From *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (1985)
By Emmanuel Levinas
Trans. Richard A. Cohen

Chapter Seven

The Face

Ph.N.: In *Totality and Infinity* you speak at great length of the face. It is one of your frequent themes. What does this phenomenology of the face, that is, this analysis of what happens when I look at the Other face to face, consist in and what is its purpose?

E.L.: I do not know if one can speak of a "phenomenology" of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, 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 straightforward ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.

Ph.N.: War stories tell us in fact that it is difficult to kill someone who looks straight at you.

E.L.: The face is signification, and signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context. Ordinarily one is a "character": a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of so-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not "seen". It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond. It is in this that the signification of the face makes it escape from being, as a correlate of a knowing. Vision, to the contrary, is a search for adequation; it is what par excellence absorbs being. But the relation to the face is straightforward ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: "thou shalt not kill." Murder, it is true, is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity. The prohibition against killing does not render murder impossible, even if the authority of the prohibition is maintained in the bad conscience about the accomplished evil - malignancy of evil. It also appears in the Scriptures, to which the humanity of man is exposed inasmuch as it is engaged in the world. But to speak truly, the appearance in being of these "ethical peculiarities" – the humanity of man is a rupture of being. It is significant, even if being resumes and recovers itself.

Ph.N.: The Other is face; but the Other, equally, speaks to me and I speak to him. Is not human discourse another way of breaking what you call "totality"?

E.L.: Certainly. Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse. I have just refused the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship.

Ph.N.: But since the ethical relationship is beyond knowledge, and, on the other hand, it is authentically assumed through discourse, it is thus that discourse itself is not something of the order of knowledge?

E.L.: In discourse I have always distinguished, in fact, between the *saying* and the *said*. That the
saying must bear a said is a necessity of the same order as that which imposes a society with laws, institutions and social relations. But the saying is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it. The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him. It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence; this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever is the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him.

Ph.N.: In the face of the Other you say there is an "elevation," a "height." The Other is higher than I am. What do you mean by that?

E.L.: To be sure. But I think that whatever the motivation which explains this inversion, the analysis of the face such as I have just made, with the mastery of the Other and his poverty, with my submission and my wealth, is primary. It is the presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not that, we would not even say, before an open door, "After you, sir!" It is an original "After you, sir!" that I have tried to describe. You have spoken of the passion of hate. I feared a much graver objection: How is it that one can punish and repress? How is it that there is justice? I answer that it is the fact of the multiplicity of men and the presence of someone else next to the Other, which condition the laws and establish justice. If I am alone with the Other, I owe him everything; but there is someone else. Do I know what my neighbor is in relation to someone else? Do I know if someone else has an understanding with him or his victim? Who is my neighbor? It is consequently necessary to weigh, to think, to judge, in comparing the incomparable. The interpersonal relation I establish with the Other, I must also establish with other men; it is thus a necessity to moderate this privilege of the Other; from whence comes justice. Justice, exercised through institutions, which are inevitable, must always be held in check by the initial interpersonal relation.

Ph.N.: The crucial experience is thus here in your metaphysics: that which permits escaping Heidegger's ontology as an ontology of the Neutral, an ontology without morals. Is it starting from this ethical experience that you construct an "ethics"? For it follows, ethics is made up of rules; it is necessary to establish these rules?

E.L.: My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning. In fact I do not believe that all philosophy should be programmatic. It is Husserl above all who brought up the idea of a program of philosophy. One can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme.

Ph.N.: Can you specify in what this discovery of ethics in the face breaks with the philosophies of totality?

E.L.: Absolute knowledge, such as it has been sought, promised or recommended by philosophy, is a thought of the Equal. Being is embraced in the truth. Even if the truth is considered as never definitive, there is a promise of a more complete and adequate truth. Without doubt, the finite being that we are cannot in the final account complete the task of knowledge; but in the limit where this task is accomplished, it consists in making the other become the Same. On the other hand, the idea of the Infinite implies a thought of the Unequal. I start from the Cartesian idea of the Infinite, where the ideatum of this idea, that is, what this idea aims at, is infinitely greater than the very act through which one thinks it. There is a disproportion between the act and that to which the act gives access. for Descartes, this is one of the proofs of God's existence: thought cannot produce something which exceeds thought; this something had to be put into us. One must thus admit to an infinite God who has put the idea of the Infinite into us. But it is not the proof Descartes sought that interests me here. I am
thinking here of the astonishment at this disproportion between what he calls the "objective reality" and the "formal reality" of the idea of God, of the very paradox – so anti-Greek – of an idea "put" into me, even though Socrates taught us that it is impossible to put an idea into a thought without it already having been found there. Now, in the face such as I describe its approach, is produced the same exceeding of the act by that to which it leads. In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God. In Descartes, the idea of the Infinite remains a theoretical idea, a contemplation, a knowledge. For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire. I have tried to describe the difference between Desire and need by the fact that Desire cannot be satisfied; that Desire in some way nourishes itself on its own hungers and is augmented by its satisfaction; that Desire is like a thought which thinks more than it thinks, or more than what it thinks. It is a paradoxical structure, without doubt, but one which is no more so than this presence of the Infinite in a finite act.

Chapter Eight

Responsibility for the Other

Ph.N.: In your last great book published, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, you speak of moral responsibility. Husserl had already spoken of responsibility, but of a responsibility for the truth; Heidegger had spoken of authenticity; as for yourself, what do you understand by responsibility?

E.L.: In this book I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face.

Ph.N.: How, having discovered the Other in his face, does one discover him as he to whom one is responsible?

E.L.: In describing the face positively, and not merely negatively. You recall what we said: meeting the face is not of the order of pure and simple perception, of the intentionality which goes toward adequation. Positively, we will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is incumbent on me. It is responsibility that goes beyond what I do. Usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say, in Otherwise than Being, that responsibility is initially a for the Other. This means that I am responsible for his very responsibility.

Ph.N.: What in this responsibility for the Other defines the structure of subjectivity?

E.L.: Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another. In the book, the proximity of the Other is presented as the fact that the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself – insofar as I am – responsible for him. It is a structure that in nowise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object – to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the Other is known to me.

Ph.N.: I can know someone to perfection, but this knowledge will never by itself be a proximity?

E.L.: No. The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other. To say: here I am [me voici]. To do something for the Other. To give. To be a human spirit, that's it. The incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality (I do not see what angels could give one another or

\[1\] Cf., Genesis 22:1, 7 and 11, and Isaiah 6:8, for Hineni. Also, cf., Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in Philosophy Today, Vol. XXII, no. 2, Summer 1978, pp. 127-145. [Tr. note]
how they could help one another). Dia-chrony before all dialogue: I analyze the inter-human relationship as if, in proximity with the Other – beyond the image I myself make of the other man – his face, the expressive in the Other (and the whole human body is in this sense more or less face), were what ordains me to serve him. I employ this extreme formulation. The face orders and ordains me. Its signification is an order signified. To be precise, if the face signifies an order in my regard, this is not in the manner in which an ordinary sign signifies its signified; this order is the very signifyingness of the face.

Ph.N.: You say at once "it orders me" and "it ordains me." Is this not a contradiction?

E.L.: It orders me as one orders someone one commands, as when one says: "Someone's asking for you."

Ph.N.: But is not the Other also responsible in my regard?

E.L.: Perhaps, but that is his affair. One of the fundamental themes of Totality and Infinity about which we have not yet spoken is that the intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection to the Other; and I am "subject" essentially in this sense. It is I who support all. You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: "We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others." This is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offenses that I would have committed; but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility more than all the others.

Ph.N.: That means that if the others do not do what they ought to do, it is owing to me?

E.L.: I have previously said elsewhere – I do not like mentioning it for it should be completed by other considerations – that I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo. But only me! My "close relations" or "my people" are already the others and, for them, I demand justice.

Ph.N.: You go that far!

E.L.: Since I am responsible even for the Other's responsibility. These are extreme formulas which must not be detached from their context. In the concrete, many other considerations intervene and require justice even for me. Practically, the laws set certain consequences out of the way. But justice only has meaning if it retains the spirit of disinterestedness which animates the idea of responsibility for the other man. In principle the I does not pull itself out of its "first person"; it supports the world. Constituting itself in the very movement wherein being responsible for the other devolves on it, subjectivity goes to the point of substitution for the Other. It assumes the condition – or the uncondition – of hostage. Subjectivity as such is initially hostage; it answers to the point of expiating for others. One can appear scandalized by this utopian and, for an I, inhuman conception. But the humanity of the human – the true life – is absent. The humanity in historical and objective being, the very breakthrough of the subjective, of the human psychism in its original vigilance or sobering up, is being which undoes its condition of being: disinterestedness. This is what is meant by the title of the book: Otherwise than Being. The ontological condition undoes itself, or is undone, in the human condition or uncondition. To be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings. As if, through human spirituality, the categories of being inverted into an "otherwise than being." Not only into a "being otherwise"; being otherwise is still being. The "otherwise than being," in truth, has no verb which would designate the event of its un-rest, its dis-inter-estedness, its putting-into-question of this being – or this estedness – of the being. It is I who support the Other and am responsible for him. One thus sees that in the human subject, at the same time as a total subjection, my primogeniture manifests itself. My responsibility is untransferable. No one could replace me. In fact, it is a matter of saying the very identity of the human I starting from responsibility, that is, starting from

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this position or deposition of the sovereign I in self-
consciousness, a deposition which is precisely its
responsibility for the Other. Responsibility is what is
incumbent on me exclusively, and what, humanly, I
cannot refuse. This charge is a supreme dignity of the
unique. I am I in the sole measure that I am
responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute
myself for everyone, but no one can substitute
himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of
subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky
said: "We are all responsible for all for all men before
all, and I more than all the others."