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Figurative Language and the "Face" in Levinas's Philosophy

Diane Perpich

> The value of images for philosophy lies in their position between two times and their ambiguity.
>
> —Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow"

> Imagery . . . occupies the place of theory's impossible.
>
> —Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*

For many readers, and perhaps above all for Levinas himself, there is something deeply dissatisfying about the account of the "face of the other" in *Totality and Infinity* and yet the importance of this figure for the major ethical claims of the book can hardly be overstated. The fundamental thesis broached through the notion of the face is the difference between the way in which things are given to consciousness (the order of ontology) and the way in which human beings are encountered (the order of ethics). Whereas things are given to consciousness in sensible experience through the mediation of forms or concepts, the face is present, according to Levinas, in its "refusal to be contained" in a form (Levinas 1969, 194). A passage early in *Totality and Infinity* defines the face as follows: "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me,* we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me" (50–51, italics in original). A face is thus a very peculiar sort of "phenomenon." In effect, it is *non-phenomenal;* it does not *appear* as such and remains exterior to concepts.[1] Rhetorically, the face is an image that represents the inadequacy of every image for representing alterity. That is, it represents the impossibility of its own representation and so the problems begin.

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In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida suggests that Levinas's claim that the absolute alterity of the other refuses conceptualization is undermined from the outset since in order to have meaning *as* an other, to be recognized and respected as an other, the other must first of all appear: "it is impossible to encounter the alter ego . . . , impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general). One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such" (Derrida 1978, 123). In what sense can we think or represent absolute alterity if, strictly speaking, it is unthinkable and unrepresentable? And, further, what are we to make of the performative contradiction insofar as Levinas's discourse does precisely what it says it is impossible to do? As Derrida notes, even if one cannot thematize the other, "this impossibility and this imperative themselves can be thematized" (123). The difficulty here is that if there "is" an alterity of the type that interests Levinas, then there is no way to represent or speak about it literally—in which case the question arises, in what sense *is* it? And if one can speak about it, then it is not unrepresentable and thus is not absolute in the sense Levinas says it is.

A further contradiction in the notion of the absolute alterity of the face arises owing to the fact that insofar as Levinas's notion of an absolute other forbids us from assigning to the other any determinate predicate, it seems as if all unique, singular faces are the same. As Jean-Luc Marion formulates this problem: "how can one assign an identity to the origin of the appeal such that one can specify which face is involved each time, but without thereby reducing it to a visible phenomenon in the mode of a spectacle?" (Marion 2000, 226). Marion makes a virtue of this feature of Levinas's account, suggesting that "it belongs to the very sense of the appeal that it remain essentially anonymous, and not by default but by excess—the excess of alterity over what it alters" (240). Anonymity, on this view, belongs to the formal structure of interpellation and Marion therein sees a positive possibility: the appeal could be exerted equally (though not necessarily in the same way) by diverse "others," namely, God, the other person, being (or the event), and life (auto-affection). While there is insufficient space here to analyze Marion's argument in full, one feature of the way in which he sets up the problem deserves special mention: the problem as he sees it is how to preserve the "extreme abstraction" of the face, its status as refractory to exhaustive conceptualization, while also permitting it to have an identity or to be identified (227). Moreover, this is a

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problem for Levinas's thought whether one is considering the account of the face given primarily in *Totality and Infinity* or whether one considers the structurally analogous but substantively advanced statement of the problem as the relation between the Saying and the Said in *Otherwise Than Being*. Referring to the latter, Marion asks explicitly, "Does the appeal say only the pure Saying of the appeal, or does it also achieve and allow to appear an inevitable Said, the Said which says—or rather, who says—the identity of the one who appeals (*ce qui appelle*)?" (227). Just as the face seems to lose its alterity if it takes on a determinate identity, so too the appeal seems to lose its status as a Saying if it has a determinate content (namely, a Said). Can the face in expression or Saying appeal to (or even command) the ego while leaving both its own identity and the determinate nature of the appeal in suspense?

Both the problems raised by Derrida and those raised by Marion are, in important respects, a function of the limitations of language. The difficulties arise because there is no way to *say* or *state* the singularity of the other without thereby rendering it an abstract, universalizable property. In one sense, language is necessary for the full appearance of the face. Intelligibility requires that the face be able to be designated in some manner within language. But the singularity "represented" by the face cannot appear in language as such; it appears only at the price of losing or foregoing its singularity. This limitation is not an external or incidental feature of Levinas's thought like an obstacle to be overcome or a liability one learns to work around. Rather, it expresses the fundamental tension that structures his conception of ethics and that, on his view, characterizes our ethical situation: singularity must be said and it cannot be said. The whole of singularity's desire and demand is that it be affirmed and yet every affirmation is a betrayal and a denial. At the end of this essay, I will consider certain implications of this predicament for questions about whether or not Levinas's thought constitutes an *ethics* or about what sort of ethics it might be. Before turning to such questions, I will explore how Levinas's thought arrives at this impasse between singularity and representation and the unique rhetorical constraints it puts on the development of his philosophical position.

Singularity has not always been at the forefront of Levinas's philosophy. In the earliest works to introduce the notion of the other (where it is still written *l'Autre* and not yet *l'Autrui*), Levinas is interested in alterity almost exclusively insofar as it offers the possibility of an escape from the unrelieved weight of the subject's own being. The guiding idea of these

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early texts[2]—in opposition to the Heideggerian analysis of being (which nonetheless remains fundamental for Levinas's own thinking)—is that anxiety before the positivity of being might be just as "primal" as anxiety before finitude and death (Levinas 1978, 20). The "elementary truth" (2002, 52) of being—that it *is* and that there is no escaping it—is disclosed through certain privileged experiences such as insomnia, fatigue, and suffering. In suffering, for example, life is said to lose its aspect of being a game not because it becomes unpleasant, but "because the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being riveted" (52, translation modified). This sense of being riveted to one's own being is at the root of the malaise that Levinas identifies and analyzes in this early, existentialist period of his thought, and the need to escape is described specifically as "the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I is oneself*" (55, italics in original).

Importantly, the 1935 essay *On Escape* makes no mention at all of the alterity of the other person and nowhere suggests that the social or ethical relationship might serve as a path out of being or as a means of interrupting being's immanence.[3] *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other* go much further in this regard and are the first to introduce the idea of the other as an *absolute* alterity. These texts argue that the other's alterity or, as Levinas also says, the other's "exteriority" is "not simply an effect of space, which keeps separate what is conceptually identical"; nor is the other only an *alter ego* since then the intersubjective relationship would be the "indifferent and reciprocal relationship of two interchangeable terms" (1978, 95). The relation to the other is an asymmetrical relationship that cannot be made reciprocal or symmetrical because the other's alterity is not a relative quality but rather the very content of her being: "The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity" (1987a, 83). The other "bears alterity as an essence" (87–88). Levinas will adhere to this thesis about alterity throughout his major works, but in these early texts alterity nonetheless remains subordinated to the problematic of escape. For example, Levinas writes in *Existence and Existents* that the relation to the other "is not something justified of itself," but is of interest only insofar as it constitutes "on the ontological level, the event of the most radical breakup of the very categories of the ego" (1978, 85). It is this breakup, this path out of being, that concerns him and the alterity of the

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other gains currency primarily because of the role it plays in opening this path.

Because these early essays identify operations within being with power, they are required to seek the break with being, that is, transcendence, in a relation to the other in which the ego is affected by the other in its very mode of being, but in which this affection remains outside of models of domination or subordination. This is no doubt why love relationships, specifically the erotic relationship and the relation to one's child, are initially held to exemplify transcendence. The erotic relationship is, for Levinas, a situation in which the alterity of the other is able to appear "in its purity" (1987a, 85) since it expresses a situation in which desire is a desire to keep on desiring and thus it requires as its condition that the object of desire remain unattained even in the fulfillment of the desire. Eros aims, in other words, at the other precisely *in* her alterity. Levinas remarks of the erotic relationship in particular that it is "a relationship that is impossible to translate into powers" (88).[4] But even so, the erotic is not sufficient as a prototype of transcendence because the ego does not *become other* in erotic love, but only aims at alterity. The ego becomes other to itself, Levinas claims, "only in one way: through paternity" (91). To have a child is to have a part of oneself *in* that child; it is to have become other than or other to oneself. But this being's one child, far from lessening his or her alterity, is understood by Levinas as increasing it. I cannot possess my child, but neither can I be indifferent to her. In paternity, the ego is possessed by the other without losing itself and without being able to possess the other or negate her alterity.[5]

Although *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other* deliver the formal structure of transcendence, conceived as a relationship with an absolute alterity in which the ego neither loses itself nor colonizes the other, these texts are perhaps better described as protoethical rather than ethical since they lack a fully developed notion of singularity. It is the latter category, rather than alterity per se, that carries the weight of ethics in Levinas's mature thought. The notion of singularity expresses, first, the idea that each human being is a unique and irreplaceable self, irreducible to any of the attributes that could be used to describe her and that would reduce her to what she has in common with others. In addition, it expresses the idea that, as irreducible, the other has unequivocal ethical standing. For Levinas, each singular being has moral worth and dignity not in view of some shared, universal property (a capacity for pain or reason, for example) but *simply as such*. These two aspects of the notion of singularity, irreducibility, on

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the one hand, and ethical standing, on the other, are first linked together in the 1951 essay "Is Ontology Fundamental?" where Levinas insists that the other person is not given to us like a thing through the mediation of concepts, but is in society with us, which is to say is a being who faces us and *as such* institutes a relationship outside of power and possession—institutes, that is, an *ethical* relationship.

Levinas argues in this essay that if things lack ethical standing and can be put to any use whatsoever—if, that is, they are "only things"—it is "because the relationship with them is established as comprehension" (1996, 9). Comprehension consists in every case in going beyond the particular in order to grasp it through that in it which is general or universal (5). In comprehension, the thing is possessed and if it "resists" me it does so only as an obstacle, as when a tool is too big or too small for the job at hand, or when my plans have to be changed because of bad weather or a flat tire. The resistance I encounter in the face of another human being is of an altogether different sort: "The encounter with the other (*autrui*) consists in the fact that despite the extent of my domination and his slavery, I do not possess him. . . . That which escapes comprehension in the other (*autrui*) is him, a being" (9).

> Our relationship with the other certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension. Not only because knowledge of the other requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impassible contemplation, but because in our relation with the other, he does not affect us in terms of a concept. *He is a being and counts as such.* (6, italics added)

The irreducibility of the singular other who faces me and the idea that this being "counts as such" are central themes of Levinas's work throughout the 1950s. In the 1952 essay "Ethics in Spirit," for example, Levinas again identifies comprehension of things with their possession and opposes the relation with a face (1990, 8). Even though it can be treated as a thing, the face offers an "absolute resistance to possession" in "presenting itself somehow in a personal way" (8). "To see a face is already to hear 'You shall not kill'" (8). "Freedom and Command," written in 1953, describes the face as "the fact that a reality is opposed to me" (1987b, 19); and adds that it is a "direct relationship" with "a being becoming naked, an unqualified substance breaking through its form and presenting a face" (20). The face is "the presentation of an entity as an entity, its personal presentation" (20). Moreover, a relation to the face as an exteriority that

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breaks with being is said to be possible "only as an ethical relationship" (21). Similarly, in "The Ego and the Totality," we read that the other who is addressed or invoked in discourse "is not invoked as a concept, but as a person"; this other "is a being situated beyond every attribute which would have as its effect to qualify him, that is, to reduce him to what he has in common with other beings, to make of him a concept" (41). In this same passage, Levinas opposes any interpretation of the face that would take it as the signifier of a signified or as a mask dissimulating a real (42). The assemblage of brow, eyes, nose, and mouth is said instead to indicate a self-presence, a "hard and substantial interlocutor," a noumenal "you" outside of every system or totality (41). The ontology essay puts the point as plainly as possible: the relation to the other person has neither the same formal structure nor the same meaning as relations to things because in our relation to the other "the object of the encounter is at once given to us and *in society* with us" and "we cannot reduce this event of sociality to some property revealed in the given, and knowledge cannot take precedence over sociality" (1996, 8).

It is tempting to think that the world is divided into those who will accept this proposition and those who will not, and that there is no evidence or argument that could be brought by one side that would change the minds or hearts of the others. The situation would then be like the one that Socrates describes in the *Apology* where some believe that it is always wrong to do a wrong, even in return for a wrong, and others will never be convinced that vengeance is terminally unjustified and unjustifiable. In the case that Levinas considers, there would be those who believe that the relationship to human beings is qualitatively different from the relationship to things, and there would be those who could never be convinced that comprehension and sociality represent distinct and irreducible domains.

The innovation of "Is Ontology Fundamental?" is that it recognizes that it must locate the "evidence" for its claims about ethics outside of the domain in which the notion of evidence has a proper place. That is to say, the language of evidence belongs to the domain of perception, knowledge, and comprehension, in short, to everything that Levinas terms "ontology." To call for evidence is already to presume that one is operating within the domain of generalities, hence it is to have committed oneself in advance to neglecting singular beings in their singularity. This is simply to recognize the problem with which we began: singularity cannot appear as such. But even though this is necessarily so, there is a moment in language where it "testifies" all the same to the singularity for which it can find no proper

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evidence: "To comprehend a person is already to speak with him" (6) and in speech, "the [Heideggerian] formula 'before being in relation with a being, I must first have comprehended it as a being' loses its strict application, for in comprehending [the other person] I simultaneously tell this comprehension to this being" (7). The "evidence," or, more properly, the testimony in support of Levinas's view thus comes in the guise of a distinction between the constative and allocutionary dimensions of language: "The other (*autrui*) is not an object of comprehension first and an interlocutor second. The two relations are intertwined. In other words, the comprehension of the other (*autrui*) is inseparable from his invocation" (6). "A human being is the sole being which I am unable to encounter without expressing this very encounter to him. It is precisely in this that the encounter distinguishes itself from knowledge" (7).

Here Levinas takes a position that disagrees outright with Derrida's point that in order to be respected the other must *first of all* appear. Appearance is neither primary nor secondary on this account, but co-originary with a moment in which the other is invoked or greeted, and further, in "every attitude in regard to the human there is a greeting—if only in the refusal of greeting" (7). The greeting, which Levinas also terms "expression," does not follow the same pattern as perception or knowledge because it involves grasping the other neither through a projective structure that illuminates the other as a possible co-contributor to the ego's projects nor as a fellow *Dasein* engaged in its own similar concerns. In this projective structure, the singular being is passed over, as it were, as the intention aims at those universal features of the other that make him or her available to me within a given context. Invocation does not aim at or refer to the other as the bearer of certain qualities or properties; it "refers to a pure individual, to a being as such" (7). In invocation, then, language *enacts* the irreducibility of sociality to comprehension, even if at the constative level it must continue to subordinate the former to the latter. What this performative element means for Levinas's conception of ethics will concern us momentarily, but first we need to pursue the notion of singularity a bit further.

By attending to the rather strange references to psychoanalysis that punctuate Levinas's discussion of the relation to the other in "The Ego and the Totality," it becomes possible to discern more fully the stakes of his notion of singularity. In a very straightforward way, the essay on totality prolongs Levinas's earlier attempt to undermine Heidegger's claims about the pri-

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macy of the understanding of being and to give content to the slogan: ethics is first philosophy. As this somewhat experimental essay on social thought unfolds, Levinas emphasizes that social relationships cannot be based on love not only because society would then be built up by means of successive infidelities, betrayals at the heart of love, but because the society of the couple is a solipsism of two: "Earthly morality invites one into the difficult detour that leads to third parties that have remained outside of love. Justice alone satisfies its need for purity. In a sense this amounts to saying that dialogue is called upon to play a privileged role in the work of social justice. But it cannot resemble the intimate society, and it is not the emotion of love that constitutes it" (1987b, 33). The problem with love and with erotic relationships (which just five years before had seemed to Levinas exemplars of the relationship with absolute alterity) is that they are relationships of "participation" in the sense that Levy-Bruhl gave to this term in his work on so-called primitive mentality. They are relationships that threaten the ego with an immersion that submerges all individuality, reducing one to a moment of the social whole (in this case the whole of the couple), stripping one of one's ability to critically reflect or judge, or to be more than an expression of the totality. As Jill Robbins has pointed out in a slightly different context—but one that will become relevant momentarily—this fear of participation also lies behind Levinas's rejection of aesthetic forms and is constitutive for his claim that art is deeply "irresponsible" (Robbins 1999, 86–89).

Levinas's hesitations about the value of psychoanalysis—indeed, what might be called his allergic reactions to psychoanalysis—are similarly based. Psychoanalysis, he writes, "casts a basic suspicion on the most unimpeachable testimony of self-consciousness" (1987b, 32). Psychological states in which the ego seems to have a "clear and distinct" grasp of itself are reread by psychoanalysis as symbols for a "reality that is totally inaccessible" to the self and that is the expression of "a social reality or a historical influence totally distinct from its [the ego's] own intention" (34). Moreover, all of the ego's protests against the interpretations of analysis are themselves subject to further analysis, leaving no point exterior to the analysis: "I am as it were shut up in my own portrait" (35). Psychoanalysis threatens an infinite regress of meaning, a recursive process that leads from one symbol to another, from one symptom to another with no end in sight and no way to break into or out of the chain of signifiers in the name of a signified. "The real world is transformed into a poetic world, that is, into a world without beginning in which one thinks without knowing what one

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thinks" (35). Put less poetically, Levinas's worry is that psychoanalysis furnishes us with no fixed point or firm footing from which to launch a critique and to break with social and historical determinations of the psyche in order to judge society and history and to call both to account. Indeed, his uncharacteristic allusion to "clear and distinct" ideas betrays his intention: to seek, against both religious and psychoanalytic participations, for a relationship in which the ego is an "absolute," "irreducible" singularity, within a totality but still separate from it, that is, still capable of a relation with exteriority. To seek such a relation is, Levinas says, "to ask whether a living man [*sic*] does not have the power to judge the history in which he is engaged, that is, whether the thinker as an ego, over and beyond all that he does *with* what he possesses, creates and leaves, does not have the substance of a cynic" (35). The naked being who confronts me with his or her alterity, the naked being that I am myself and whose being "counts as such" is now naked not with an erotic nudity but with the nudity of a cynic who has thrown off the cloak of culture in order to present him- or herself directly and "in person" through "this chaste bit of skin with brow, nose, eyes, and mouth" (41).

Levinas picks up the thread of this worry about psychoanalysis in "Ethics and Discourse," the main section of "The Ego and the Totality." To affirm humankind as a power to judge history, he claims, is to affirm rationalism and to reject "the merely poetic thought which thinks without knowing what it things, or thinks as one dreams" (40). The impetus for psychoanalysis is philosophical, Levinas admits; that is, it shares initially in this affirmation of rationalism insofar as it affirms the need for reflection and for going "underneath" or getting behind unreflected consciousness and thought. However, if its impetus is philosophical, its issue is not insofar as the tools that it uses for reflection turn out to be "some fundamental, but elementary, fables . . . which, incomprehensibly, would alone be unequivocal, alone not translate (or mask or symbolize) a reality more profound than themselves" (40). Psychoanalysis returns one, then, to the irrationalism of myth and poetry rather than liberating one from them. It resubmerges one within the cultural and historical ethos and mythos in a way that seems to Levinas to permit no end to interpretation and thus no power to judge. He imagines psychoanalysis as a swirling phantasmagoria in which language is all dissimulation and deception. "One can find one's bearings in all this phantasmagoria, one can inaugurate the work of criticism only if one can begin with a fixed point. The fixed point cannot be some incontestable truth, a 'certain' statement that would always be sub-

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ject to psychoanalysis; it can only be the absolute status of an interlocutor, a being, and not a truth about beings" (41). In this last claim, the fate of Heideggerian fundamental ontology that is an understanding of Being rather than a relation to beings (or to *a* being, a face) is hitched to the fate of psychoanalysis and both linked to participation, the "nocturnal chaos" that threatens to drown the ego in the totality.

It is significant that it is here that Levinas revives the analysis of language first offered in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" and appeals once again to the way in which the interlocutor is addressed or invoked outside of and before representation and thought. Invocation is the possibility of a break with phantasmagoric participation; it puts the ego in relation with an exteriority without this exteriority being absorbed into the being of the ego and without the ego being in turn wholly submerged or swallowed up by exteriority. Levinas argues that this "distance between the same and the other, in which language occurs, is not reducible to a relation between concepts that limit one another, but describes transcendence, where the *other* does not weigh on the same, but places it under an obligation, makes it responsible, that is, makes it speak" (41). Alterity or, more accurately, singularity thus provides an orientation within thought and as such opens up the possibility of a rational discourse that has the ability to withstand the tides of participation that threaten to submerge the ego. In a twist that may surprise those who associate Levinas only with the view that conceptuality is a kind of violence, Levinas turns out to be a strong proponent of rationality, though he avers that rationality is genuinely rational only where it is connected to the possibility of critique. And critique, on his view, must have its origin and maintain its meaning "outside" of thought. Here we come back full circle to the original concern to find a path out of being, although now the exigency is not that of an existential imperative but of an ethical one. The distinction between sociality and comprehension is deployed in the name of critical rationality as the instrument of social justice; and the demand for social justice is not derived from reason but is an independent, irreducible motive force.

Recall that singularity comprises two related claims, one insisting on the irreducibility of the singular being who faces me and a second insisting that this singular being "counts as such" or has irreducible ethical standing. The "evidence" for both claims is performative. Regarding the first, Levinas's discussions of alterity are meant to show that beyond every characterization of a person in terms of *what* she is—e.g., a lawyer, a mother, blue-eyed—there is an irreducible *who* that is not just the sum of the person's

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social roles, relationships, or descriptors. This "who," however, cannot be stated without turning into a "what" and without thereby reintegrating the face into the social fabric in a way that makes of it nothing more than the cloth from which it is cut. But even if *who* someone is cannot be said without making of it a *what,* the relation to this singular other in her singularity is performed in every instance of discourse. Anything I say about the other is also expressed *to* an interlocutor who is invoked, Levinas says, not as a concept, "but as a person" (41). Similarly, there can only be performative proof that the singular being who faces me "counts" independently of any calculus of interests or any capacity that would qualify her as a candidate for moral and ethical treatment. The insistence that the other "counts as such" reflects Levinas's view that something like respect for the other is not the endpoint of ethical deliberation but the impetus to enter into such deliberation in the first place. Speaking of the relationship between the ego and the other, Levinas remarks that the term "respect" could be used to describe this relationship provided that it was recognized that this relation is "not an indifferent relation, like a serene contemplation, and that it is not the outcome of, but the condition for, ethics" (43). Respect in Levinas's sense indicates that I am compelled to recognize the singular being who faces me, but that this recognition is not a mode of cognition but occurs performatively in invocation.

Of necessity, language and symbolic practices involve generality. To say something about something is necessarily to invoke general categories or concepts that apply to a range of particulars. In fact, language can only recognize particulars *not* singulars. Even to speak of John Smith—a unique human being with a first and last name—is necessarily to speak of him in general terms. We specify that we mean the John Smith who has law offices downtown and who is Mary Smith's older brother. We give those determinations that help our listener pick out a particular being, but even as these determinations identify Smith uniquely, they locate him within various classes: lawyers, brothers, downtown commuters. These determinations do not touch on and cannot say Smith's singularity. What, then, differentiates singularity from particularity? Why is Smith both a particular being *and* a singular being? In the first place, it must be clear that it is not in virtue of some further quality or determinant that Smith, besides being a lawyer and a brother, is also a singular being. To think so would be to make a category mistake in Gilbert Ryle's sense. Singularity is not a property of beings, nor even a mode of existing; it is that in a being that resists conceptualization. And again, not because it is something indeter-

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minate or indeterminable; singularity lies *beyond* or *outside of* the distinction between the determinate and the indeterminate. It is, as Levinas says, the absolute uprightness of a face that opposes me and says "no," "I am not that," or "Don't kill me." Since it is neither an object or thing nor a property or quality, Levinas cannot speak of the face as *manifesting* itself or as being *disclosed*. Instead he speaks (understandably, perhaps, but no less problematically) of the "epiphany" of a face. "Its epiphany is not simply the apparition of a form in the light, sensible or intelligible, but already [a] *no* cast to powers; its logos is: 'You shall not kill'" (55). Singularity is not the same thing as particularity, then, because it is already an ethical category representing the other as a being with irreducible ethical standing: someone who "counts as such." For Levinas, as has already been argued, this statement is not the conclusion of an argument or the product of rational deliberation but the enacted condition of such arguments and deliberations. It is the face that commands us to the work of rational deliberation in the name of social justice.

As Levinas develops his claim that the ethical relationship takes place in language, he criticizes rhetoric as a form of language that sets snares for the other's freedom. The origins of this view can be found in "The Ego and the Totality," where Levinas characterizes eloquence and propaganda as having the goal of flattering freedom "so as to make of it the accomplice of maneuvers that are to lead to its abdication" (42). In the section of *Totality and Infinity* titled "Rhetoric and Injustice," Levinas suggests that rhetoric does not approach the other as a face, but in injustice since its "specific nature" consists in wanting to corrupt the other's freedom (1969, 70). Identified with propaganda, flattery, and demagogy (though also with pedagogy and diplomacy), rhetoric is said to approach the other "obliquely," through ruse, artifice, and exploitation, rather than in the straightforwardness of a "veritable conversation" (Robbins 1999, 17). Levinas argues that the ethical relationship is accomplished only in language, but stipulates that it entails an access to the other outside of rhetoric and that it coincides with the "overcoming" of rhetoric (see Robbins 1999).

This would be fine, but if the early accounts of invocation are to be believed, all discourse equally performs the relation to singular beings. It is not only language with a certain sort of content that invokes the other and accomplishes the ethical relationship, but *all* discourse. If we hold Levinas to his earlier views about invocation (and ample evidence exists that this remains the dominant view in his mature works as well), then we

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must reject any distinction between language that effects an ethical relationship and language that does not. Indeed, as Levinas often points out, I accomplish the relation to the other even in gestures or language by which I try to refuse or avoid acknowledging the other. The refusal to greet another is still an admission that there is *someone* from whom I turn away. So, what are we to make of Levinas's repeated references in *Totality and Infinity* to the "straightforwardness" of ethical language and the "obliqueness" of rhetoric? They are one more expression of his worry that all relationships within being are reducible to relations of domination and subordination. The swirling phantasmagoria that psychoanalysis seems to produce as it ceaselessly moves from one interpretation to the next is unsettling for Levinas because it seemingly leaves the other (and the ego, too, for that matter) at the mercy of prevailing meanings and dominant social understandings. The ego's "no" and its protest that it is "not that" are not only liable to being dismissed, but seem necessarily to be so. The ego becomes a pawn of historical and cultural circumstances, having no meaning independent of them and no unimpeachable point from which to challenge them. Levinas argues, as we have already seen, that this fixed point is provided by the "hard and substantial" face of the interlocutor; but, as we have also stressed from the beginning, the face cannot be represented as such in the order of being and knowing. It appears only at the price of transmuting its singularity into generality.

And yet, it *does* appear. That is, it has a place in Levinas's philosophy where, ironically but perhaps not surprisingly, it is conveyed precisely by a bit of rhetoric, namely the *figure* of the face. The strife between rhetoric and ethics in Levinas's work has obvious parallels with the strife between art and philosophy in Plato's *Republic*. In the *Republic,* Socrates banishes certain art forms from the ideal *polis* and the education of its guardians on the grounds that the images and rhythms contained in them were capable of beguiling the senses and corrupting the soul. A dominant line of argument in the *Republic* suggests that artistic expression should be subordinated to moral and social ends, themselves determined through philosophical means alone. As commentators have long observed, however, the text in which these claims are advanced is itself written in a highly stylized literary form, the dialogue, and is replete with images, allusions, poetic phrases, and even myths. Indeed, as Michèle Le Doeuff has made plain, philosophy has from the first arrogated to itself the right to determine its own legitimate forms, and has almost always followed Plato in affirming the nonphilosophical character of images, figurative language, and rheto-

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ric more generally (Le Doeuff 1989, 6). As Le Doeuff keenly points out, Plato's exclusion nonetheless regularly fails and already does so spectacularly in his own works since, as Alcibiades remarks at the end of the *Sophist* (221e), "in fact, Socrates talks about laden asses, blacksmiths, cobblers, and tanners" (quoted in Le Doeuff 1989, 1).

Levinas's antipathy toward art and rhetoric appears in form and substance to be a direct inheritance from Plato (Robbins 1999, 55). In early essays as well as in his first major works, Levinas deliberately excludes works of art and artistic expression as a means of access to the ethical relationship, exiling "plastic images" much as Plato exiled the beguiling images and cadences of poetry. But like Plato in this too, Levinas's thought relies on a *figure* or *image*—a rhetorical trope—to convey its main philosophical (and supposedly nonfigural) point. Just as Socrates in the *Republic* is forced to abandon "plain" speech and present an image of the Good in the famous "analogy with the sun," the central moment of Levinas's ethics depends upon a figure—the face of the other—that the reader is prohibited from interpreting literally. As Levinas employs this figure, it does not refer in the ordinary way to the image one presents to the world but to the possibility of a being that "divests itself of its form," that "breaks through" and destroys its own "plastic image" (24). The face thus refers to the other's noncoincidence with his or her own image, and to the ego's consequent inability to reduce the other to a self-identical object, graspable by means of an image or concept. Again, what are we to make of this philosophy that denigrates rhetoric as the opposite of ethical language and of ethics itself, and that simultaneously relies precisely on a figure or trope to express the central notion in virtue of which the ethical relationship is to be understood? The absolute alterity of the other is approachable, according to Levinas, only in nonfigurative or nonrhetorical language, but the notion of such alterity can be expressed only figuratively with the aid of an image that the philosopher claims represents the inadequacy of images.

There is no resolving this contradiction, nor the others with which we began. However, this contradictory image of the face allows us to identify what is simultaneously a central set of tensions in Levinas's account of the ethical relationship and the tension that, on his view, is endemic to the relationship itself. No evidence can be given of the other's singularity, no principle invoked to silence the skeptic and prove that he is responsible for the other who faces him. Yet, the relation to a singular being in his singularity is performed or enacted in each instance of discourse.

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There are any number of questions that this position raises. First and foremost, what is the content of the responsibility to which the ethical relationship enjoins one? That is, suppose one were to be persuaded that the other is an irreplaceable and unique self who has moral standing simply as such. What specific duties or obligations, what specific forms of interpersonal and social relationships are generated by this understanding of singularity? How can the Levinasian subject or agent answer the traditional questions of ethics: what ought I do and how ought I live? In a related way, suppose that one fails to be convinced by the account of singularity. Is there anything that can be said to someone who remains skeptical about her responsibility face to face with the other? Moreover, what sort of account of normativity is implied by the notion of an ethics that is performative rather than discursive? Does language perform the *demand* for respect of singularity or is it itself already in some sense the giving of respect? These questions must be the subject for future inquiries and the line of interpretation advanced above was pursued precisely with the goal of raising these questions about the nature and status of Levinas's claims as *ethical* claims.

In conclusion, let me return to the question of the contradiction in Levinas's employment of the figure of the face with the aid of Michèle Le Doeuff's work on the role of images in philosophical texts. In her study *The Philosophical Imaginary,* Le Doeuff argues that images in philosophical texts are not just popularized examples of theoretical points which could be done away with without injury to the philosophical theory advanced through them; nor are they are merely decorative embellishments or elements borrowed unthinkingly from a stock of culturally available folklore (Le Doeuff 1989, 6–7). They are neither completely heterogeneous nor completely isomorphic with the theoretical enterprise in question, but are "at work" in it (6). The essays in Le Doeuff's book make use of both narrower and broader versions of her general thesis:

> The narrower version states that the interpretation of imagery in philosophical texts goes together with a search for points of tension in a work. In other words, such imagery is inseparable from the difficulties, the sensitive points of an intellectual venture.
>
> The broader version states that the meaning conveyed by images works both for and against the system that deploys them. *For,* because they sustain something which the system cannot itself justify, but which is nevertheless needed for its proper working. *Against,* for the same reason—or almost: their meaning is incompatible with the system's possibilities. (3)

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Elaborating the stronger version of the thesis, Le Doeuff notes that imagery "occupies the place of theory's impossible" (5). They express something the system needs to express, but cannot justify in its own terms.

Regardless of whether one accepts Le Doeuff's thesis in either version as an account of the relationship of images to theory in philosophical texts—and, in my view, she makes a compelling case—her view seems to encapsulate precisely the dilemmas that beset Levinas's notion of the face. In fact, in Levinas's case, I am inclined to the stronger thesis: the contradictory image of the face (which represents the unrepresentability of alterity) pinpoints not just a tension in his work but something that is both necessary to his ethical enterprise and simultaneously puts it at risk, working both for and against his "system." I use the word "system" here advisedly, since Levinas's thought is developed explicitly in opposition to the sort of all-encompassing systems that he labels totalities. And yet, there is a complicity with systematic tendencies in Levinas's thought, not in his stated aims or method but at the level of what his thought *desires*. As is manifest by the references to "clear and distinct" ideas and a "fixed point" in "The Ego and the Totality," there is a strain of Levinas's thinking that wants, if not the system itself, then at least the certainty that systems are designed to produce. And it wants to deploy this certainty against the totalizing forces of systematicity and generality which themselves engulf and erase singularity. Levinas's discourse wants what it cannot have: a systematic (and thus unfailing) undermining of system.

The difficulty lies in the different registers or orders to which the object of critique and the critique itself belong. Levinas insists, in *Totality and Infinity* at least, on a notion of ethical critique that is not immanent to or generated from within the structures that it critiques. Even if theoretical consciousness were capable of self-reflective correction (and on Levinas's view it is not), moral consciousness—or what we call *conscience*—most certainly is not.[6] That is, even if contradictions between perceptions are the impetus for a reflective review of knowledge claims (e.g., up close I see that the tower is square, but at a distance it appears round), there is nothing comparable to this conflict that could serve as the spur to become aware of the immorality or injustice of one's actions. "Justice does not result from the normal play of injustice. It comes from the outside" (1987b, 40). Left completely untutored, the child would never become aware that his actions are experienced by others in ways that are hurtful. He may well come to realize that certain courses of action are ineffective or that they result in more frustrations and impediments to his projects than the re-

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verse, but these realizations are not the same as coming to recognize that the harm caused is *moral* harm. "The first consciousness of my immorality is not my subordination to the facts, but to the Other, to the Infinite. The idea of totality and the idea of infinity differ precisely in that the first is purely theoretical, while the second is moral" (1969, 83).

How can moral claims be made in a register that cannot recognize them as such and that must reduce them either to incontrovertible facts or always disputable principles? Correspondingly, how can singularity be "recognized" or "acknowledged" when both seem structurally to require prior cognition or knowledge? This is the central methodological and ethical problem posed to us by Levinas's philosophy and reflected through the necessary contradiction of a face that represents the impossibility of its own self-representation.

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Notes

1. It bears emphasizing that Levinas never says that human beings cannot be known or that they are not given to consciousness in the same way as things. His claim is that, unlike things, they cannot be reduced to this givenness. This is expressly his point in *Existence and Existents* (1978, 39–41).

2. The texts I have in mind are *On Escape, Existence and Existents,* and *Time and The Other.*

3. At the end of *On Escape,* Levinas commends idealist thought for seeking to surpass being, even saying that any civilization that lacks this aspiration toward exteriority "merits the name 'barbarian,'" but he also acknowledges that, at least in its traditional forms, idealism fails to make good on this aspiration and is open besides to the criticisms of "sacrificing sensuous reality" and "scorning the concrete and poignant demands of human beings prey to their everyday problems" (2002, 73). Although this mention of the concrete other is suggestive for a proleptic reading of Levinas, there is no real link forged in these concluding remarks between idealism's failure as regards an escape from being and its neglect of concrete human lives and their attachment to sensuous reality.

4. This absolute separation of erotic relationships from power relationships is, of course, thoroughly contested in the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and others. The aim here is not to endorse Levinas's view, which in any case he does not maintain for very long. What remains essential for his account is the way in which the relation to alterity is a relation in which the subject's power as a power of appropriation is brought up short not by a physical challenge or obstacle but by the *ethical* resistance—the "no"—of the other.

5. Both the sexism and the potential biologism of Levinas's account of paternity need to be addressed before it can be made palatable as any sort of freestanding account of the relationship of parent to child. However, since my interest here is in a structural feature of the relationship rather than in its content per se, I leave aside further exploration of these problematic aspects of Levinas's view.

6. On the notion of critique see the section of *Totality and Infinity* titled "Freedom Called into Question." A fuller investigation of the epistemological side of Levinas's claims about

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critique would need to consider the relationship of his notion of critique to the immanent critiques developed by the Frankfurt School and critical theory more generally.

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