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JILL ROBBINS

*Visage, Figure: Reading Levinas's
Totality and Infinity**

What would it mean to face what Derrida has called “the ethics of ethics”? That is to say, to confront the very opening of the question of ethics—the grounds of both its possibility and impossibility—prior to the production and elaboration of all moral rules or precepts? According to Emmanuel Levinas, the face of the other [*le visage d’Autrui*] is the very site and privileged figure for such an opening. In the face-to-face encounter, responsibility in its most original form of response, or language-response, arises. The pages that follow will consider both the specificity of the ethical and the specific otherness that Levinas identifies in the face-to-face.

Yet if the face is the privileged figure for the opening of the question of the ethical, the question of the textual status of the face remain to be asked. Can there be a figure for the ethical? a figure for the face? The very question is problematic in that rhetoric, as a (derivative) science of figures, is incommensurable with the more originary level of Levinas’s description. Could

**Abbreviations*

- TI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, 1979). *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961).
- FC Emmanuel Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987). “Liberté et commandement,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 58 (1953).
- DL Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963, 2d ed. 1967, 1974).
- EI Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

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the opening of the question of the ethical be marked with a certain figurality? And supposing that one can speak about an alterity that is rhetorical or textual, can the alterity of the other and textual alterity be even addressed in one breath? Here again, the question of ethics and the question of language come into their closest possible proximity.

THE FIGURE OF THE FACE

"The alterity of the other," writes Levinas in his 1961 *Totality and Infinity*, "is not 'other' like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, like, sometimes, myself for myself" (TI, 33). A relation to this latter, finite alterity characterizes what Levinas calls the work of identification, that is, my ability to absorb otherness "into my identity as thinker or possessor" (TI, 33). (He also calls it the economy of the Same, and it refers to the habitual exchanges that make up the self's concrete relationship with the world.) But the alterity of the other is *infinite*. Encountered neither as a phenomenon nor as a being (something to be mastered or possessed), the other is encountered as a face. It is in the encounter with the face of the other [*le visage d'Autrui*] that the other's infinite alterity is revealed.

The first reference to the face in *Totality and Infinity* reads as follows:

For the presence before the face, my orientation toward the Other can lose the avidity of the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship, established over the things hereafter possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of discourse [*discours*]. The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face [*nous l'appelons, en effet, visage*]. [TI, 50]

Levinas "names" the face here according to the formal structure of infinity as he has previously described it, "an *ideatum* that surpasses its idea" (TI, 49), a thought that thinks more than it can contain.¹ But although he names the face here, he will also insist that the primordial relationship to the face is *not* one of naming: "*Autrui* is not only named, but invoked. To put it in grammatical terms, the other does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative" (DL, 21), or as he also says, "in the dative."

These grammatical terms, which are only provisional and which will later be abandoned, do indeed seem to illuminate the passage above, in

1. The Cartesian idea of infinity is a guiding notion of Levinas's work and one of the privileged moments in his history of philosophy. The first reference to the face in *Totality and Infinity*, cited above, introduces it as "a deformalization or the concretization of the idea of infinity."

particular the transformation that vision undergoes in the encounter with the face. For in “the presence before a face,” the avaricious gaze *turns into* generosity [“l’avidité du regard se muant en générosité”] and language [“discours”]. The (ethical) necessity for this transformation stems from Levinas’s assertions that vision is a violent way of relating to the other. It “immobilizes its object as its theme.” As a form of adequation (*TI*, 34), it is unable to respect what is infinitely other. It seeks to absorb that alterity, to draw it into the play of the Same. In this way, vision is just one instance of the self’s *habitual* economy, an economy that always fails to do justice to the other. Other possibilities within this habitual economy include representing the other, recognizing him, knowing him, understanding him, or any form of the theoretical relation. All would be unjust, for they would attempt to appropriate the other, to reduce him to the (self-) Same.

That is why, in the passage above, vision, a relationship of adequation, turns into generosity and a certain kind of language, relationships of non-adequation. This transformation that the gaze undergoes is, precisely, ethical in the sense that Levinas gives it: “we name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ethics” (*TI*, 43). Thus the (ethical) encounter with the other interrupts the self’s habitual economy and its tendency to conceive of the world as a space of possibilities and power [*pouvoir*].² It interrupts the play of the Same. And let us also note in passing: the ethical transfer is a figural transfer as well. The turn from vision to generosity and language, and ultimately, to voice, resembles a synesthesia, a crossing of sensory attributes. Moreover the verb *se muer*, “to turn, to moult, to metamorphose,” implies a break, within the figural turn, in phenomenality. We will come back to these reflections. For now, suffice it to say that in Levinas’s account, the primordial relationship to the other that one faces is “discourse.” The nontotalizing relationship to the face of the other is accomplished “in a discourse, in a conversation [*entre-tien*] which proposes the world. This proposition is held between (*se tien entre*) two points which do not constitute a system, a cosmos, a totality” [*TI*, 96]. Thus, discourse is a relationship with the other that maintains the distance of infinite separation “yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance: (*TI*, 41). And thus, as Alphonso Lingis

2. Throughout *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas plays on *pouvoir*’s interchangeable senses of possibility and power, as part of an ongoing polemic with Heidegger’s description of the world as a space of possibilities for *Dasein*. This reading is problematic insofar as it seems to confuse possibility, an *Existential*, with power (a relation between already constituted entities). By contrast, Levinas’s use of the term, “spontaneity” is not ontic and not at all psychological: it is part of his reading of the Heideggerian “being-in” as joyous possession of the world which ignores the other. See the reading of Levinas and Heidegger by Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 134ff. Henceforth cited in the text.

comments: "To face someone is both to perceive him and to answer to him."³ One faces the other as interlocutor. One faces the other in language.

Yet let us not take for granted that we know what we mean here by language. For the *parole* that ensues in response to the face of the other cannot be understood according to hermeneutic models of "conversation" or "dialogue." It is a founding "conversation," a discourse before discourse, which is, Levinas says, "established over the things hereafter possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said." A conversation rigorously without communality, it makes *lieux communs* possible. Rather than being a searching together for consensus, it is what makes possible the difference between consensus and disagreement.

Nor is this to be mistaken for any form of communication. It is "prior" to language understood as an exchange of signs. The face signifies in a distinctive manner which Levinas calls expression *kath' auto*, ["according to itself"], or that which signifies only relative to itself. Expression is the way in which the face, which is not reducible to my vision, exceeds and breaks out of the phenomenon. It breaks through what Levinas calls the form, the plastic image with *its* look:

This way for a being to break through its form, which is its apparition, is, concretely, its look, its aim. There is not first a breakthrough, and then a look; to break through one's form is precisely to look; the eyes are absolutely naked. A face has a meaning not by virtue of the relationships in which it is found, but out of itself; that is what expression is. [*FC*, 20]

The life of expression consists of undoing the form in which the existent, exposing itself as a theme, in this way dissimulates itself. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. [*Le visage parle. La manifestation du visage est déjà discours.*] (*TI*, 66)

We will not enter into the extent to which Levinas's discussion of expression *kath' auto*, "over and above the disclosure and dissimulation proper to forms," is part of a polemic against Husserl and Heidegger. What concerns us here is, first of all, that "my" gaze undergoes not just a transformation in the encounter with the face, but also a reversal. The face, which is not reducible to my vision of it, looks back. It talks back [*le visage parle*]. To see a face means that the face looks and talks back. (This reversal was already implied in the word *visage*. *Visage*— from the Latin *visum*, "a thing seen"—is not just a thing seen or intended. It is also that which intends me, as Levinas etiologizes it: "Regarder un regard, c'est regarder ce qui ne s'abandonne pas, ne se livre pas, mais qui vous *vise*: c'est regarder le *visage*," *DL*, 21.) Sec-

3. Alphonso Lingis, Translator's Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, op. cit., xxx. Henceforth cited in the text.

only, in the transformation plus reversal that constitutes the (ethical) encounter with the face, it is not just that my look becomes discourse and that I face the face in language, but also, the face, which breaks through its form, looks back at me, and speaks. As Alphonso Lingis also remarks: "the face faces in language" (Linguis, xxx). To encounter a face is to encounter a speaking face. As Levinas writes above, "the face speaks" [*le visage parle*].

Derrida has remarked in "Violence and Metaphysics" that it may be "tempting" to consider this discourse on the face a prosopopeia (Derrida: *Violence and Metaphysics*, 101). It is tempting particularly for literary critics, because when Levinas gives the face *as voice* here, he in a sense de-faces it, gives it a *figure*. At times it is as if figuration performs the desired (ethical) break in phenomenality, the turn away from the optical. Yet while this, like the earlier transformation or ethico-figural transfer ["l'avidité du regard se muant en générosité"] seems tropological, prosopopeia or any other rhetorical term is simply inapplicable here, again because of the level of Levinas's description, which is written both within and against the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology, and because, in short, of the *founding* status of the encounter described. Perhaps one would want to speak of the tension between the figural transfers operating within the sequential narrative of Levinas's description and the anteriority of the founding experience that is described. In the passage above we read: "The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is *already* discourse." While the sequential narrative proceeds forward, the (quasi-transcendental) description proceeds backwards. The "already" here belongs to an immemorial past that is accessible to no present.

The face, as Derrida remarks, is given as "the original unity of glance and speech" (Derrida: *Violence*, 100). At stake in Levinas's discussion of expression (which seems very much grounded in the experience of actual faces) is the way in which, in contradistinction to other modes of signification, facial expressions signify only themselves. They do not refer to something other, even to states of mind or feeling.⁴ Their autSIGNIFICATION is prior to language conceived as a system of signs or as knowledge that could be available to a consciousness. It is a primordial speaking that is an invitation to speak. Levinas writes:

For expression does not consist in presenting to a contemplative consciousness a sign which that consciousness interprets by going back to what is signified. What is expressed is not just a thought which animates

4. Compare, in this context, Augustine's account of how the face signifies in *Confessions* 4:8. There is coincidence between "the movement of the heart" and "the signs revealed in the face," and thus these signs have, in effect, a necessary rather than arbitrary link to their referent.

the other; it is also the other present in that thought. Expression renders present what is communicated and the one who is communicating; they are both in the expression. But that does not mean that expression provides us with knowledge about the other. The expression does not speak about someone, is not information about a coexistence, does not invoke an attitude in addition to knowledge; expression invites one to speak to someone. The most direct attitude before a being *kath' auto* is not the knowledge one can have about him, but is social commerce with him. [FC 20–21]

Derrida and Blanchot have both pointed out the phonocentric moments of Levinas's description and thus its complicity with what Derrida has called the metaphysics of presence. Such turns of phrase as "expression renders present what is communicated and the one who is communicating," or as we can read elsewhere in his work, that expression means "being behind the sign," or that "he who manifests himself comes, according to Plato's expression, to his own assistance" (TI, 66), all seem part of a privileging of oral discourse as "plenitude" (TI, 96), as a presence to oneself (Derrida: *Violence*, 101–02). As Blanchot remarks, it is at just these moments that the discourse, the *entretien* that Levinas describes "becomes a tranquil humanistic speaking again" (EI, 81). This is largely a result of the privileging of oral discourse in Levinas. (For Levinas rarely uses the word "man." The *visage*, as we recall, is defined as the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me. The *visage* is man in his infinite alterity, man insofar as he is infinitely other. *Visage* is not a description added on to the conception of "man"; it is prior to it.) But that the Levinasian *entretien* would revert to a humanistic conversation is also due to a fault of the language ("our" language), which is weighted towards the hermeneutical and the dialectical. (We might recall again, that the face's speaking, which belongs to the "already," does not take place in the present and is accessible to no present.)

Thus let us not forget the radicality of the Levinasian *entretien*, of the language relation with the other, especially as Blanchot has elaborated it in *L'Entretien infini*. In this encounter, the asymmetry between discussants is absolute. The other is described alternately by Levinas as the Most-High and the weak one. At times he seems the overlord, and at times the utterly helpless and destitute. He is, as we shall see, the one who commands me and the one to whom I am infinitely obligated. Thus, despite the seeming symmetry of the exchange of glances and speech, despite the formal symmetry of the phrases "face-to-face," and despite, in Blanchot's phrase, "l'affrontement de deux figures" that it invariably suggests, the face-to-face encounter has nothing symmetrical about it. Blanchot comments: "I never face the one who faces me. My manner of facing the one who faces me is not an equal

confrontation of presences. The inequality is irreducible" (*EI*, 89). And this is why at the close of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers a formulation to describe the relation to the other that both Blanchot and Derrida have picked up on, namely, "the curvature of intersubjective space which inflects distance into elevation," or simply, "the curvature of space" (*TI*, 291).

The speaking relation to the other in the face-to-face is not, then, "l'affrontement de deux figures"; it is, as Blanchot comments further, "the access to man in his strangeness by speech" (*EI*, 89). How can such a speaking maintain "the strangeness of this strangeness" and not "repatriate it"? (*EI*, 97). As in the Levinas passage cited earlier, this will be a kind of speaking that is not a knowledge about or speaking about the other, but rather a speaking *to* him, an invocation. And a question that surely haunts much of Levinas criticism, and that has been treated by both Lyotard and Derrida, is, how to speak about this invocation of the other without neutralizing the relation, transforming it into a form of knowledge? How to speak about Levinas's discourse without rendering its performative dimension constative, assimilating it to the denotative language of the same? How, for that matter, to speak *to* the other without comprehension (a form of "repatriation")? Would this not occasion the grossest of misunderstandings?⁵

If this speaking to the other is "to maintain the strangeness of this strangeness," it must be characterized by nonreciprocity and non-comprehension. "Parole sans entente et à laquelle je dois cependant répondre" (*EI*, 92), writes Blanchot. Such a speech, is thus, in an important sense, impossible. *Parler sans pouvoir* is what Blanchot calls it, that is, to speak without power (for the other has interrupted my *pouvoir de pouvoir*), to speak without being able (to speak), to speak without ability.⁶

This is a strange speech, this speech that is "the access to man in his strangeness." It is a founding speech, not speech between two already constituted entities, but speech that founds the rapport, and that *is* the rapport (without rapport). In this *entretien*, as Blanchot writes, the *entre* designates an interval held up over a void, as abyss. This speech with the *visage* is a speech with the outside (although Levinas generally uses the term "exteriority"), for *Autrui* is "always coming from the outside" (*EI*, 80). A speech with the outside, it is speech with, the "stranger, the destitute, the proletarian" (*TI*, 75), or, in the Biblical locution that Levinas frequently invokes, "The stranger, the widow, the orphan." The other is "always, in relation to

5. See Jean-François Lyotard, "Levinas's Logic," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986): 117–58, and Jacques Derrida, "En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici," in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. François Laruelle (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1980): 21–60

6. For a discussion of the inability in responsibility, see Ann Smock, "Disastrous Responsibility," *L'Esprit Créateur* 24 (1984): 5–20.

me, without country, stranger to all possession, dispossessed and without dwelling, he who is as if 'by definition' the proletarian . . . " (*EI*, 80).

AND CAIN SAID TO ABEL

The being that expresses itself, that faces me, says *no* to me by his very expression. (*FC*, 21)

[The Other] opposes to me not a greater force . . . but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: "thou shalt not kill." [*TI*, 199]

The face, it is inviolable; these eyes absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, offer, nevertheless, an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation of murder is inscribed: the temptation of an absolute negation. The Other is the sole being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation of murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear: "Thou shalt not kill." [*DL*, 22]

Levinas had described expression as an autSIGNIFICATION and as an invitation to speak, within the originary language encounter with the face of the other. It is only in his analysis of murder that the face's speaking is given a particular content, albeit negative. In the passages above we discover that the expression "says no," that the "primordial expression," "the first word" is a prohibition, "thou shalt not kill," that "to see a face is already to hear: 'thou shalt not kill.'" How are we to understand the "primordial expression"? Does it mark the fact that the (im-)possibility of murder inhabits the language relation to the other at its origin, as Blanchot would have it? "Such would be the speech that measures the relation of man face-to-face with man, when there is no choice but to speak or to kill. A speech as grave, perhaps, as the death of which it is the detour. The speech/murder alternative is not the tranquil once and for all between good speech and bad death . . . in this situation, either to speak or to kill, speech does not consist in speaking, but first of all in maintaining the movement of the *either/or*; it is what founds the alternative" (*EI*, 88).

Just as this *parole* is precisely not part of a dialogue in the usual sense, not a humanistic word that keeps the peace, but a "grave" word—in both senses—a word which maintains the very violence of the alternative, so too the primordial expression which Levinas describes is not a mere speaking, for it takes place on the level of distress, nudity, and exposure to violence. In the above descriptions, the face is both utterly defenseless—"naked," that

is, “without covering, clothing, or mask” (*FC*, 21), naked because of its eyes, its look which breaks through form, and causes it to be “divested of its form” (*FC*, 20)—and also that which challenges my powers, “inviolable,” saying “no,” opposing me, offering resistance. We have seen this double aspect of the face before, at once as the destitute one and as overlord. We have seen this challenge as well when the encounter with the face of the other is said to interrupt the self’s habitual economy and its *pouvoir de pouvoir*.

These powers are, at the limit, murderous. Vision is a violence; it would possess the other; it is even “by essence murderous.” The face resists possession insofar as it is not reducible to my vision; it breaks out of the form that would encapsulate it. Yet to the extent that the face does present itself as form, the temptation of murder is “inscribed” there. The temptation of murder is inscribed in the face’s phenomenalization, inscribed in the sensuous moment of expression (*ex-primere*, to press out). Expression thus invites both speaking and murder. The very ambiguity of the face’s presentation, as that which lodges itself within form and is also beyond form, renders it absolutely vulnerable. In Levinas’s account, it renders it absolutely resistant as well: “This temptation of murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face.” This ambiguity of the face’s presentation is one of the reasons why murder is, as Levinas says, “impossible”: “Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. It is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but it is already impotency, because the face rends the sensible” (*TI*, 198). Murder wants to kill the other, who is beyond the sensible. Yet in murdering the other, it arrives only at the sensible. In this way, murder always misses its mark. No doubt it effects an annihilation of the other in his being. But it thereby misses the genuine alterity of the other, namely that which in him goes beyond the sensible (and that which in him is beyond being).

If the face is vulnerable to violence insofar as it expresses itself in the sensible, and resistant to violence insofar as it is beyond the sensible, how are we to understand Levinas’s assertion that the face offers “an absolute resistance *in which* the temptation of murder is inscribed,” namely, that the resistance itself is the temptation? As Levinas explains the nature of this resistance, the face is “total resistance without being a force” (*FC*, 19). In murder, however, “one identifies the absolute character of the other with his force” (*FC*, 19). In other words, one mistakes the other’s resistance *for* a force.⁷ Or as Blanchot puts it, murder takes the infinity by which *Autrui*

7. “Violence consists in ignoring this opposition, ignoring the face of a being, avoiding the gaze, and catching sight of an angle whereby the *no* inscribed on a face by the very fact that it is a face becomes a hostile or submissive force. Violence is a way of acting on every being and every freedom by approaching it from an indirect angle” (*FC*, 19).

presents himself as if it were a property of *Autrui* and wishes to reject it absolutely. Thereby it misses *Autrui*; "it changes him into absence, but does not touch him" (*EI*, 87). Thus the one who murders is caught in a substitutive structure; he is like a man who must aim at his target (infinity) over and over again, and always miss it. (That is why he cannot kill his victim enough times.) The infinite alterity of the speaking face is "incommensurate with a power exercised"; there is a "disproportion between infinity and my powers" (*TI*, 198). And it is in this sense that while murder is a real possibility, it is what Levinas calls an "ethical impossibility."⁸

But by ethical impossibility Levinas also means the cessation of my murderous powers, of my *pouvoir de pouvoir*. This cessation of *pouvoir* is inaugurated and marked by the face's primordial expression, which "says no," whose "first word" is "thou shalt not kill." "To see a face is already to hear: 'thou shalt not kill.'" The encounter with the face of the other interrupts the "imperialism of the same" (*TI*, 39). This interruption is emblematic of the ethical movement. At times Levinas calls it a "conversion" or "reversal" of our nature.⁹ At stake is the very birth of ethics or responsibility.

As we have seen elsewhere in Levinas's work, this interruption is marked by an ethico-figural turn of speech, a quasi-synesthetic turn from my vision to the other's voice, or from the sense of seeing to that of hearing: "to see a face is already to hear 'Thou shalt not kill.'" But is this a matter of hearing, with its connotation of self-coincidence, at all? The face's primordial expression is a *citation*, that is, it is characterized not by phenomenality, but by the structure of the mark, with the constitutive absence that that implies. Moreover, the "voice" delivers a commandment from an immemorial past, accessible to no present: "To see a face is *already* to hear: 'thou shalt not kill.'" This "already" ruptures self-coincidence. Thus when Levinas gives the face as voice here, again he gives the face as (nonphenomenal) figure. He gives the face as a figure for, one might add, the literal, for the originary donation of the law. But that the face (*visage*) could be a figure (*figure*) was always possible within the semantic destination of the word. And if the face can indeed be a figure, are we sure that we know what we mean by "figure"? Is not "figuration" itself transformed by such a usage?

How are we to evaluate the fact that the commandment that the face

8. "If the impossibility of killing were a real impossibility, if the alterity of the other were only the resistance of a force, his alterity would be no more exterior to me than that of nature which resists my energies, but which I come to account for by reason; it would be no more exterior than the world of perception which, in the final analysis, is constituted by me. The ethical impossibility of killing is a resistance made to me, but a resistance which is not violent, an intelligible resistance" (*FC*, 21–22).

delivers to me is, after all, one of God's commandments, the sixth commandment, "thou shalt not kill"? First, let us remark on the basis of Levinas's 1953 essay, "Freedom and Command," that there is a general way of understanding commandment that is more or less independent of any theological context. In that essay, Levinas explains that the "no" that the face opposes to me is "not the *no* of a hostile force or threat . . . it is the possibility of encountering a being through an interdiction" (*FC*, 21). Unlike repression, interdiction signals a positive possibility, or better, an ethical relationship. Interdiction is inseparable from the asymmetry which characterizes the face-to-face encounter and from the distinctive way in which the face signifies. The very fact that expression breaks through form is, in effect, its imperative:

The being that is present dominates, or breaks through its own apparition, it is an interlocutor. Beings which present themselves to one another subordinate themselves to one another. This subordination constitutes the first occurrence of a transitive relation between freedoms, and, in this very formal sense, a command. (*FC*, 21)

And as he concludes a few pages later, "speech in its essence, is commanding" (*FC*, 23).

But the question concerning the nature of this commandment remains. Does its presence imply that Levinas's ethics are dependent on the revealed morality of positive religion? Apparently not, for Levinas's sense of religion is as removed from ordinary understanding as is his sense of ethics. In *Totality and Infinity* he writes, "we propose to call religion the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (*TI*, 40).

Yet Levinas does, nevertheless, cite one of the ten commandments, which are at the center of the revealed morality of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this context, one would have to note that while Levinas respects many aspects of the Christian religion, he is not concerned with a unitary Judeo-Christian tradition. His concern is primarily with the Judaic, and

9. Emmanuel Levinas, Interview with Richard Kearney in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 25. Robert Bernasconi describes it as an intentionality in reverse in "Levinas and Derrida: The question of the Closure of Metaphysics," in the same volume. See also Bernasconi's, "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics," in John Sallis, ed. *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 122–39, and "Fundamental Ontology, Metontology, and the Ethics of Ethics," *Irish Philosophical Journal* 4 (1987): 76–93.

particularly, with the rabbinic tradition as a “source” for his ethics. Moreover, Levinas distances the Judaic from the interpretation it has received within the unitary Judeo-Christian tradition, an interpretation that is often negative and privative. He offers instead a reinscription of the Judaic. For example, as he states in a recent interview,

It is often said ‘God is love’. God is the commandment of love. ‘God is love’ means that He loves you. But this implies that the primary thing is your own salvation. In my opinion, God is a commandment to love. God is the one who says that one must love the other.¹⁰

At work here is a critique of the Christian economy of salvation with its habitual ignoring of the other. The legalism of the Judaic religion, its preoccupation with 613 commandments, is here reinterpreted as a fundamental orientation toward the other. This reinscription of the Judaic in Levinas’s work is found primarily in what he calls his “non-philosophical” or “confessional” writings, his readings of the Talmud and his essays on Judaism.¹¹

Although such an explanation would seem to make Levinas’s ethics dependent, once again, on the revealed morality of a positive religion, in this instance Judaism, this is not the case. For one thing, the explicit references to Judaism in Levinas’s work are found mostly in the nonphilosophical writings. Secondly, we cannot take for granted that we know what we mean by “Judaism” in Levinas’s work. The Judaism in question is a reinscribed “Judaism” that is equivalent neither to the determinations it has received within the dominant “Greco-Christian” conceptuality nor to Judaism as a historical or positive religion, although it necessarily takes off from there.¹²

Finally, and still with reference to positive religion, when Levinas writes that the face commands me, “thou shalt not kill,” he seems to suggest that the law is revealed not by God, as in the Biblical claim, but in the face of the other (man), and that this relationship is prior to any relation between man and God. This is indeed the case, but it need be the case only if that relationship between man and God is conceived of as a theology, a discourse on God’s attributes, or a thematization. As Levinas implies in the interview cited above, the relationship to God is, however, not a *credo*, nor is it any kind of ontological assertion. It is the primacy of doing for the other. That is

10. Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 177.

11. See, in addition to *Difficile liberté*, Levinas’s *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1968), particularly the reading of Sabbath 88a–88b there.

12. I develop this in a chapter on Levinas in my *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), forthcoming.

the sole relationship between man and God. In many ways this “Judaism” is closer to an atheism.

But one might still ask, what is the “religious” meaning of the commandment “thou shalt not kill?” Within historical Judaism, according to one commentator, the concept of murder is “enlarged” to include even “the omission of any act by which a fellow-man could be saved in peril, distress or despair.”¹³ With all due caution, such a reference may help to illuminate the spirit of Levinas’s murder analysis.¹⁴ But Levinas’s phenomenological descriptions of the relation to the other already make the “religious” meaning (in his sense) of the commandment quite explicit, without further reference to religion in the traditional sense. Its “religious” meaning is the imperative of response or responsibility that arises in the encounter with the other, who faces, in language.

What did Cain say to Abel immediately before he murdered him? In Genesis 4:8, there is a lacuna in the text (preserved in the Masoretic tradition), where the verse is incomplete: “And Cain said to Abel his brother” “The Hebrew *vayommer* means not ‘told’ or ‘spoke to’ but ‘said unto’, and the words said ought to follow.”¹⁵ The text of Genesis 4, verses 3–8, in Everett Fox’s translation, reads,

It was, after the passing of days that Kayin brought, from the fruit of the soil, a gift to YHWH, and as for Hevel, he too brought—from the firstborn of his flock, from their fat parts. YHWH had regard for Hevel and his gift, for Kayin and his gift he had no regard. Kayin became exceedingly enraged and his face fell. YHWH said to Kayin: Why are you so enraged? Why has your face fallen? Is it not thus: If you intend good, bear-it-aloft, but if you do not intend good, at the entrance is sin, a crouching-demon, toward you his lust—but you can rule over him. Kayin said to Hevel his brother But then it was, when they were out in the field, that Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother and he killed him.¹⁶

In numerous versions of the Bible (such as the Samaritan, Greek, Syriac, Old Latin, and Vulgate), and consequently, in most translations, the missing phrase is supplied: “let us go outside.” This metonymic response seeks to provide a bridge to the place of the action that follows. The midrashic re-

13. *Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, ed. J. H. Hertz (London: Soncino Press, 1978), 299.

14. That the murder situation should be “paradigmatic” at all within Levinas’s ethical discourse has to do with the difficult sense in which the ethical becomes *visible* through the violation of the ethical.

15. Harry M. Orlinsky, ed. *Notes on the New Translation of The Torah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1969), 68.

16. *In the Beginning: A New English Rendition of the Book of Genesis*, trans. with Commentary and Notes by Everett Fox (New York: Schocken, 1983).

sponse to this lacuna in *Bereshith Rabbah* 22:16 is freely embellishing. It interpolates an extended discussion between Cain and Abel. This response, like that of Philo, assumes that the brothers had a *quarrel*. Philo even writes: "the plain is a figure of contentiousness."¹⁷ And although the midrash explains alternately that the two quarreled about material possessions, religious ideology, and sexual jealousy, the face of the quarrel seems more important than its content.¹⁸

Considering the episode as a whole, the contemporary commentator André Neher remarks Cain's silence in response to God's question, "Why has your face fallen?"¹⁹ This silence is not entirely unreasonable, given the notorious obscurity, indeed, the near unintelligibility of the admonitory verse that follows, "If you intend good, bear-it-aloft . . .".²⁰ But, writes Neher, "in place of God, he chose his brother as the recipient of his answer: 'Cain said unto Abel his brother . . .'."²¹ And thus, as Elie Wiesel remarks, he turned his quarrel against God against his brother instead.²² What did Cain say to Abel here? For Neher, the initial "rupture in communication" between Cain and God underscores the failure of dialogue that is central to the episode as a whole: "Abel does not speak, whereas Cain speaks all the time" ("incessantly," as Wiesel notes). "Thus dialogue was swallowed up in silence and death." Neher concludes: "it is as if the obliteration of the dialogue were the cause of murder" (Neher, 95). The "dialogue" of which Neher speaks, based on an ideal of symmetry and an understanding of language as communication, is derivative of the Blanchotian "speech or death," the asymmetrical *parole* that founds not only the possibility of "dialogue" in such a sense, but also the very speech/murder alternative. Yet Neher's comment gives pause: it is as if the textual gap or lacuna in its very materiality were the cause of the murder the episode recounts.

17. Philo, vol. 2, with an English trans. by F. H. Colson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 205.

18. See the discussion by Nehama Leibowitz in *Studies in Bereshit Genesis*, trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1972), 38–45.

19. As Claus Westermann notes, "J" understands Cain's reaction to the rejection of his gift as "psychosomatic." "He became inflamed . . . his face fell." *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 297. Everett Fox reminds us that "the text is punctuated . . . by changing connotations of the word 'face.'" *In the Beginning*, 19.

20. Commentators agree that the Hebrew of this verse is obscure, and its textual difficulties irresolvable.

21. André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, trans. David Maisel (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 97–98. See also the related discussion by Neher in *L'Existence juive: solitude et affrontements* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), 34–36. Henceforth cited in the text.

22. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), 54.

What did Cain say to Abel? Perhaps, as Neher suggests, he simply repeated God's words to him "in all their fearful ambiguity." These words were not only obscure, but as Elie Wiesel comments, "cruel": "Repudiated by God, Cain sank into a black depression. Whereupon God, with a cruelty as startling as it was unprovoked, asked why he looked so crestfallen, why he was so depressed. As though He did not know, as though He was not the cause!:" (Wiesel, 58). Perhaps, Wiesel continues, Cain wanted to unburden himself to Abel, who did not listen.

And Cain said to Abel, "Let us go outside." Why did he direct him toward the outside?" "Outside, where there were no witnesses," says one commentator (Westerman, *Genesis* 1–11, 302). Blanchot writes, "as if he knew that the outside is the place of Abel, but also as if he wished to lead him back to that poverty, to that weakness of the outside where every defense falls away" (*EI*, 87).