

Ethics and the Concept of the Face in Emmanuel Levinas's First Philosophy

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Abstract

This article examines Emmanuel Levinas's transformative impact on modern philosophy through the concept of the "Face" as the foundation for "Ethics as first philosophy." It begins with his critique of the Western philosophical tradition, which prioritizes ontology and adequation, showing how he shifted from the "Said" to the "Saying" as an ethical event prior to knowledge. The Face is presented not as a phenomenological given, but as a manifestation of absolute alterity opening onto metaphysics and exteriority. By exploring its paradox—combining vulnerability and authority—the study reveals how the Face summons the self through the imperative "Thou shalt not kill." Ultimately, Levinas's philosophy redefines selfhood as grounded not in Being or egocentrism, but in unconditional, asymmetrical responsibility toward the Other, placing ethics beyond essence and ontology.

Keywords: Levinas; Face; Ethics; Alterity; Responsibility.

Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical project constitutes a decisive turning point in contemporary philosophical thought, as it redirected philosophy from the question of Being to the question of the Other, and from the centrality of the self to the primacy of the ethical relationship. Within this shift, "Ethics as first philosophy" does not appear in Levinas as merely a rearrangement of philosophical sub-disciplines, but rather as a revolution in the very meaning of philosophy, its task, and the nature of the discourse capable of undertaking it.

Researching the manner in which Levinas constructs "Ethics as first philosophy" fundamentally requires investigating his philosophy for the justifications that make this philosophical proposition legitimate. Furthermore, understanding the elements upon which this new philosophical legislation for ethical management is built—which is considered one of the most powerful rootings of moral philosophy in the history of Western thought—is essential. Among the most important of these justifications emerges the concept of "the Face",

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due to the profound significance it carries in embodying the metaphysical dimension, and in demonstrating the primacy or philosophical legitimacy that makes ethics tantamount to first philosophy.

What we aim to present in this context is highlighting that singularity which distinguishes Levinas's view of philosophy, a singularity that will constitute a decisive turning point in Western philosophical thought towards a new task for philosophy and the philosopher, where philosophy becomes with him "an ethical preoccupation and a question about the Other". This turn presupposes the critique and transcendence of the philosophical premises of the Western tradition; therefore, Levinas frames this issue outside the system of "philosophies of the subject" in Western thought, which also compels him to reconstruct the concept of subjectivity. Hence, the novelty that the philosophy of ethics will introduce in Levinas: "consists in attempting to establish a meta-epistemological, meta-ontological, and meta-phenomenological meaning for the Other, that is, situating it within a space of metaphysical treatment".

We would not be far from the truth if we said that the signification of "the Face (*Visage*)" in Levinas's ethics has played a fundamental role in crystallizing the meaning of ethics, insofar as it is prior to ontology. This is not solely due to the status this concept holds among the fundamental concepts in the ethical system, but also due to the deconstructive nature of the Face's manifestation. This concept encompasses a profound signification through which the human encounter between the I and the Other is interpreted as "face-to-face (*face-à-face*)". This encounter is not merely a factual event in space and time; rather, it is an experience in which reducing the alterity of the Other to the Same is precluded, because what recedes behind the Face is the epiphany of the sublime as a trace that can neither be possessed nor thematized. For this reason, analyzing the signification of the Face leads us to "beyond the face (*au-delà du visage*)".

The Face, as "the signification of meaning (*signifiance du sens*)"³, according to Levinas, compels us to think of it and of ethics as first philosophy as if they were two sides of the same coin, as long as Levinas acknowledges that: "metaphysics is enacted originally in the epiphany of the Other in the face"⁴. In as much as ethics, in its broad sense, refers to the antithesis of Western thought as "totalitarian thought" according to Levinas, the concept of "the Face" equally places us in a position of contemplation regarding its semantic energy, an energy with which Levinas tears the fabric of philosophical thought. The Face, in the context of Levinasian philosophy, expresses the site of transcendence, gathering the possibilities of this transcendence, and becomes the source from which ethical commands are issued⁵.

Based on this, the problematic of this article can be formulated as follows: How does the concept of the Face in Levinas establish ethics as first philosophy? And what allows the Face to transcend being merely a perceptual given, to become the site of the ethical Saying, a

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*, 10e éd. (Paris: Fata Morgana, 2021), p 171.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), p. 242.

⁵ Christian Saint-Germain, "Pouvoir de la singularité: Le pathos du visage dans le texte d'Emmanuel Levinas," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 49, no. 1 (1993):p 27.

horizon for metaphysics, and a foundation for reconstructing the relationship between the I and the Other?

To clarify the position Levinas grants to the Face within his ethical project, it is necessary first to examine his critique of Western philosophical discourse, because this critique is what paves the way for the transition from the primacy of ontology to the primacy of ethics.

1. The Critique of Philosophical Discourse and the Possibility of Ethical Saying

Philosophical thought believed it could establish a discourse capable of uttering "the pre-originary" (the Saying) without betraying it. However, this betrayal inevitably reflects in the ethical context, because "the Said" emanating from the I does not direct itself toward the Other and for their sake; rather, it appears as a hegemonic discourse over any alterity, overtaken by objectivity and knowledge in a way that prevents it from becoming an ethical dialogue in the Levinasian sense. In this regard, François David Sabah argues that the Saying and the Said appear more contradictory than inverse⁶. This is because the signification of "the Saying" in this context refers to our relationship with the Other as a relationship of responsibility. Hence, Levinas's opposition to language as a Said aims solely to unveil the pre-originary and the non-intentional consciousness that precedes the formation of consciousness in the phenomenological sense or the Heideggerian Dasein.

The question of language in the Levinasian corpus is inseparable from the central issue in his philosophy: rendering "Ethics as first philosophy." This proposition cannot be realized without seeking a possibility to understand Being differently from Western ontology. Therefore, the question of language falls within the crossing toward a language that transcends ontological discourse by undertaking an ethical hermeneutic of language as an utterance (expression and crossing to the beyond). Accordingly, from the perspective of Bernard Forthomme, "the relationship should be a word (Parole)"⁷.

By interpreting the word as "a sermon, and prophetic speech"⁸, the ground upon which philosophical discourse was formed can be shaken—namely, the Greek Logos. In this regard, Levinas states: "Logos as discourse is confused with Logos as rationality; the communication that language ensures seems identical to its secondary function"⁹. Thus, this Logos produced a monolithic language for "the subject" according to adequation, and positioned the language of philosophical thought always around thought and constantly directed toward "the ego." We believe that this very context is what prompted Levinas to question the possibility of an ethical language, through which he transcends the universal system of language imposed by the I, toward an ethical language that responds to the call of alterity. The response here is not understood on the premise that the Other calls upon us through speech alone, but rather that the call itself contains a silent call heard the moment the Other is present before us—a divine call that reveals itself in the face of the Other.

Accordingly, Levinas perceives that philosophical discourse as "(a Said)" is a rational discourse aimed at elucidating truth, such that "the function of language will revert to

⁶ Rodolphe Calin and François David Sebbah, *Vocabulaire de Levinas* (Paris: Ellipses, 2011), 15.

⁷ Bernard Forthomme, *Une philosophie de la transcendance: La métaphysique d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Pensée Universelle/Vrin, 1979), 258.

⁸ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 235.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 4e éd. (Paris: Vrin, 2016), 304.

abolishing 'the Other' to break with this harmony [...] language seeks to abolish the Other, by making it conform to the Same!"¹⁰. All of this is due to the fact that philosophical thought always looks to the primacy of thought over language, and the primacy of knowledge over ethics. This is what led philosophical thought to strive for a universal philosophical discourse, given that reason cannot be different relative to another reason.

Based on this, the desired objectivity and truth in philosophy are inseparable from this Logos which established them according to the condition of adequation. Philosophical thought inserted the issue of "the Other" into its discourses as another subject, and as an object within "the Ego," believing it could comprehend all things in that movement where "the subject" always returns to itself. This summarizes how philosophy thought of "the Other" and how it formulated the concepts of moral philosophy according to the Same, not as ethical legislation starting from the concept and status of "the Other." In other words, previous traditional philosophies of all kinds did not afford a reverse path leading us from "Ethics" to other philosophical issues. Rather, the path drawn by Western philosophy has always started by demonstrating the subject, then moving to the world and the Other, and then to the ethical question, in a manner that does not allow thinking of a reverse path leading from exteriority, alterity, and difference toward the Ego.

However, this objection to philosophical discourse does not stop at the limits of critiquing language as a tool for representation or adequation; rather, it leads in Levinas to the search for another possibility for Saying—the distinction between "the Saying" and "the Said." Through this situation, Levinas formulates his central question regarding the issue of language and the motives for seeking a language for ethics, as a crossing to beyond essence and as an exit from ontology toward first philosophy. This, in turn, is inseparable from opposing philosophical discourse as "a Said" by means of the religious "Utterance (Parole)" as a "Saying." Hence, this trajectory led him to search for the possibility of a Saying without it being a Said, which he found through his book *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. There he roots this vision: "the Saying without a Said (le Dire sans Dit)"¹¹, where "the Saying" in its transcendent meaning as expression refers to the concept of responsibility. As Levinas writes: "We are here in the heart of this ambiguity of inspiration, in the answer to the an-archic (An-archique) unheard, enigmatic Saying, in my responsibility toward the Other"¹².

In this sense, "the Saying" is not understood in Levinas as merely a different linguistic level, but as a relationship prior to knowledge, and a sign of a responsibility directed toward the Other prior to any theoretical thematization of them. His initial focus was on researching the relationship between "the Saying and the Said" through the relationship between "discourse and ethics (Discours et éthique)" in *Totality and Infinity*. There, he roots this vision by looking at the relationship as the Encounter (Rencontre) with the face of the Other (Le Visage), an encounter that does not mean a phenomenological or cognitive perception of

¹⁰ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 70.

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être, ou au-delà de l'essence*, 10e éd. (Paris: Vrin, 2017), 78.

¹² Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p 232.

the face, but rather intends it as a voice and a call: "with a strange, imperative, and disarmed authority, it is the word of God and the word in the human face"¹³.

The signification of the face, as an epiphany (Epiphanie) of the word of "God" in the human face, shatters, in Levinas, the concept of phenomenological intersubjectivity, just as it shatters the meaning of appearance that cannot be reduced and understood within consciousness. This reflects the dominance of metaphysical language over Husserlian phenomenology, which he demonstrates through the theoretical results concerning the "experience of the Other."

As long as the relationship with the Other is a relationship with a face in Levinas, this necessitates the presence of a third, which is "God" as "the other of Being" or as "beyond essence," who reveals Himself through the face of the Other as a presence even in absence. From here, "the encounter with the Other" through the response to the silent call becomes the language of the face, "a language prior to words, the authentic language of the face"¹⁴, which is embodied, for example, in the phrase "Thou shalt not kill."

This silent language, as a divine command revealing itself through the face, is what carries us to "beyond essence" like the Platonic "Supreme Good." Thus, the encounter with the Other becomes a light carrying us toward the true "Transcendent," which is "God" as absolute alterity, who is not revealed in discourse but rather withdraws through "the Said," leaving His trace in the face as responsibility. And this "trace (La trace) of the Infinite is ambiguity"¹⁵. The passage of the Divine through the face of the Other is what grants transcendence to the Other, making the ethical relationship one that precedes understanding and knowledge. Therefore, the language of the face serves as "the Saying," which cannot be reduced to objective dialogue because it is: "the language of the unheard, the language of the stranger, the language of the unsaid"¹⁶.

Since "the Face" is a language prior to words, it is the original language synonymous with the meaning of "the Saying." Here, "the Saying" occurs as prior to the intentionality of consciousness¹⁷, like the face that escapes phenomenological description. In this way, the function of language in Levinas becomes the search for how to ascend to "the Saying" as the "pre-originary" meaning, which is the transcendent station occupied by "the Saying." If "language" in Heidegger is "the house of Being," then language in Levinas is beyond the house, and this is what enables Levinas to cross beyond language and into ethical philosophy as first philosophy.

From this perspective, the question of language in Levinas is no longer a purely linguistic question; rather, it becomes part of the critique of the primacy of ontology itself. Thus, Levinas argues that it is necessary that "truth be sought in the Other [...] such a situation is language"¹⁸. The purpose of placing the search for truth in "the Other" can only be understood

¹³ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, pp. II–III.

¹⁴ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p III.

¹⁵ Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p 232.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p III.

¹⁷ Étienne Feron, *De l'idée de transcendance à la question du langage: L'itinéraire philosophique de Levinas* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1992), 135.

¹⁸ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 56.

in an ethical context as the silent call of the face, overcoming the concept of the relationship with "the Other" that dominated Western philosophical thought. It is not an ontological relationship as Heidegger presumed; consequently, philosophical discourse and the language of philosophy belonged "to the work of truth, itself as thematization (Thématisation) and identification (Identification) in which Being is an appearance"¹⁹.

In contrast, Levinas defines "the Saying" in its profound and original signification: "Saying acts as ethical sincerity to the extent that this Saying acts as an exposition. As such, this Saying cannot be reduced to any possibility of an ontological definition of the Said. The Saying is what makes the subjective exposition of possible sincerity permissible"²⁰. What does this ethical sincerity mean? Does it parallel the concept of truth in the ontological sense, or does it transcend it?

Ethical sincerity, as one of the meanings of "the Saying," does not involve sincerity as truth in the logical sense, but rather means: "Sincerity (Sincérité) is the Saying"²¹. It actualizes this sincerity through giving without keeping anything for ourselves, reflecting the meaning of sacrifice and devotion for "the Other" in ethical philosophy, where "Sincerity" is considered the foundation of the relationship between "the self and the Other." In this manner, it becomes: "Sincerity is a saying without a said."

In this context as well, "the Saying" is understood as a transcendence of the cognitive relationship, a transcendence that requires exiting the philosophical duality of "Subject and Object" entrenched since Descartes. Levinasian ethics thus transcends these conceptions of the relationship. Ethics becomes, in certain respects, a reformulation of Western philosophical discourse by negating "the Said," beginning by positing "the Other" as an interlocutor and as external to the subject in a way that cannot be reduced to it. According to Bernard Forthomme, Levinas believes there is no cognitive relationship with the Other outside the ethical context²². In this, there is a separation and distance between "the Self and the Other," outside intelligibility and presence—a distance that Western philosophy denounces. This is reflected in the issue of language and in Levinas's attempt to search for "a saying without a said" as determined through the relationship with the Other and the Transcendent/God.

If this is the case, then the transition to metaphysics does not mean a return to traditional metaphysics, but rather a redefinition of its subject matter starting from exteriority and alterity.

2. The Face and Metaphysics

Following all of this, we can directly pose the question of metaphysics/first philosophy starting from the alteration in its subject matter and methodology undertaken by Levinas. Metaphysics here expresses its deviation from the traditional concept of Western metaphysics. It is impossible to pose the issue of ethics as first philosophy, and to pose its topics regarding the ethical relationship with the Other, based on the thinking and transcendental subject that

¹⁹ Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p 312.

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Kearney (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p 31.

²¹ Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p 223.

²² Forthomme, *Une philosophie de la transcendance*, p 258.

weaves the fabric of objectivity through what corresponds to it, and by means of reducing the Other to the Same. This is what makes truth, at least in the traditional horizon, possible.

In contrast, the subject matter of philosophy in Levinas, as we noted earlier, consists in the search for the "pre-originary" meaning that transcends the limits of traditional metaphysics. Levinas expressed this by stating: "Ethics is drawn beyond vision and certainty by the structure of exteriority as such"²³. Therefore, metaphysics will become a search for the meaning emanating from exteriority, as a preliminary approach to ethics. There is no way to speak of ethics without that discourse being founded on metaphysics, such that: "Metaphysics plays its role in ethical relations"²⁴.

We understand from this statement that the purpose served by metaphysics is the crystallization of the elements and concepts that constitute the system of ethics. Ethics derives its subject matter through the description of "the encounter with the Other" as the event from which meaning comes from (beyond meaning). It must be emphasized here once again that the description here is not a phenomenological description, so long as it is situated [beyond vision and certainty]. For meaning comes from beyond meaning through the relationship with the Face as an "epiphany" acting as the word of (God).

Continuing from Levinas's previous statement, he writes: "Theological concepts without significations derived from ethics remain merely empty and formal frameworks"²⁵. Through this statement as well, the role of metaphysics in defining those relations through (the relationship with the Face) emerges, as a movement and openness toward linking ethics with the Transcendent and the Infinite through the relationship of the I with the Other (face-to-face). Thanks to this, metaphysics achieves an authentic realization, through its inquiry into what is beyond the origin. First philosophy, as meta-ethics, is fundamentally an expression of the essence of ethics. Thus, "First Philosophy" is a breach of the traditional metaphysical and phenomenological system, going further than where philosophical thought had stopped.

At this level, exteriority is not understood as merely a spatial outside, but as a mode of relationship that does not fall within the duality of subject and object, which explains Levinas's objection to intentional structure as formed in phenomenology. Levinas defined the essence of ethics for us by saying: "The essence of ethics lies in its transcendent intentionality, and that every transcendent intentionality does not have the structure of the act of consciousness (noèse) and the intentional object (noème)"²⁶. Levinas means here by [transcendent intentionality] the relationship sketched through the Face, which defies phenomenological description or perception, and as we pointed out earlier, acts as an epiphany and revelation of the Divine through the Face, which has no space within the structure of consciousness. This is not only because it exceeds human capacity to comprehend it, but also because it is "the other of thought, the other of Being, and as an absolute alterity" that cannot be reduced to the categories of reason according to the relationship of adequation.

²³ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 340.

²⁴ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 77.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 77.

²⁶ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 15.

Therefore, Levinas believes it is not necessary that every relationship with something be a reflexive relationship (*Réflexive*) like the one that exists between the subject and the object. "The Face" is not an object, and neither is "the Other"; not everything is a (*Représentation*) within consciousness, as was the case in Husserl's phenomenology. This is the point that distinguishes the methodological employment of phenomenology between Husserl and Levinas. While Husserl's purpose was to perfect the method and employ it through the strict description of the modes of intentional consciousness by suspending our judgments and preconceptions, we find that Levinas supports this method—which enables us to discover meaning within our lived experience—to be in constant contact with what is external and alter to us, allowing us to grasp the total meaning.

Based on all this, it can be said that Levinas's view of ethics as first philosophy, and as a fundamental and primary question for philosophy, passed through overturning the traditional view of the subject matter of philosophy, a view that still dominates the orientations of contemporary philosophical thought in Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas replaced their questions with the ethical question, making it the fundamental and operational question of first philosophy. This contributed to replacing the primacy of the ontological question with the primacy of the ethical question, by changing the field and methods of questioning: from thinking about "Being" to thinking about "Ethics", and from thinking about existence to thinking about human interaction. As for the methods of this questioning, they remain immersed in the ontological edifice and rooted with Levinas in the depths of metaphysics as an inquiry into the beyond (*Au-delà*) and into the "pre-originary". However, Levinasian questions refrain from being a self-legislation that reduces the Other to the Same; therefore, they make "the Other" the center of questioning and a priority over "the Self". Consequently, the field of competence of ethics/first philosophy can be described as a description of the relationship with the Other through "the Face", and the relationship of "the Self with the Other" as face-to-face (*Face-à-face*), a relationship that necessitates absolute responsibility, because its foundation begins when "the self" resolves to abandon its egoistic position and its self-interest in existence, for the sake of the Other.

Thus, part of the task of Levinasian philosophy is questioning and researching the authentic transcendence as: "ethical-metaphysical transcendence"²⁷. Therefore, Levinas directs the concerns of his ethical philosophy toward "human interaction" amidst the inter-human relationship as a passage toward transcendence. The relationship with the Other and transcendence, according to David Banon, is not a cognitive relationship like the relationship of subject and object, but a primary relationship, a relationship with the an-archic (*An-archique*)²⁸. Hence, the relationship between the I and the Other, as a factual relationship, plays the role of an experience of the relationship with metaphysical transcendence.

The Other, as transcendent to the I, or in phenomenological language, is not a (Noème) nor an alter-ego (Alter-ego). This idea was the means by which Levinas undermined the concept of Husserlian intersubjectivity. The Other escapes consciousness, just as transcendence

²⁷ Forthomme, *Une philosophie de la transcendance*, p 286.

²⁸ David Banon, *De l'être à la lettre: Philosophie et judaïsme dans l'œuvre d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2022), p 110.

escapes any thematization or reduction. This negates the I as the constitutor of the world and things, such that "the human Other is transcendence [*Autruï est transcendence*]"²⁹, in Levinas's ethics. Since the issue of transcendence surpasses these cognitive and objective limits and ascends to the level of total experience, the ethical relationship with the Other requires an empirical and objective signification through the encounter. The event of the encounter through the Face represents the experience of openness to the Infinite, a passage to the metaphysical relationship with the Infinite/Transcendent, where "a relationship with the absolute Other or truth is established"³⁰

Within this same horizon, the signification of the Face is determined, not as an object for vision, but as the site for the epiphany of ethical meaning.

3. The Signification of the Face and Responsibility

By virtue of the status through which "the Face" occupies a central position among the concepts of ethical philosophy in Levinas—as Marc Faessler asserts, for example, that "the bulk of Levinas's works presents the Face as the original site from which meaning emanates"³¹ it is confirmed that this profound signification of the Face is what allowed Levinas to legitimize "Ethics as first philosophy". This compels us to examine this concept based on some necessary questions: What does the Face mean in Levinas's philosophy? And how did Levinas rely on this concept to extend a bridge through which he pierces the edifices of totalitarian Western philosophy toward ethics?

Knowing the origin of a thing requires knowing its characteristics and the traits that distinguish it from other concepts. Starting from this, we will begin by negating some conceptions that might be loaded onto this concept and distract us from understanding its original signification. The Face for Levinas is not an object for description, which is justified by his statement in the dialogue with Philippe Nemo: "I do not know if it is possible to speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face [...] and at the same time, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, forehead, a chin, and you can describe them"³².

Therefore, the analysis of the Face does not begin with describing its features, but with demonstrating the manner in which the Other presents itself outside any perceptual or cognitive reduction. We can benefit from this statement in understanding the signification of "the Face" in Levinas. "The face of the Other" does not refer to an object that can be known or whose features can be described by looking at it as a visible thing among other things in the world.

However, Levinas specified that [access to the face is straightaway ethical]. This means that the ethical precedence of the look turned toward the human face is an affirmation that seeing "the Face" is a transcendence of that sensory and perceptual vision as Merleau-Ponty

²⁹ Corine Pelluchon, *Pour comprendre Levinas: Un philosophe pour notre temps* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2020), p 38.

³⁰ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 15.

³¹ . Marc Faessler, "Dieu envisagé," in *Répondre d'autrui: Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jean-Christophe Aeschlimann (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1989), p 101.

³² Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et infini*, 22e éd. (Paris: Fayard, 2018), 79.

believed, because the Face is: "signification without a context [*contexte*]"³³. This means, according to Levinas, that looking at the face of the Other should be out of context. If we say, for example, that someone is a professor at the university or Vice-President of the Council of State, this look itself implies that our relationship with the Other is like our relationship with things. As for the relationship with the Face according to Levinas's ethics, it is an independent meaning, and a look that pierces through the visible of the Face to its invisible.

"The Face", then, according to this conception, is the site through which the moral conscience awakens, where ethics in this context becomes a resistance to ontology. This precedence, or this beginning, for Levinas, appears through our simple daily experience such as saying hello or saying: "After you, sir"³⁴. This beginning through the encounter does not refer to a relationship with a pure subject demanding that we know this human, as much as it reflects an ethical beginning. This is where the purity of "the Face" and the ethical encounter manifests, which is "submerged in goodness, so you are unable to approach the Other empty-handed"³⁵, which also signifies the ethical precedence of the relationship with the Other in Levinas.

Therefore, the analysis of the Face is inseparable from the analysis of the relationship between alterity and responsibility. Based on this, it can be said, following Alexander Schnell, that the relationship with "the Face" is not an objective relationship, but a relationship with a being that retains complete exteriority (*extériorité*), while simultaneously being immediacy (*Immédiateté*), nudity (*Nudité*), and destitution (*Dénuement*). This demonstrates that the ³⁶ relationship with "the Face", and the signification subsumed under it, cannot be approached through an intentional act like our relationship with an "object". Rather, the resistance of "the Face" to perception, and the insubordination of its signification to thematization and reduction to the gaze of the subject, is what makes its meaning independent from anything else that could be reduced or described.

From this perspective, Levinas argues that "the Face" carries "against contemporary ontology, a concept of truth that is not a disclosure of an impersonal neutral (*Neutre impersonnel*), but carries an expression: the being opens all the folds and generalities of Being" (*Neutre impersonnel*). Thus, the signification of the (Face) becomes an antithesis to the concept of "the truth of Being"³⁷, in [contemporary ontology], especially in Heidegger. The Face, as an openness or as a site, carries us, as Levinas describes it, to a non-place (*non-lieu*)³⁸, since exteriority (*extériorité*), Infinity (*infini*), alterity (*altérité*), and trace (*trace*) do not possess ontological properties, but are prior to any ontological determination. This is the role of the Face in Levinas's ethics. It acts as the light that reveals things without itself being revealed, akin to the meaning of Being in Heidegger: a light that reveals and is not revealed, as it withdraws while manifesting things.

³³ Levinas, *Éthique et infini*, p 80.

³⁴ Levinas, *Éthique et infini*, p 84.

³⁵ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 43.

³⁶ Alexander Schnell, *En face de l'extériorité: Levinas et la question de la subjectivité* (Paris: Vrin, 2010), 126–127.

³⁷ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 43.

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), p 12.

Thus, the signification of the Face serves as the fundamental constituent of meaning in Levinas, through the relationship of the I with the Other and the Infinite. This is because it opens before us the primary ethical meaning prior to cognitive and ontological meaning (as the intelligibility of existence). However, instead of opening to existence and realizing the meaning of the I as adequation, it opens us to existence with the alterity of the Other and to Transcendence (*Transcendance*), or in Levinas's terms, to "exteriority and alterity". These are among the possibilities granted by the Face in its true meaning as ethical discourse, which was mentioned in the primacy of (the Saying over the Said).

The meaning Levinas grants to the concept of "the Face" places it in a fundamental position for the interpretation of ethics, and establishes a ground upon which the concept of the ethical relationship is built. "The Face" in Levinas also expresses: "The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me"³⁹. If the appearance of "the Other" to "the Ego" is fundamentally the appearance of "the Face" that exceeds a representational idea, the constitution of "the Other" through the eye of the subject, this means, in the context of Levinasian philosophy, that "the Face" represents, on one hand, the alterity of the Other that resists reduction to the Ego, such that the presence of the Other will not become an object of knowledge or an alter ego. On the other hand, "the Face" represents a point or a site for openness to exteriority and into "beyond the face", which is embodied in the "idea of the Infinite".

From here, we can understand the paradoxical nature Levinas assigns to the Face, namely its combination of weakness and authority. "The face of the Other (*Visage d'autrui*)" as the site of the encounter, defining itself and escaping any context, is what makes its reduction to a specific meaning impossible, making this characterization of the relationship with the Face ethics itself possible. However, it encompasses an extraordinary signification due to the ambiguity it yields in meaning. Therefore, Levinas writes: "What characterizes the Face in its status from a known thing, is tied to its paradoxical (*Contradictoire*) nature; it is all weakness (*Faiblesse*) and all authority (*Autorité*)"⁴⁰. What is gathered from this statement—alongside the clear assertion Levinas declares at the outset about the manifestation of the Face not being like the manifestation of things—is that this distinction can also be understood through its paradoxical meaning between "weakness and authority".

This exposed weakness does not lead to permissibility, but transforms in the encounter into an ethical imperative condensed in the phrase "Thou shalt not kill". The signification of "the face of the Other" for Levinas refers, on one hand, to it being weakness, and on the other hand, to how this weakness transforms during the encounter into "authority and imperative", in a positive formulation. This first necessitates the obligation to respect the "alterity of the Other", and what its face harbors of "imperative and weakness", both of which manifest in the phrase "Thou shalt not kill". This phrase carries the signification of prohibition and responsibility toward the Other. The phrase can be formulated thus: Whom shalt thou not kill? Thou shalt not kill the Other. However, the concept of responsibility in Levinas is understood in a dialectical, asymmetrical, and non-reciprocal (*Réciproque*) nature, unlike how Martin

³⁹ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p 185.

⁴⁰ Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*, p 114.

Buber conceived it in the (I-Thou) relationship. According to Levinas, the face-to-face encounter becomes the primary and authentic experience, and responsibility becomes a condition for this encounter, not in a reciprocal form, but as concerning "the I" before "the Other", and indeed more than it.

Moreover, "weakness" is not understood here as an opportunity to despise "the Other", despite that possibility. Rather, weakness is understood as a mode in the manifestation of the exposed and naked Face, which can be easily harmed, yet at the same time, that naked manifestation: "The Face is straightaway supplication". It is a plea for protection, begging not to be harmed. This plea requested by the face of the Other is not simply an empirical description of human actions; it represents an ontological structure of human behavior, as it escapes consciousness and its logical and ontological system. This is why Levinas shifts his focus to moral consciousness, because these demands expressed by the Face express, in his view, an order and proximity to the goodness expressed by the Face⁴¹. Thus, the Face appears, in Levinas's conception, as a fundamental event, and one of the primary ways that brings us closer to the Other. The Other, as a face, is always in need of something, and this complex nature of the Face is what makes giving a precise description of it extremely difficult.

We continue here our explanation of the previous statement, in the context of our analysis of the meaning of weakness, where Levinas stated [and its mortality appears at the same time]; that we: "encounter death in the face of the Other"⁴². The face of the Other is what reminds us of death through the phrase sketched on it (Thou shalt not kill). Death does not concern only each I or Dasein exclusively from the rest, as Heidegger believed; rather, the death of the Other is what affects "the I", making it more anxious than its anxiety over its own death and being-toward-death. For "the Face", to the philosopher of ethics, is the station in which: "the epiphany becomes proximity [*l'épiphanie se fait proximité*]"⁴³.

On this basis, responsibility does not appear as a subsequent result of the relationship with the Other, but as its original structure, i.e., the condition that makes the face-to-face encounter possible in the first place. The meaning of absolute responsibility appears in the context of the previous phrase [absolutely commands us not to kill], as a call to responsibility toward the Other. The general meaning of responsibility in the context of ethical philosophy is reflected here in the meaning of Being in Levinas as existing for others. Or more precisely: existence, in one of its meanings for Levinas, is a call of responsibility and anxiety for the Other, and not (conatus essendi) as the effort a being exerts to maintain its being as Baruch Spinoza conceived it, nor a struggle or "war of all against all" as Thomas Hobbes conceived it, nor "as will to power and vital struggle" as Nietzsche believed. Responsibility, as a fundamental and primary structure of ethics, does not reflect the general meaning as accountability for human actions, but is: "a gratuitous, non-transferable responsibility"⁴⁴ for the Other, like an unconditional love for humanity. Through this meaning, Levinas presents an objection to the meaning of Being as self-concern and anxiety for oneself.

⁴¹ *Simonne Plourde, Emmanuel Levinas: L'altérité et responsabilité (Paris: Éditions du CREF, 1996), p 40.*

⁴² *Emmanuel Levinas, Dieu, la mort et le temps (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993), p 121.*

⁴³ *Levinas, En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger, p 322.*

⁴⁴ *Levinas, Altérité et transcendance, p 172.*

The impact of the Face is not limited to redefining the relationship with the Other; it extends to reconstructing the meaning of the self itself, as the self is no longer a center for foundation, but a site for response. Thus, the meaning of "weakness" in the Levinasian ethical space appears as the limitation of the self, its weakness, and its need for the Other, and furthermore, it appears as a responsibility for the other human. The manifestation of "the human face constitutes a piercing of the crust [La croûte] of 'the being persevering in its being' and concerned with itself"⁴⁵. Thus, the encounter with "the face of the Other" is understood as a questioning of "the I" and not the reverse. That is, the presence of the Other is not an object for the I or an antithesis to it; rather, the I becomes the one subjected to the question, which comes in the form of imperative and authority demanding a response to the call of responsibility.

As long as this is the case, in Levinas's conception, regarding the meaning of the ethical relationship sketched through "the face of the Other" as a discourse of responsibility, the radical question of ethics is only achieved by awakening the I from its inner worlds toward what is external to it, toward the Other who represents the foundation of the ethical relationship. Consequently, this necessity in projecting the ethical question through the Other does not mean relegating the I or subjectivity to the margins; rather, its intent is to formulate a new concept of the self and liberate it from the ontological and cognitive anxiety that burdened it. As long as philosophy always described it as a knowing subject and as a "*Dasein*" understanding its existence, man, according to Levinas, is not the being who understands what existence means as Heidegger wants, but is the being who: "heard and understood the commandment of holiness in the face of the other human"⁴⁶.

From this statement emerges the radical difference in the vision of man between the ethical perspective and the ontological perspective. Levinas's vision of man is rooted through his ethical humanity, which provides us with a path to cross toward the humanity of the other human.

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that the concept of "the Face" occupies a central place in Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy, not as one concept among others, but as the point at which alterity, transcendence, metaphysics, and responsibility converge. The Face cannot be understood within the horizon of perception, description, or representation; rather, it belongs to a relation in which the Other resists reduction to the Same and escapes cognitive or ontological containment.

From this perspective, the Face opens a new possibility for philosophical thought. It displaces the center of gravity from the knowing subject to the Other, from truth as adequation to meaning as response, and from ontological discourse to "the Saying" as responsibility. In this way, Levinas reconnects ethics with metaphysics by redefining metaphysics itself, no longer as a thinking of being qua being, but as a thinking of "exteriority", "beyond essence", and transcendence.

⁴⁵ Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*, pp. 172-173.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Altérité et transcendance*, p 172.

The Face thus becomes the site of an ethical awakening: it puts the self into question, interrupts the primacy of ontology, and founds a relation to the Other that precedes knowledge, freedom, and representation. Its ethical signification appears most clearly in the command "Thou shalt not kill", and in the asymmetrical responsibility it imposes on the I before the Other.

The main conclusions of this article may be summarized as follows:

- _ The Face is not an object of phenomenological description or representation.
- _ Its signification is grounded in the "face-to-face (face-à-face)" relation.
- _ It is through the Face that Levinas establishes ethics as first philosophy.
- _ "The Saying" exceeds "the Said" because it refers to a responsibility prior to knowledge.
- _ The Face opens onto the Infinite and onto "beyond the face (*au-delà du visage*)".
- _ Its ethical meaning appears in the conjunction of vulnerability and authority.
- _ The responsibility founded by the Face is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal.
- _ The Face reconstructs the meaning of the self as ethically awakened in relation to the Other.

Thus, the Face is the key concept through which Levinas redefines philosophy itself: from ontology to ethics, from self-grounding thought to responsibility for the Other.

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