

- **Introduction:**
 - Why this talk?
 - The change of title? Couldn't resist the alliteration?
 - Reminder of Kirpatrick's talk on Levinas's concept of 'the face' (last October).
 - Who is Levinas?

- **Why Levinas has not been to the fore until relatively recently**
 - His philosophical 'method': initially, the phenomenological (Husserl, Heidegger), but eventually – and especially when it comes to the concept of *le visage* ('the face') he departs from this
 - This renders him – to some – (and virtually by definition), *non* philosophical.
 - The 'side' issue of whether this matters or not.

- **'The face'**
 - What does this mean? Brief explanation of the phenomenological method – 'to the things themselves' (eschewing theory) - and why Levinas departs from this. It doesn't do justice to 'the face'.
 - How so? Because any attempt to describe the phenomenal appearance of the face is doomed to be always 'too late'. Doesn't the phenomenological method allow for this? Describing phenomena *only* as it appears? Yes, but already that is too late. But then aren't *all descriptions* doomed to be 'too late'? Yes, but this leads Levinas to also eschew phenomenological description as having any ontological status (here he clearly departs from Heidegger – the great philosopher of being). So what is left? Well.... *the face*. In what sense? Certainly not in any empirically 'capturable' sense (TV documentaries on the face – comparisons, measurements etc.), but in our 'face-to-face' encounters everyday.
 - Face-to-face encounters: What do these consist of? Levinas wants to say that knowledge is *not* the key here. We don't – and indeed cannot - actually *know* any other face. How then can we encounter what we cannot know? Can we encounter the unknowable? Well, let's take language. It is now almost philosophically commonplace now to concede that language is *inherently* ambiguous, 'definitionally' unknowable in any ultimate sense (Derrida), and yet we use and move within it everyday without this striking us in any significant way as being absurd. We 'know' someone else, but we don't know them as well. They 'speak' to us, their face 'speaks' to us, yet their 'saying' (*direr*) cannot be known in any ontological sense. Only their 'said' (*dit*) can be ontologically known. Only the

past is accessible by ontological investigation, and even the status of this is questionable, it being open to various interpretations, reinterpretations and so on. But the past at least has certain 'common' paradigms available within which to work (whether myths, theories of being, or scientific and psychological hypotheses), whereas the present has none, *except perhaps one*, which I'll come to a bit later.

- In *Meaning and Sense* (1964) Levinas says this:

The manifestation of the Other is, to be sure, produced from the first in conformity with the way every meaning is produced. The Other is present in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this whole, as a text is by its context. The manifestation of the whole ensures his presence; it is illuminated by the light of the world. The understanding of the Other is thus a hermeneutics and an exegesis. The Other is given in the concreteness of the totality in which he is immanent, and which is expressed and disclosed by our own cultural initiative, by corporeal, linguistic, or artistic gestures.

However, Levinas follows by saying this:

But the *epiphany* (my italics) of the Other involves a signifyingness of its own, independent of this meaning received from the world. The Other comes to us not only out of the context but also without mediation; he signifies by himself.

Also:

Whereas a phenomenon is already, in whatever respect, an image, a captive manifestation of its plastic and mute form, the epiphany of the face is alive. Its life consists in undoing the form in which all beings when they enter into immanence, that is, when they are exposed as a theme, are already dissimulated.

In relation to the face of the Other, Levinas uses terms such as 'epiphany', 'visitation', and 'height'. Although the face is *manifest* in a cultural and historical context etc., it nevertheless *disrupts* this context at the very moment that it manifests. As far as thematic or cultural accounts go, the face is infinitely elusive. They are at best like a very good map or guidebook, which nevertheless cannot do justice to the particular detail of a particular landscape ('one must *be there*').

- Not so controversial a claim when one thinks about it? After all, don't we say things like: 'You think you know someone, and then...', or: 'We should always be prepared to look at someone afresh', or: 'After all, you never *really* know someone'.

- **The face as an interesting/bizarre but *barren* phenomenon?**

- If the 'epiphanous' face 'undoes' the form of the 'culturally manifested' face, then what remains? Levinas's answer:

The nudity of a face is a bareness without any cultural ornament, an absolution, a detachment from its form in the midst of the production of its form. The face *enters* into our world from an absolutely foreign sphere, that is, precisely from an absolute, which in fact is the very name for ultimate strangeness.

Question: How, and in what sense, is this possible? How can the face of the other *not* be either a suggestion, a symbol, an image, a *true representation* in which the alleged Otherness of the face is inevitably 'reduced' to ontological (cultural) contexts? After all, in even *attempting* to give a summary of Levinas's concept of the face aren't I using ontological categories of being, even if only in a 'definition-by-negation' technique? Aren't I condemned to speak the language of being, of categories, to even get close to his concept?

Possible answer: Examples - the concept of infinity. We can 'grasp' it, but not understand, exhaust, imagine it. (Levinas uses Descartes in this sense.) The 'foreign food' example?

So even though I might be condemned to use the language of categories, of cultural and historical context, in order to attempt to describe Levinas's face, this does *not* necessarily mean that I am thereby barred from directing another towards the primal experience of it.

- But, primal experience is one thing, making some sense of that experience is another. So far all we seem to have is a denuded face, a kind of emaciated 'nothing'. What can we *do* with this? There might be all kinds of primal experiences I can have, but so what? What do they *amount* to, what significance do they have?

- **The face as *ethical summons***

- 'Stripped of its very form, a face *shivers* in its nudity. It is a distress.' And the shivering, the distress, '*looks*' at me. And the look is already a supplication, an exigency, a demand. It says: 'Thou shalt not kill', or, in more recognizable philosophical terms: 'You are infinitely responsible for me'.
- Test this for yourselves. Look into someone's 'denuded' face and see if you directly experience two interdependent things: (i) a vulnerability, and (ii) a responsibility *for* that vulnerability. (We *could* try this as a 'class exercise'? Maybe not)

- Distinction between this form of responsibility and more 'normal' forms. We didn't *create* that vulnerability (it's simply a given feature of our existence that we are fallible, finite beings); in *that* sense we are not responsible, but we *are* nevertheless infinitely responsible *immediately* we see ('hear') this vulnerability. In what sense? Potentially *anything* we say or do affects the other. Once we 'hear' the vulnerability 'spoken' by the face of the other we can no longer 'innocently' live in our own ego-conscious world. As Levinas puts it:

Consciousness is called into question by the face. Being called into question is not the same as becoming aware of this being called into question. The 'absolutely other' is not reflected in consciousness. It resists it to the extent that even its resistance is not convertible into a content of consciousness. Visitation (by the face of the other) consists in overwhelming the very egoism of the I which supports this conversion. A face confounds the intentionality that aims at it.

It is not a question of the 'demand' of the other being either reasonable or unreasonable, understated or overstated, able to be met or unable to be met; it is prior to *any* of those kinds of considerations; it is *there*, spoken in the face (in all faces, no matter how 'well off'). It says something like: 'You must take me into consideration', 'You cannot ignore me, even when you ignore me!', 'I exist', and so on. One can ignore a lamp-post but not a human, even when one walks straight past without looking sideways.

- ***Infinite responsibility? (The 'gravity' of Levinas's ethics)***
 - How are we *infinitely* responsible? Well, humans (at least) are not 'fixed' beings with 'fixed' natures. (Existential theme here.) It follows that we can never 'get to the bottom' of them, 'exhaust' their infinite possibilities, there is 'forever' the possibility of going deeper – infinity is 'vertical' rather than 'horizontal'. So, the ethical responsibility is never done with. The depth of the gravitational pull of the Other is infinite. In this regard The Other is a bit like a black hole – infinitely 'weighty'!
 - The Erotic Other. Levinas uses the erotic Other as a figure – perhaps as a stronger version or example of the more general Other. Gazing into the eyes and face of an erotic partner, one might get a better sense of a kind of 'uncanny', unknowable depth that one feels pulled towards, but with this pull being more (and different) than mere physical desire. A desire, or rather *compulsion*, to 'do everything', 'be everything', 'fix everything' for the Other, even

though one very well knows that this is impossible to ever accomplish! There are interesting possibilities here in terms of how the erotic may play a facilitating role in awakening one to Others in general. [A Platonic-type dialectical movement, but with the end result differing in that one doesn't 'ascend' to the ideal (and infinite) form of the Other, but rather to a general awareness of the infinite depth in faces all around us.]

- **The question of 'proof' or 'evidence'. How do we know that Levinas is on to something, rather than just waffling (religious waffle?)**
 - 'Suck it and see', there's no other way, apart from wonderful, convincing talks like this! Perhaps philosophy can orientate one, as it were direct one in terms of *where* to look, but the looking must be done for yourself; it is not a matter of philosophical argument *as such*. The empirical manifestation of the face is the *site* where the *epiphany* of the face can be experienced.

- **Levity?**
 - Ted Cohen's take on Jewish humor. Difficult if not impossible to define, but *one* thing he thinks he can isolate is that it is the humor of *outsiders*. Quotes W.H.Auden as thinking that 'both American and Jewish humor are conspicuously good at doing what he calls *taking possession of the Present*' (my italics). In America, Jews are the 'outsiders of the outsiders'.

 - My proposal. A kind of 'outside' humor, levity, having the effect of *both* a lightening of the afore-mentioned infinite, gravitational pull, but *at the same time* an opening, a revealing *of* it. The purpose of such a move? To enable us – perhaps – to be able to see a certain brand of humor (levity) as being able to play a central *ethical* role in human affairs. It potentially helps us to be able to live more fully 'in the face of' this infinite gravitation pull of the Other, that is without lapsing into modes of pathology (e.g. domination – Sartre?) or avoidance.

 - Outsiders – by definition - don't belong. They don't *fit*. They *can't* be classified, except as outsiders. In a sense they don't understand what they're outside of. From another point of view they might be able to see things more 'objectively', from a distance as it were. It's these two factors combined, *not* understanding and *distance*, which produces the kind of humor that potentially helps reveal the

'denuded' face of the Other, but which at the same time 'lightens' the infinite weight of the Other. How does this work?

- *Not* understanding – When we 'understand' someone we in a sense 'capture' them, as in some classification scheme – *homo sapien*, right-wing, paranoid, middle class, a rational being, a child of god, and so on. To Levinas all these classifications, indeed *all* classifications full stop, are a kind of 'negation' of the absolute Otherness of the Other. So, what kind of humor coincides with this Levinasian thought? Answer: Absurd humor (of which the Jews have plenty by the way). Two examples:

A poor Jewish man stopped at the home of a rich Jewish man to ask for a handout.

'I don't just give away money' declared the rich man, 'but I have a Gentile who mows my lawn for \$20. *You* mow my lawn and I'll pay you \$25'.

'Let the Gentile keep the job', says the poor Jew.

'Just give me the \$5'.

As Beckett's Malone remarks, paralysed in his deathbed:

'If I had the use of my body I'd throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought.

This is a kind of absurd humor, the first revolving around twists with numbers, as well as taking advantage of a certain view about Jews and money. The second – more to my purposes here - speaks of suffering and death, but with a lucid distance in place, which gets to the heart of our human condition. We both have and do not have a body, a face. Sometimes this is called the metaphysical aspect of being human, but the point here is that it cannot be understood in any traditional philosophical sense. It is ... *absurd*. Humor that somehow acknowledges this can both *lighten* and *enlighten* us as to the Otherness of the Other. It uniquely provides us with a way of acknowledging the Otherness of the other, in all its infinitely uncaptureable 'essence' (to misuse a term), but at the same time to potentially, *practically* 'distance' ourselves from them – to 'lighten our load' as it were – but, and this is crucial, *without* thereby avoiding our responsibility to them in the way that this is more typically, or traditionally, avoided, whether that be through various categories of being, or mere indifference.

- **Critchley's Levinas joke.**
 - At his own expense.
 - The American presidential tradition in humor – speaks of a certain recognition of the contingency, the absurdity of holding power over another?
 - Figures for existence – absurd, ridiculous, but with the one paradigm (mentioned earlier that I'd come back to) that perhaps we can indeed 'understand' on some common ground (no matter what age, nationality, or social position we occupy), that of the face's vulnerability and our responsibility to it.

Sources:

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Levinas, Emmanuel, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1996