that requires only by beseeching. The authority that reaches me from the face as a prohibition against murder is an “unarmed authority” (AS 69) that can call only upon my free, good will for help. The term “appeal” expresses both the unconditionally obliging character of a categorical imperative in the Kantian sense, and a call to human freedom as good will—that is to say, as a will that can override its own self-interest and stand essentially open for the other than itself, but that can also, again as free will, cast this appeal to the wind. The face of the other signifies for me the experience of violence as continuous

enchantment and real possibility, and thus immediately the ethical “shame” that I must not be the murderer of the other (EI 91).

When Levinas offers a positive analysis of this putting into question of the ego’s self-interested effort of existing, he speaks of a call to responsibility for the other. This responsibility consists in the first place in taking care not to violate or destroy (“kill”) the other in his otherness, which is to say not to reduce the other to his countenance, but instead to recognize, respect, and do justice to him in his otherness. When we look at an other and see eyes, nose, a forehead, a chin, and so forth, all of which can be described, then we consider the other only as an object. And this is precisely a form of lack of respect, hence a form of violence. In his evocative language, Levinas can then also propose that the best manner in which to meet the other consists not in the least in taking note of the color of his eyes (EI 89). When one sees the color of the eyes, the other becomes a “spectacle” by which his irreducible and infinite otherness is violated. In contrast with the shameless intrusion that breaks in on the other without embarrassment, we can, with Levinas, designate the ethical relation supposed in the commandment “Thou shall not kill” as “holding back”: *le mouvement apparemment négatif de la retenue* [the seemingly negative movement of holding back] (NLT 96). Confronted with the vulnerability of the face, I am thereby called to restrain myself and to pull back—in other words, to *not* do something, or concretely, not to do the other violence, which in fact runs counter to the spontaneous dynamics of my effort of existing that presses brutally forward (*comme une force qui va* [like a force that goes]).

This makes possible a better grasp of the manner in which the “good will” mentioned above relates itself to the “effort of existing.” As “aimed at the good” one might think that the good will is to be found wholly outside of the *conatus essendi*. Indeed, such a dualistic interpretation is put forth easily by numerous interpreters of Levinas, inspired not least by Levinas himself, particularly in *Totalité et Infini*. In that work, “the Same” (*le Même*) and “the Other” (*l’Autre*), “the effort of existing” (*l’intéressement*) and “responsibility” (*la responsabilité par Autrui*), and “being” (*être*) and the “otherwise than being” (*autrement qu’être*) are held apart from one another as two different and distinct fields of meaning that can also be radically contrasted. However, since Levinas never speaks of the Same *or* the Other, but of the Same *and* the Other (*le Même et l’Autre*), the question is really how they do indeed relate to each other.

A correct understanding of this relation can be clarified via the Husserlian method to which Levinas often refers. This method consists in first withdrawing from what appears and is given to everyday perception, in order to—from a position of systematic and methodical doubt—return *zu den Sachen selbst*, or to what is covered over or forgotten in the perceived phenomena, and thus to return to “true reality”—to the thing itself—of the phenomenon. What is immediately obvious in our everyday perception of the dynamic of human existence is that it is driven by the *conatus essendi*. On closer inspection, this description of the subject appears too hasty. According to Levinas—and here we come upon what is in my opinion the real originality of his ethical thinking—our characterization of the I by self-

interest and effort of existing has covered something up, something already at work in that very effort of existing. Concretely, there is at work in the effort of existing itself—in the Same, and not outside it—a scruple that places the *conatus essendi* in question from inside out and breaks it open to the other than itself. Literally, the word *scruple* means a *pebble in one's shoe* making it impossible to stand still, and instead moving or inciting one to take another step. It is therefore not by chance that Levinas speaks of “the Other in the same” (AE 141). This scruple that disturbs even the effort of existing comes to light through an encounter with the face, but it is not introduced or created by that encounter. The confrontation with the appeal of the naked and vulnerable face awakens in the *conatus* the scruple over itself through which the “being” of the I reveals itself as also “otherwise than being.” As paradoxical as it may sound, this “otherwise than being” is not introduced by the face but in fact is manifested as essentially belonging to the dynamic of the *conatus*. The scruple over itself that operates from inside out within the *conatus* means precisely the “good will” as an ethical event. As orientation to the good, the good will is not a “natural necessity”—nor is the effort of existing—in the sense that a person can do nothing other than choose either for the other or for self-interest. The good will enacts itself precisely as scruple, as placing in question, as a discomfort with itself in the effort of existing. As *conatus essendi*, I am uneasy about my own *conatus essendi*; I realize that the evidence of my striving to exist is not at all evident, that I might not outlive my self-interest after all. In the exercise of my effort of existing it occurs to me that, left to itself, that effort is brutal, and leaves everything behind it, in its own wake. There is also a certain “natural impulse or inclination” in the *conatus* to think and act from its own interest, though this still does not mean that it is abandoned to itself as an inevitable mechanism of natural necessity. It is because it can be marked by an internal scruple or reserve about itself that the *conatus* is ethical, and by this it exceeds nature—nature being understood here as moderated or exercised in accord with natural law. And through the crisis that it bears within itself—*la crise de l'être* [the crisis of being]—it is not abandoned to itself as fatality, but can exceed itself to the other than itself. Through the internal scruple a choice is put before it between self-interest and the otherwise than being, by which it exceeds itself as “involvement with the good,” and is thus “good will.” In short, the paradox of being human is that as the effort of existing we are not abandoned to our nature as to a natural impulse, but, through the scruple—through our conscience as *mauvaise* conscience [bad conscience]—we can arise above ourselves to choose for the good, that is to say for “unselfishness.” In this way, the effort of existing in itself also already marked and touched by the good, not as necessity but as possibility and call. It is not for nothing that Levinas cites this as *le miracle de l'humain* [the “miracle of the human”]: the other in the same, transcendence in immanence, the “extraordinary” in the “ordinary,” the other that affects the same and unsettles it, or more forcefully, throws it into such disorder that the effort of existing is turned inside out and exposed as vulnerable to the other than itself, which is to say the face of the other (AT 141–43).

The apparently negative movement of reserve and placing oneself in question in the effort of existing, so to speak, makes room for the positive movement of attention and responsibility for the other. This responsibility, which establishes the nonkilling of the other and which begins as from the summons of the face—and, finally, which is therefore radically heteronomous—Levinas characterizes time and again throughout his writings as “goodness.” “Responsibility” is a term very dear to him, and the highest realization of it consists in existing close to the other in his extreme vulnerability, that is, not to leave the other alone in his exposure to the inexorability of his death. And although I can do no more for the other, he cannot reimburse me for my goodness. As countenance, the face is also “in the sights” of death as the ultimate and inescapable menace making all will-to-live ridiculous. This, then, is goodness as nonindifference, one that is also asymmetrical and that thus in no way takes as a precondition for goodness any payment or reward from the other. Levinas sometimes tries to clarify the “unselfishness” of the responsibility for the other as “pure goodness,” “love without eros,” “charity without reciprocity”—“to fear for the other” without this fear beginning from “fear for myself.” In this respect, for Levinas this “fear for the other pursued and stricken by death” is the foundation and even modality of responsibility-to-and-for-the-other as goodness (EI 128).

Goodness as Inverted World

With this strong accent on goodness—not merely surprising but also moving—Levinas himself is nonetheless also conscious of a possible reproach, namely that his ethics of goodness is in fact a cheap, romantic, and naive philosophy. Levinas resists this charge vehemently. His ethics of responsibility is a very realistic philosophy that departs precisely from the moral evil of violence and injustice (NLT 23–24).

Levinas concedes that on first sight the idea of goodness seems simple, even banal. But for him it loses its simplicity in light of the evil that wishes to transgress it. Levinas’s basic ethical idea of care for the other—who is always essentially “other” and thus “foreign”—acquires its full force in light of the denial and destruction of the other. This latter point has already been touched on when analyzing the call to responsibility going out from the face in connection with the command “Thou shall not kill” and through the definition of the ethical as the scruple in the *conatus essendi* itself. This command points directly to the possibility and reality of violence and murder as evil. Moreover, there arise no norms in human society, and few prohibitions, unless reality is such that they become either necessary or at least desirable. Were each of us spontaneously and, as it were, inherently non-violent, there would exist neither ethics nor any prohibition against murder. Only when a specific evil has a certain factual evidence—which is not to say “necessity”!—do there come to be ethical values and norms, formulated for the most part in the form of prohibitions, precisely in order to make clear that such values (which in fact are often and easily violated) must not be violated. Were there always and everywhere respect for the otherness of the other person, then there would also be no ethics, which is

also to say that there would be no need for an obligation to respect, or to formulate a prohibition against murder as the minimal expression of that respect. In this sense, goodness as nonviolent relation to the other that tries to do him or her justice is anything but a cheap and naive thought, good only for pious souls or idealistic adolescents not yet familiar with life's hard realities. Goodness as the path to the other is not at all a self-evident, "natural" idea that would emerge spontaneously in our everyday struggles. It is anything but self-evident. On the contrary, it establishes an "inverted order," an *Umwertung aller Werte* [a "revaluation of all values"], for it is possible only as a radical transgression of our "ordinary" striving to be that, according to its self-interest, orders the other to itself with the greatest self-evidence. The naivete, in other words, lies not on the side of goodness, but on that of freedom and the I, which in its "natural" or spontaneous "being" acts as if everything were there "for him" alone. Only when we have understood goodness as the overcoming of our "quasi-natural" self-interest that, on the basis of our neediness, seems rather more evident than does "being for the other," can its true, revolutionary, and counterintuitive character emerge. To employ one useful image—an image that comes from Levinas himself—goodness goes so far that it keeps the cold in and for itself while we by nature rather appreciate the warmth. The true meaning and real value of goodness, understood as the unconditional of the other despite its "otherness," consists precisely in overcoming the evil threatening the other with reduction and destruction, instead establishing another relation with him or her, one resting on attention and devotion to the other. In this sense, the Levinasian idea of responsibility for the other can never be thought of or explained without also pointing to its counterpart, its negative inverse, which it resists in particular, namely the evil of reducing the face of the other person to his countenance, which is also to say indifference before, or rejection of the other—not of the human in general, but of the other person, of the alterity of the other person (CAJ 78).

Use, Consumption, and Misuse of the Other

To make clear that goodness is not a weak concept but an iron-strong ethical one, I find it important to pause for a moment over the attention that Levinas pays to moral evil, and specifically to the evil that one person perpetrates against another. On one hand, he discovers in evil the same basic structure, namely the "reduction of the other to the same" (TI 6). On the other hand, he distinguishes in it different forms. These can be arranged in ascending order, starting from the "comprehending" and thus grasping consideration of the other, through tyranny, the passion of murder and hate, and finally coming to an end at what for Levinas is evil in the extreme, namely racism and, more particularly, anti-Semitism as a "horribly perfect" form of racism. I go into each of these different forms of evil because they illustrate unambiguously the ethical refusal to put one's effort of existing in question.

A first form of evil lies in considering the other as a potentiality or function of the establishment and affirmation of my ego, or I. In a state of

“want,” I have need of the other—I cannot be without others. It is from there that my spontaneous, natural consideration of others is always self-interested and self-involved. This we can call the economic relation to the other, which develops *de facto* into an economic regime of reciprocal, well-understood private interests in the sense that people relate to each other on the basis of satisfying one another’s needs, in which case they are thus also “interesting” for one another. One can go so far in this that the otherness of the other is no longer respected but, to speak with Kant, reduced to a mere means. Concretely, this happens whenever I try to make the other person subordinate to me as “food” or “power,” or to press him into one or another form of service, hence to “consume” the other, to instrumentalize him and to use him: to cannibalize, whether under a hard form or a milder one. For this, I can of course apply all the riches and power that I have assembled for myself in my struggle for existence. I can use all possible means—or better put, misuse them—to draw the other to myself, to extort from him, to intimidate him or buy him, in short to subject him to myself—and without there arising a direct expression of brutality or enslavement (TI 209, LC 268). At first glance, this would seem to indicate a milder form of evil, but in essence this modality already contains the possibility of a stronger and even an extreme form of evil, for it, too, displays what we have seen as the fundamental dynamic of all evil: the reduction of the other to oneself.

Now, this reduction of the other on the practical plane is usually accompanied by, and is in any case also strengthened by, a reduction on the noetic plane. Concretely, I try to gain access to the other by stripping him of his alterity via concepts, categories, and thematization. In this way, I can make “images” or photographs of the other person so that I suppose myself to know him. In doing so, I approach the other not according to his otherness itself, but from a horizon, or another totality (QLT 77). I look the individuality of the other, so to speak, up and down, forming a conception of him not as this-individual-here-and-now but only according to the generality of a type, an *a priori* idea, or an essence. Still more concretely, this means that the other conceived within this reductive form of thinking is seen from out of the wider horizon of his history, culture, environment, customs, and traditions, personal past, characterological properties, sociological conditioning and (depth-) psychological structures. The “comprehending” I, or ego, negates the irreducible uniqueness of the other and tries to conceive of him in the same way as he does the world. Comprehensive knowledge is thus also no innocent phenomenon but a violent phenomenon of power. By my “penetrating insight” I gain not only access to the other, but also power over him. Through my knowledge, I not only can fix the other to his physical, psychological, and sociological appearance at a particular moment, but can also manipulate and blackmail him. From this, it is clear how knowledge, which is indispensable for my separation and is thus a good for me, nonetheless at the same time brings evil for the other. This is the tragedy of human understanding. The development of my noetic identity is not without wrinkle or blemish, exhibiting a dark underside, namely, a disrespectful and essentially merciless exercise of power over the other. By applying my cognition to understand the other,

there occurs “a determination of the other by the same, without the same being determined by the other” (TI 145).

The Effort of Existing as Potentially Violent

The economic pursuit of autonomy, which makes not only the world but also the other person a “means of existence and self-development,” brings us immediately to another, radical form of evil: interhuman violence. Notwithstanding the fact that this reductive interaction among people lies in the same line as the reduction of the world to economic concerns, Levinas also points explicitly to their difference: Though both have a certain resistance to worldly facts, both also always submit in one or another manner to my project of existing. But in the case of one’s fellow humans this includes a specific difficulty. For insofar as they, too, are “I’s,” or “alter egos,” they exhibit the same self-interested effort of existing as do I myself, and thus also act just as reductively. All I’s in pursuit of autonomy want to ensure, establish, and expand their own identity as much as possible. Hence does my primitive egoism sooner or later strike up against the primitive egoism of other I’s, or alter egos (TH 93). This implies the inevitable existence of a general situation of conflict: The many I’s who inhabit one and the same world cannot all at the same time be at the absolute center to which all else is made to refer. According to their ontological nature, or effort of existing, they measure themselves and exert themselves with all power and every possible means against one another (DEHH 173). It becomes a struggle for power of all against all, war in the most general sense of the word (AE 5). And this is a war waged openly and directly, or indirectly, either from a subtly laid ambush, or more circuitously, taking the other by surprise (TI 200–01). Hence does the effort of existing, necessary for life and seeking autonomy, strike against its own contrary.

Violence as Tyranny and Enslavement

Another form of the reduction of the other to the same, and thus also of violence, is, according to Levinas, tyranny, a despotic and unlimited expression of the effort of existing (LC 264–66). Tyranny consists in an I trying to subjugate the others—without killing them—in such a way that in one or another manner they give up to him their freedom. The tyrant attempts by persuasion, rhetoric, propaganda, seduction, trickery, diplomacy, demagoguery, (threats of) torture or physical violence, brainwashing, plagiarism, intimidation, or bribery to bring other free subjects to abandon the autonomous exercise of their freedom in exchange for satisfaction of their needs (“bread and games”) (TI 42, 205).

This tyrannical penetration into and seizure of freedom makes of its victims not only “slaves,” but in its extreme form also “enslaved spirits.” Incarnated freedom can indeed allow itself to be appropriated by the intrigues of another and by doing so become its slave. In this way, one’s freedom is abandoned to that other person. One no longer has an individual will; one loses his freedom to think and act. In its consistent form, this

means that even the “capacity” to obey an order, which implies freedom, is eradicated. There is only a degenerate form of heteronomy. An enslaved spirit acts out of “blind” obedience. Here, “blind” means literally that the obedience in question is not in the least bit cognizant of obedience. The enslaved subject loses the experience of his autonomy and of his obedience. There is no longer any “conscious” obedience, but only an inner, irresistible “inclination” and “drive” to accommodate oneself to the powerful (TI 213–14). This inclination, which can grow into masochistic “desire,” is marked by an extreme submissiveness and compliance, by an “extreme weakness” that in everyday language is indicated as slavish dependence, or “canine trust and which in a fascist situation becomes trust for trust, sacrifice for sacrifice, obedience for obedience” (DL 197). The inclination to submit becomes second nature. The subject overwhelmed and possessed is no longer conscious of being overwhelmed; the two now radically coincide. The enslaved spirit no longer feels the strange and unreasonable like a slap in the face. The tyrant, no matter precisely which form, in fact no longer finds anyone against him, but only a mass of material without any substantial core or resistance, at which point he can give full rein to his passions to his heart’s content. Love of the “master” fills the enslaved spirit so completely that he is without any distance or even the capacity to seek it. Fear of the powerful “lord” takes possession of him to such an extent that he no longer sees it for the simple reason that he sees only “from out of” that very fear (LC 265–66).

The Passion of Murder and Hate

From the forms of reduction of the other to the same described up to now it follows that the consistent exercise of willpower of my effort of existing emerges in a denial of the other of which murder is the physical incarnation, though not the only one (DVI 244–45).

Murder manifests itself not so much as a fact taking place once and for all, but as a passion driven by a well-determined intentionality—namely, to destroy the other totally. The “denial” occurring in the “consumption” and “use” of others still remains partial. In the “grasp” that I exert on them, I do indeed contest their independence but I still preserve their existence in reality so that they are and continue to be “for me.” Killing is radical: One does not dominate (appropriate, use, and consume) the other, but clears him out of the way, or destroys him; the other is driven even from existing. Murder, then, renounces absolutely all “comprehension” of the other, for one no longer wishes to include the other in the “same,” that is, in one’s own project of existing, but, on the contrary, to exclude him, because he is “too much” in the way of one’s struggle for identity. Murder manifests itself as the effort and realization of an inexorable struggle for omnipotence: The I plays not “all or nothing” but “all and nothing.” It promotes itself to “all” so that the other must be reduced to “nothing” or “no one,” which is also to say to “is-no-longer,” in not only the factual but also, and above all, the active sense of “is” no longer (*être* understood not formally as existence but qualitatively as *conatus essendi*, thus as “capacity”; TI 172).

Levinas points out how hate is another form of denial that is at the same time related to murder and in a certain sense worse (though, of course, from another perspective it is also less serious). Hate is an extremely paradoxical manner of denying the other, for one wants at the same time both to radically negate the other and also not to do so entirely. From its offensive height, hate wishes to humiliate and crush the other, but without destroying him completely. On one hand, hate aims at making the other suffer, such that he would then be reduced to pure passivity. But on the other hand, hate wishes that the other in this passivity would remain at his most active, so that he could bear witness to this hate. Still more, hate wants not only that the other undergoes it but also that he suffers from it, for it is only by this suffering that he can testify to the hate. Only the suffering of the other reveals the destructive, reductive power of the "same" at work in hate. Hate does not always wish the death of the other, or at least it wishes his death to come only as the highest form of suffering. Whoever hates wants to be the cause of a suffering of which the hated person is the living proof. To make the other suffer through one's hate is not simply to reduce him to an object, but on the contrary to enclose him forcefully in his subjectivity. Or better, hate at one and the same time both does and does not objectify the other. In his suffering, the other must realize his objectification, and for this very reason remain a subject. Hate wants both of these two aspects, which ensures that it is insatiable. It is sated precisely when it is not. The other gives satisfaction to the one who hates him only by being an object, and yet he can never be object enough, for hate demands that, at the same time the hated one falls, he nonetheless also remains clearheaded and bears witness. This is what makes hate so absurd and sordid. Hate wants the death of the other, yet without killing him; it holds the other, still living, at the verge of destruction, so that through the terrible pain of rejection and denial the other testifies to the triumph of hate (TI 216)!

Racism as Denial of the Otherness of the Other

Levinas also considers all of the forms of moral evil discussed up to this point to return in an extreme but consistent way to racism (VA 100). Strictly speaking, racism takes the view that one group of people is morally or culturally superior to another group, based on a hereditary difference in race. Racism considers the racial origin of an individual or a community as the factor determining not only the appearance but also the way of thinking and acting. Moreover, racism accords value to one race above all others, and one who is racist usually reckons himself among the superior race. According to racist thinking, people are considered in the first place or even exclusively in terms of their belongingness to a different race, most often visible in color of skin and other physical features (figure, nose, eyes, and so forth). On the basis of these features, they are then judged and above all condemned. And these condemnations are in turn nourished and strengthened by all sorts of "images of the enemy" cast against the "other" race.

For Levinas, it is clear that racism was incarnated in an "exceptional" way in the persecution of the Jews by the National Socialism of Hitler and

his followers (AS 60), which he therefore designates as “the diabolical criminality of absolute evil” (CCH 82). In his work *Mein Kampf*, Hitler argued for the superiority of the so-called Aryan race, the race of the *Übermensch* [“Superman”]. Only those who belonged to the “pure” Aryan race, who all the more so embodied this race purely, had the right to live and reproduce. The Nazis therefore not only developed ingenious, scientifically designed programs to “solve” the Jewish question (the *Endlösung*, or *Shoah*) by means of concentration camps and gas chambers (of which Auschwitz in Poland was only one, but the most famous). They also developed and enacted complex, extensive sterilization programs aimed specifically at the physically and mentally handicapped so that the Aryan race would not be stained by begetting “impure” children. And there were also the infamous euthanasia programs established in order to remove “gently” the incurably ill and mentally handicapped, who were thus less valuable and unnecessary members of the Aryan race. Because homosexuals did not contribute to the furthering of the pure Aryan race they were severely persecuted, and the gypsies were eradicated because they did not belong to the Aryan race and therefore represented a threat to its purity.

In a wider sense, one also speaks of racism when one recognizes and relates to others on the basis of their belonging to another culture, language group, or religion. As contemporary examples of this, we can point to the manner in which people today reject immigrants from the Arab world and wish to expel them because of their origin in another religion, specifically Islam and its related traditions. Or think of the long-standing suppression and discrimination against African Americans in the United States, many of whose ancestors were brought over from Africa as slaves.

According to Levinas, the core of racism consists not in the denial of, or failure to appreciate, similarities between people, but in the denial of, or better said, failure to appreciate and value, people’s differences, or better still, the fundamental and irreducible otherness by which they fall outside of every genre and are thus “unique”: “Alterity flows in no sense out of difference, to the contrary difference goes back to alterity” (VA 92). A racist relation wants to recognize and value only the “same,” or one’s “own” [*het eigene*], and therefore excludes the “foreign.” Out of self-defense, we are easily inclined to accept and consider positively only that which agrees with, or is “similar” to, ourselves. One finds the other embarrassing, threatening, and frightening. One therefore tries to expel him from oneself, to place him outside so that he can be considered as the “enemy” from whom one “may” defend oneself, and whom one may even “destroy” as what brings life and well-being under pressure, unless one can reduce him to oneself or make him a part of oneself. One wants to accept “others” (or “strangers,” or “foreigners”) only to the extent that they belong to one’s own “genre” or “kind,” which is to say to one’s own blood and soil, to the same family, tribe, sex, clan, nation, church, club, or community, do the same work, have the same birthplace and date. One’s “own” is praised and even divinized at the price of the “other,” which is vilified. The “stranger” becomes the scapegoat on whom we blame all of our problems and worries. One accepts differences only insofar as they are a matter of accidental

particularities or specificities within a same genre or basic design, in which individuals differ from one another within a same “sort” only very relatively (for example, character, taste, intellectual level), and in which their deeper affinity is not at all tested (VA 97). Against this background, it is clear that for Levinas anti-Semitism, as a specific and advanced form of racism, takes aim at the Jew as the intolerable other. For anti-Semitic thinking and sentiment, the Jew is simply the enemy, just as for every racism the other is the enemy as such, that is to say not on the basis of personality, one or another character trait, or a specific act considered morally troublesome or objectionable, but due only to his very otherness. In anti-Semitism, the Jew, as “other,” is always the guilty one. It is never “oneself,” the embodiment of the “same” that not only arranges everything around itself but also profiles itself as principle of meaning and value (CAJ 77–79).

From this perspective on racism as rejection of the other, it appears, according to Levinas, that racism is not a rare and improbable phenomenon existing in the heart and thought of only some “perverse” people that has nothing to do with us. Insofar as one is, according to the spontaneous dynamic of existing, or *conatus essendi*, directed toward the “same,” toward maintaining and fortifying one’s “own”—all such as I have just sketched it—one must be considered “by nature” potentially racist, though of course without being “predestined” for it. In itself, this admits no question of psychological or pathological deviation. According to Levinas, this implies that one cannot simply dispense with the racism of Hitler and the Nazis, in contrast to something instead occurring only once, as a wholly distinct and incomparable phenomenon, at least if one views it not quantitatively but qualitatively, which is to say in terms of its roots and basic inspiration. In an attempt to hold open a pure—in fact, Manichean—distinction between “good” (us) and “bad” (the “others”), thus keeping oneself out of range of the difficulties in question, it happens all too often that Hitlerism is described as something completely unique that has nothing in common with the aims and affairs of the common mortal. The perspective of Levinas shows that Hitlerism, with its genocide and other programs of eradication, is only a quantitative extension, that is to say a consistent, systematic, and inexorably refined outgrowth of racism in its pure form, one that, in its turn, represents a concretization of the effort of existing, which, as the reduction of the other to the same, is the nature of our existence (without, on the other hand, our being abandoned to this nature as a fatality, since as ethical beings we can overcome it). No one is invulnerable; any of us is a potential racist, and at least sometimes a real racist. Racism, like Hitlerism, does not occur by chance, or by an accidental turn. Nor is it an exceptional perversion occurring in a group of psychologically disturbed people. It is a permanent possibility woven into the dynamic of our very being, so that whoever accedes to and lives out the dynamic of his own being inevitably extends racism in one or another form (AS 60–61). We can no longer blame racism and anti-Semitism on “others,” for both their possibility and the temptation to them are borne in the dynamic of our own being, as “non-reciprocal determination of the other” (TI 99), which is precisely the kernel of our freedom (TI 97).

It is specifically to unmask this racist violence, and all forms of violence as modalities of denial of the other as other, that Levinas discerns the basic ethical norm in the commandment mentioned and explicated above, “Thou shall not kill,” which is to say in the commandment to respect the otherness of the other. In committing to the possible overcoming of evil, and of racism in particular, through the ethical choice for the good, Levinas certainly realizes how vulnerable this “overcoming” of evil is. By rejecting the idea that every objective system, through its ironclad, mechanistic laws and coerciveness, might be able to render evil impossible forever, and instead basing everything on the ethical call to the good, he makes clear that abuse, violence, and the racist exclusion and elimination of the other are constantly possible and can never be definitively overcome. In ethics, there is no eschatology, in the sense of a guaranteed “better world” or “world without evil.” There is only the “good will” that must always prove itself in a choice against evil that is neither evident nor easy. Only in this way can there be a good future and justice for the other: only through ethical vigilance with respect to all forms of violence, tyranny, hate, and racism, and a society that nurtures in both our upbringing and education a “sensibility” for the other as “stranger.” Such a sensitivity takes in full seriousness the ethical essence of the human person, and serves always to put us back on the path to a culture “where the other counts more than I do,” and where the most foreign enjoys our complete hospitality.

The Jewish Wisdom of Love

Levinas designates as “the wisdom of love” [*la sagesse de l’amour*] the connection just described between the commandment “Thou shall not kill” and the commitment to responsibility and goodness for the other. For him, love is not a subjective feeling bubbling up in the ego’s heart or “good sentiment,” like an expression of my personality, but is, in contrast, a commandment descending on me “from elsewhere”—from the alien, irreducible face of the other—specifying the “invested” and developed personality in which I “feel comfortably myself” and am able to function well, turning me upside down in order to abandon myself for the other. Love is obedience to the respect commanded by the other—that is to say, respect for human rights without such a turn to the other also requiring as its precondition any tendency, predestination, or capacity already in place.

Levinas calls this love a “wisdom” insofar as it is also a form of knowledge, though a knowledge of a completely different sort than the “comprehension” that manifests itself as a form of reduction and violence. Paradoxically, Levinas contends that justice is prior to truth (TI 62). Concretely, this means that to speak the truth, as the response to the other insofar as the other is real, presupposes the work of justice. Responsibility-to-and-for-the-other, as Levinas describes it, consists precisely in “letting and making be.” Obeying the appeal that goes out from the face means not reducing the other to his countenance, but in contrast doing absolutely conscientious justice to his infinitely withdrawing transcendence or irreducible alterity. Here there emerges a special sort of wisdom, namely the wisdom

of gratitude. And this gratitude is at once a fundamental ethical posture and a form of knowledge made possible by that very ethical posture. By opening oneself to the other and doing right by his otherness, one takes up the fundamental ethical posture of justice. This justice is at the same time a form of truth to the degree that one wants not at all to manipulate or reduce the otherness of the other, but on the contrary to recognize and therefore also “know” according to the (ethical) truth. Love is wise because it is essentially conscious of an obedience that makes each truth possible.

According to Levinas, we meet with the wisdom of love primarily in Jerusalem, which is to say, for him, in the biblical tradition of *Torah* [Law] (EN 212–13). Whereas in the so-called first tablet of the decalogue our relationship with God is central, the second tablet focuses on worldly relationships and behavior. The first commandment of the second tablet reads: “Thou shall not kill.” This priority is not to be taken purely formally and externally, but also in terms of content and quality. “Thou shall not kill” is the foundation of all the other commandments and prohibitions, and is thus the source of a humane society that consists precisely in respecting the other person. The Torah “exposes ethical meaning as the ultimate intelligibility of the human, and even of the cosmic” (SaS 10). By this, Levinas does not at all mean to say that Jerusalem or the Bible has some sort of monopoly on the priority of the other person, ethics, and human rights. Indeed, it is not that it is true because it stands in the Bible, but that it is in the Bible because it is true—if it is true. This latter qualification means that a check against experience and reflection is always necessary. In these, the insightful accessibility and general human communicability of the expression in question can appear (EFP 110–11). It is for this reason that Levinas pays constant attention to a phenomenological disclosure of how “Thou shall not kill” is the foundation of ethics, responsibility, and goodness (EA 12–13).

Conclusion

Although Emmanuel Levinas is certainly not the only one in philosophy who pays attention to the human face, he is indeed the only one who makes of it a central category. Moreover, he gives to it a very specific meaning that departs markedly from the available qualifications based on physiognomy, visibility, and describability. For Levinas, the “face” is precisely that which radically and infinitely exceeds the “countenance,” not as inaccessible but as exceptionally vulnerable. It is this vulnerability that exposes the ethical meaning of the face: the simultaneous temptation to violence and the prohibition “Thou shall not kill.” The goodness that is nothing other than the positive inverse of this prohibition is then also anything but a banal or simplistic idea, good for pious and naive souls. It signifies, in contrast, the difficult and arduous struggle against moral evil, of which racism, as ostracization and extermination of the “foreigner,” is the extreme but consistent expression. The nonviolent and nonracist recognition of the other in his otherness incarnates the “wisdom of love,” which as an ethical option is never guaranteed but always returns to present itself anew as a

must. This wisdom of love is the criterion of human culture, insofar as it does not draw the truth and the ethical good out from the interiority or immanence or the same or the own, but in contrast brings it in from the radical transcendence of the other or “stranger,” as criterion of justice and truth.

—Translated by Jeffrey Bloechl

Abbreviations

- AE:** *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, Den Haag, Nijhoff, 1974. [English translation (ET): *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis. The Hague/Boston, Nijhoff, 1981.]
- AS:** *Autrement que savoir* (Interventions in the discussions and *Débat général*), Paris, Osiris, 1988.
- AT:** *Altérité et transcendance*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1995.
- CAJ:** “Conversation avec un juste” (interview by D. S. Schiffer), in *L’évènement du jeudi*, 1996, no. 585: 76–79.
- CCH:** “Comme un consentement à l’horrible,” in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1988, no. 1211: 82–83.
- DEHH:** *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1949 (1st ed.), 1967 (2nd exp. ed. with “Essais nouveaux”). [ET: *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. R. Cohen. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988.]
- DL:** *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le Judaïsme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1963 (1st ed.), 1976 (2nd rev. and exp. ed.). [ET (2nd ed.): *Difficult Freedom*, trans. S. Hand. London, Athlone, 1994.]
- DVI:** *De Dieu qui vient à l’idée* (Essais), Paris, Vrin, 1982.
- EFP:** “Entretiens,” in F. Poirie, *Emmanuel Lévinas. Qui êtes-vous?* Lyon, La Manufacture, 1987, pp. 62–136.
- EI:** *Ethique et Infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris, Fayard/Radio France, 1982. [ET: *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985.]
- EN:** *Entre Nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre*, Paris, Grasset, 1991.
- LC:** “Liberté et commandement,” in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 58 (1953): 264–72. Republished in book form, with foreword by P. Hayat: *Liberté et commandement*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1994 (also includes the essay “Transcendance et hauteur,” originally published in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 56 (1962), no. 3: 89–113, with discussion and correspondence). [ET: “Freedom and Command,” in E. Levinas, *Collected Papers*, trans. A. Lingis, pp. 15–23.]
- NLT:** *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1996.
- QLT:** *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1968. [ET in E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. A. Aronowicz. Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 1–89.]

- SaS:** *Du Sacré au Saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1977. [ET in E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Lectures*, trans. A. Aronowicz, Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 89–197.]
- TH:** “Transcendance et hauteur,” in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 56 (1962), no. 3: 89–113, with discussion and correspondence. (Cf. also LC.)
- TI:** *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, Den Haag, Nijhoff, 1961. [ET: *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969.]
- VA:** *La vocation de l’autre*, in E. Hirsch, ed., *Racismes. L’autre et son visage*, Paris, Cerf, 1988, pp. 89–102.