

# THE FACE-TO-FACE PROVOKES WISDOM OF LOVE

## Levinas' ethical view on knowledge and truth

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### Introduction

Throughout his entire oeuvre, Emmanuel Levinas<sup>1</sup> has taken a critical stance towards that which we usually call

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<sup>1</sup> The cited studies of Levinas are listed below in alphabetical order. References and citations in the text are indicated with an abbreviation of the original French edition, along with the cited page or pages. The cited page from the available English translation is indicated after the forward slash (/). AE: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, La Haye, Nijhoff, 1974. [English translation (ET): *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff (Kluwer), 1981.]; DEHH: *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1967 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.); DEWH: *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, translated by R.A. Cohen & M.B. Smith, Evanston, ILL, Northwestern University Press, 1998; DMT: *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, Paris, Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993. [ET: *God, Death and Time*, translated by B. Bergo, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2000.]; DVI: *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris, Vrin, 1982. [ET: *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, translated by B. Bergo, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998.]; EE: *De l'existence à l'existant* (1947), Paris, Vrin, 1978 (2<sup>ème</sup> édition augmentée). [ET: *Existence and Existents*,

‘consciousness’ (including knowledge and truth). In this article, from his phenomenology, or rather ‘trans-phenomenology,’ of the face, we would like to make more explicit how the face is a “radical empiricism” (TI 170/196) that at the same time transcends all perception and representation. This exploration shall take place through his critical interpretation of the Husserlian idea of the ‘intentionality of consciousness’ as a

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translated by A. Lingis, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1978.]; EFP: ‘Entretiens,’ in F. POIRIÉ, *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?*, Lyon, La Manufacture, 1987, pp. 62-136. [ET: ‘Interviews with François Poirié,’ in *Is It Righteous to Be. Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited and translated by J. Robbins and translated by J. Robbins, M. Coelen, with T. Loebel, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 23-83.]; EI: *Éthique et Infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris, Fayard & France Culture, 1982. [ET: *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by R.A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1985.]; EN: *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre*, Paris, Grasset, 1991. [ET: *Entre Nous. Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by M.B. Smith and B. Harshav, London/New York, Continuum, 2006.]; EPP: *Éthique comme philosophie première*, préface et annoté par J. Rolland, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 1998. [ET: *Ethics as First Philosophy*, translated by S. Hand & M. Temple, in S. HAND (ed.), *The Levinas Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989, pp. 75-87.]; HAH: *Humanisme de l’autre homme*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1972. [ET: *Humanism of the Other*, translated by N. Poller, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2006.]; HS: *Hors sujet. Essais*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1972. [ET: *Outside the Subject*, translated by M.B. Smith, London, Athlone, 1993.]; LC: *Liberté et commandement*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1994. [ET: ‘Freedom and Command,’ in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by A. Lingis, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, Kluwer/Nijhoff, 1987, pp. 15-45.]; NLT: *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1996. [ET: *New Talmudic Readings*, translated by R.A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1999.]; NP *Noms propres*

(*Essais*), Montpellier, Fata Moirgana, 1976. [ET: *Proper Names*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1996.]; TA: *Le temps et l’autre* (1947), Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1979. [ET: *Time and the Other (and additional essays)*, translated by R.A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1987.]; TI: *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, La Haye, Nijhoff, 1961. [ET: *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff, 1979.]; TIPH: *La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Paris, Alcan, 1930. [ET: *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, Evanston, ILL, Northwestern University Press, 1973.]

source of meaning for humans. Hence we start immediately with the paradox of the ‘epi-phenomenality’ of the face, whereby in a second movement it becomes possible to sketch the face as expression and revelation beyond perception and representation, “a nonintentional consciousness” (EN 141/105). Thus a new view on knowledge and truth shall turn up whereby it will become apparent how Levinas—notwithstanding all critique on Western intellectualism—has remained faithful to ‘reason,’ but then anchored in the ethics of responsibility and justice by and for the other.

### **The ‘epi-phenomenality’ of the face**

The term ‘face’ (*visage*) is too well-known when discussed in the context of Levinas. It is, however, not always equally clear what is meant by it, or rather what Levinas means by it is quite often not correctly understood. Hence it is quite important to reflect on his manner of describing the face. He himself does not often speak of the face per se, but about the ‘epiphany of the face,’ meaning to say about the way in which the face presents itself to us (to me). We find this phenomenology especially in his first major work *Totality and Infinity: Essay on Exteriority* (1961). In his second major work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) he surmises his phenomenology of the face in *Totality and Infinity* to be simply an established fact (AE 112,113-118, 197).

He describes this epiphany globally as “manifestation *kath’auto*” (TI 27/65). To understand this expression correctly, we must situate it within the phenomenological framework

of thought since it is in fact an anti- or rather a trans-phenomenological expression. It is situated within Husserlian phenomenology, as Levinas studied and understood it since his doctoral dissertation *La théorie de l'intuition* (1930) (TIPH) and in his subsequent writings on Husserl (DEWH). Husserl describes consciousness as 'intentional,' meaning to say as directed towards the other: "all consciousness is consciousness of something" or "out-of-oneself of intentionality": "the mode proper of intentionality in its reference to the world and to being" (DVI 158-159/100). The paradox is that the other to which acts of consciousness are directed, even when it concerns affective or evaluative (axiological) acts, always take place via perception, representation, understanding and interpretation: "consciousness as knowledge" (DVI 159/100) or "the fundamental character of representation within intentionality" (DVI 161/102). This implies that the other-than-consciousness only appears thanks to the acts of consciousness—as "facts of consciousness" (DEWH 93)—that are directed towards the other: no 'noema' without 'noesis' or 'noetic act' (DEWH 25-26). 'Reality' only acquires meaning when it is 'brought into play' in the subject's project of existence, thus as 'world' or rather as 'my—our—world.' 'Things' do not reveal themselves 'in person,' they cannot affirm themselves as an absolute, autonomous identity, independent of meaning given by humans. In other words, things only acquire meaning through their functioning as 'meaning-elements' in a 'meaning-whole,' which is indicated

by a Husserlian technical term ‘horizon’ (TI 15/44). This ‘horizon of meaning,’ once again, finds its origin in the meaning-giving subject. Levinas interprets the act of meaning-giving in an equally Husserlian fashion as ‘disclosure’ (*dévoilement*), which in turn is grounded in the ‘project’ of the ‘I’ (TI 36/64). The appearing object has meaning on the basis of its ‘referentiality,’ i.e. by means of its connection to a context, namely the ‘world’ and ‘being,’ and with the disclosing and meaning-constituting subject’s existential design: “The disclosed being is relative to us and not *kath’auto*” (TI 36/64).

Levinas affirms the same but in a different manner by speaking of the ‘form’ of the revealed ‘object’: “The way for sensible reality to present itself across its generality, to have a meaning not out of itself, but out of the relations which it maintains with all the other elements of representation, within a representation which has already taken in the world, is what we can call the form of this reality” (LC 40/20). Levinas calls it “an informed reality” (LC 41/20). Disclosure gives us a phenomenal reality, put in a category, that means in a context or horizon. “Its particularity is already clothed with a generality, that subjects it to us” (LC 41/20).

Out of this phenomenological description of the categories ‘disclosure,’ ‘horizon’ and ‘form’ it is possible—on the basis of negating or transcending them—to think of a meaning that is ‘auto-referential,’ a meaning that is in and of itself and that needs no disclosure in order to be able to

appear. A meaning that needs no assistance from elsewhere in order to emerge, namely from one or another context or form, but one that makes itself appear or rather one that ‘reveals’ itself. A meaning that is completely self-contained and refers back to itself. A meaning that precedes my ‘act of bestowing meaning’ (*Sinngebung*) (DEWH 59) and is independent of my initiative and power (TI 22/51).

Levinas discovers this ‘meaning without horizon’ that rids itself of its form, or rather breaks through its form (and thus transcends it), in the ‘face’ of the other (TO 22/51). The other is no sensible and intelligible form that is linked to other sensible and intelligible forms in a process of ‘intentional disclosure’ but is ‘face’ (*visage*) (EN 46-47/28-29). In its appearing, the other makes meaning arise before me and reveals itself as the origin of that meaning. The face “puts us in contact with a being that is not simply disclosed or uncovered, but divested of its form, of its categories, a being becoming naked, an unqualified substance breaking through its form and presenting the other” (LC 41/20). The face is nothing else than the *modus* itself of tearing itself loose from the ‘horizon’ of the world and coming towards us, without it deriving its meaning from our meaning-giving that is involved in the world. While in Husserl, the intentional subject is the source of *Sinngebung* (TI 68/95, 96/123), the face introduces a “meaning prior to my *Sinngebung*” (TI 22/51) (TI 182/207). In a synthetic way, Levinas thus states: “The first instance of signification is

produced in the face. Not that the face would receive a signification *by relation* to something. The face signifies by itself; its signification precedes *Sinnggebung*.

A meaningful behaviour arises already in its light; it spreads the light in which light is seen. One does not have to explain it, for every explanation begins with it” (TI 238-239/261). The face of the other is the failure *par excellence* of my attempts—or rather the possibility of making them fail—to ‘represent’ it and to make it into an idea that acquires a place in our project of existence. The face escapes time and again from my attempts to represent the other to me, even though I still try so hard to make ‘images’ of that other—and which also succeed... The other resists against every knowing that reveals, and that is precisely its face. In this regard the *epiphany* of the face makes all curiosity ridiculous (NP 153/191).

This shows what Levinas means with the ‘exteriority’ of the face. It is not without hesitation that he uses this category, for it can be understood wrongly as ‘spatial distance’ (TA 75/84). In his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, he uses the term as well in the subtitle: *An Essay on Exteriority*, with which he evokes the alterity of the face. This implies a qualitative way of understanding the exteriority, namely as that which is absolutely and irreducibly different. Or as Levinas likewise expresses it in the period of his second major work, *Otherwise than Being*: the alterity of the other person is the only model of exteriority, where space does not play a role (AE 102/81). Exteriority lies precisely in the fact that it constantly escapes

our knowing. To clarify this, Levinas compares our knowing of an object with our knowing of the other. If we, with our inquisitive observing and knowing, approach the object that shows itself to us—and is thus ‘given’—there always will be a part that remains unknown. Or as Levinas puts it: there is a ‘surplus.’ There is always a part that I possess through my activity of disclosing and that is thus ‘for me’ (*pour moi*). Another part, however, eludes me: the disclosed object remains still partially ‘on its own’ (*en soi*). Nonetheless, this unknown surplus becomes progressively reduced and absorbed by my knowing. Or rather, conquering knowing is in fact borne by the optimism of progress that promises that the unknown ‘on its own’ (*en soi*) will one day be transformed into the complete ‘for me’ (*pour moi*) without remainder. One counts on the fact that the distance between the present knowledge of the object and the remaining margin of *en soi* will constantly become smaller, and in the end disappear. One builds up knowledge in the silent, but steadfast conviction that the present and impenetrable solidity of the object is not definitive, but throughout the growth of knowledge—which in the mind of Hegel forms the essence of history—shall be ‘resolved’ and thus ‘sublated’ (*aufgehoben*). In contrast to that, Levinas poses the exteriority of the face not as a form that the other would possibly take on, but rather as its ‘existing’ itself, thus as definitive and ‘insurmountable.’ Its exteriority is no ‘bad’ transcendence (in the sense of Hegel’s ‘bad infinity’); on the



contrary, it is inexhaustible and infinite, non-provisional but necessary. It removes itself time and again from every disclosing thematization. There is no hope of full knowledge. The face remains the terrain of what permanently remains ‘unchartered territory.’ It manifests itself paradoxically as the ‘great unknown,’ or rather as the ‘great unknowable’ (TI 272/296).

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas again emphasised especially this ‘unknowable’ aspect of the face. There, he labels it as the “non-phenomenality of the face” (AE 113/89). The other is always and every time different: its singularity is not to be anticipated and consequently not ‘representable.’ The other does not let itself be forerun by any precursor, who would announce or describe its silhouette. The other ‘does not appear.’ Whichever signal the other would transmit before it, the other would already rid itself of its exclusive alterity. In that sense, it is the “first one on the scene” (*le premier venu*) (AE 14/11), that detaches itself from every correlation, from every possible similarity or comparison. It is literally that which comes as first, the utterly new and surprising—even if it were about an old acquaintance, a good friend, a young love, that has long been intertwined in my social relations. In that sense, the other is the ‘reversed world,’ stronger still it is the ‘most contrary’ or ‘opposite reality,’ precisely because in its epiphany the other does not correspond to my expectations. In principle, it does not confirm any possible signal

announced beforehand by a ‘precursor.’ The other is ‘beyond everything,’ literally ‘extra-vagant’ and ‘e-norm-ous’; ‘a priori’ or better still: before every a priori. The other comes to me without any adequate signal, utterly ‘out of the blue’ as it were, beyond all measure. The face is literally ‘epiphany,’ ‘beyond the phanum’: it casts its phenomenality into confusion. It obfuscates its own appearance, not because its being is too brutal to appear, but because it is in a certain sense too weak. The face is non-phenomenon because it is ‘less’ than a phenomenon that presents itself and, as it were, imposes itself (AE 109/86, 112/88, 210/ 165). The face is the purest ‘anachronism,’ essential inscrutableness or “enigma” (DVI 51/190). In this regard, the face is the ‘trace of itself,’ a disappearing in the appearing. When I approach the other in order to ‘see’ and to know her or him, I already miss the other, for I reach out to a presence that already is the past of itself. A past, not *in* the present, but as a ‘phase held back,’ a past from this present. The other has already disappeared, so much so that I always arrive too late. The face is essentially withdrawal (*anachorese*), taking distance, a never-ending movement of receding, literally a ‘receding in the receding,’ as a form of shame about one’s appearing (AE 115/91). And as an enigmatic trace of itself, the face also constantly causes a permanent unrest and crisis in the one standing before it, i.e. in me, which even includes the unease of insomnia (DVI 49/24).

## The face as expression and revelation

This rather negative description of the alterity of the other, however, has a clear positive significance. Or rather, the negative dimension of the ‘non-phenomenality,’ going beyond every representation and representability, makes the path free for a positive signification and signifying of the alterity of the other through the face. The anachronism of the face as the trace of itself, whereby it is an absence in its presence, is realised as an unsurpassed immediacy: “an enormous presence through the withdrawal of this presence” (AE 114/90). Levinas likewise qualifies this as the ‘manifestation of the *kath’auto*’ (TI 37/65). The face of the other is precisely that which shatters through all fixating forms and images in order to show itself out of itself. It simply is ‘expression’: “the face is a living presence; it is expression” (TI 37/66)—“expression of the invisible by the visible” (AE 113/89-90). And this expression manifests itself in an eminent manner in and through the glance and the word of the other.

The most naked aspect of the face is the eyes. They penetrate beyond the mask; they speak an unfalsifiable language. “This way for a being to break through its form, which is its apparition, is, concretely, its look, its aim. There is not first a breakthrough, and then a look; to break through one’s form is precisely to look; the eyes are absolutely naked” (LC 41/20). In this way, the glance is the most direct and personal presentation of the other by the

other itself. Out of itself the glance reveals the hard substantial core whereby the other truly is irreducibly other. The glance, however, is more than only but the expression of the other. By means of its glance the other directs itself indeed also to me, and this in a direct manner. The face is that which beholds me, looks at me right in the eye. When we look at each other we directly encounter each other. The glance of the other is the other itself, who looks at me in absolute 'uprightness' The encounter with the face that looks at me is then the direct relationship *par excellence*. We do not stand originally beside each other, but eye to eye (face-to-face) with each other (TI 23/52).

The other, however, does not only look upon me, the other also speaks to me. The eye does not sparkle, it speaks. Hence that Levinas likewise states that the face is precisely face because it speaks to me, which at the same time is made concrete in factual speaking (although this is thus not the only speaking, as is apparent precisely in the expressive glance). If the other now speaks to me, then is the other directly present in what it says to me. The other expresses itself in its word, and in what it says it is directly present to me, without, however, losing its radical separateness. Its word preserves, or stronger still, installs the radical purity and unassailable chastity of its alterity. Its speaking is completely at its own disposal. This escapes me entirely so that I am 'obliged' to listen. That is also why Levinas characterises the expression of the face in and through the

word as ‘teaching,’ that in no way whatsoever can be reduced to one or the other form of (Socratic) pedagogics that is only a method to draw out what already lies contained inside. The expression of the face comes to me ‘from elsewhere’ and brings in more for me than I already contain in myself, namely the true ‘message’ or ‘revelation’ of the presence of the other (TI 22/51). The face does not awaken an idea in me that was already slumbering, but teaches me something utterly new: “The absolutely new is the Other” (TI 194/219). In that sense, Levinas can say that the other is my *Master*, who by means of its appearance itself teaches me masterfully about its irreducible alterity, without my already containing this teaching within the depths of myself or my being able to let it simmer up from within me. I can entirely not foresee nor predict the word of revelation of the face; I do not have a grasp on it in any way whatsoever. I am neither the designer nor the creator, but the one who receives, the one who listens and in listening obeys, the ‘created one’ (TI 41/69, 73/99).

The face as expression through the word implies, according to Levinas, the primacy of the spoken word above the written word. Hence, the attention of Levinas goes in the first place not to language as a system of signs and structures, but to spoken language as the speaking of the other: “Oral discourse is the plenitude of discourse” (TI 69/96). When the word is spoken, it has a ‘surplus’ when compared to the written word, which again has become a

‘sign.’ The sign is a mute language, or better still: a blocked language. Spoken language, on the other hand, does not group signs and symbols into systems, but rather deciphers them. To the extent that the original presentation, or rather the presence of the other through the word, has already taken place, all other non-verbal signs can likewise serve as language or as expression of the face. Gestures, actions, products can—without words—become the revelation of the face. It is out of the spoken word that both the ‘solidified’ (written) words as well as other ‘things’ can become the expression of the face (TI 38/67, 157/182). What is typical of the spoken word or of the speech-act is that the other primarily presents itself therein, and especially that the other assists itself in this presentation: “He who manifests himself comes, according to Plato’s expression, to his own assistance” (TI 37/66). The other can contradict every interpretation I give by explaining itself more closely and thus present itself as directly present. The written discourse, says Plato, is a ‘logos’ that is unable to defend itself, subject as it is to all sorts of manners of understanding and explaining, while the spoken word as the ‘living and animated logos’ is able to do so: “In expression the manifestation and the manifested coincide; the manifested attends its own manifestation and hence remains exterior to every image one would retain of it, presents itself in the sense that we say of someone that he presents himself by stating his name, which permits evoking him, even though

he remains always the source of his own presence. A presentation which consists in saying ‘it’s me’ [moi, c’est moi]—and nothing else to which one might be tempted to assimilate (TI 272/296).

This ‘self-assistance’ likewise has a ‘temporal’ dimension. It is indeed about a presence of the other here and now. Every time the other speaks, for instance in order to contradict or readjust my view or interpretation, the other retrieves his word from the past back into the present—and this time and again. This incessancy precisely constitutes the present. In other words, it is the presentation itself or living in the now. It is as if the presence of the one who speaks reverses the inevitable movement, which leads the spoken word to the past of the written word. The ‘self-assistance’ of the speaking other is the actualisation of the actual. The today of the direct presence takes place within this struggle—at least if one may express it thus—against the past, in this actualisation. The unique actuality of the word snatches the face away from ‘being situated’ and fixated in the past, which this situation also causes. In short, the spoken word ushers in that which has already been robbed from the written word, namely the mastery of the other: by means of and out of oneself as other, that addresses itself to me. By means of its direct presence in speaking, “the interpellation, the vocative” (TI 41/69) arises, whereby I become a ‘response-being,’ i.e. a being that is engendered in order to respond—literally ‘response-able.’

## **The lie as the confirmation of the alterity of the face**

An exceptional aspect of this direct presence and self-assistance of the other in its speaking is the surprising—paradoxical—possibility of telling a lie, with which the alterity of the face itself is, at the same time, strengthened. The epiphany of the face is, in its directness, not only a nearby presence but one equally far, namely the presence of a wholly other that can obfuscate its presence by means of withdrawing itself. We saw above that the face is a new and unforeseen presence that must by itself communicate and ‘teach’ the quality of its otherness—namely its otherness itself. It is therefore a candid presence of a being that can disguise itself, can keep up appearances, or can cheat. It avails itself of the theme that it offers. Its expression does not consist in surrendering its interiority to me. The other that ‘expresses’ itself through its face does not, upon closer inspection, surrender itself (TI 38/66, 176/202). That is also its freedom: “The strangeness of the other is his very freedom! Free beings alone can be strangers to one another. The freedom which is ‘common’ to them is precisely what separates them” (TI 46/73-74). The alterity of the other lies precisely in its freedom to have its own manifestation at its own disposal, in the possibility that flows forth from its intrinsic capacity to withdraw itself, to present itself ‘differently,’ and thus to speak something untrue about itself, out of itself. What is paradoxical about this capacity to tell a lie, according to Levinas, is that it is not capable of covering



up the open-hearted—albeit as a liar—frankness of the other. The other fights, so to speak, with an open visor: it is precisely in the lie that the face manifests its alterity in an unambiguous manner. Both the lie as well as truthfulness already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face, meaning to say the privileged event of the direct self-presentation and expression in its speaking. As such, the face escapes from the alternative between truth and untruth: “The alternative of truth and lying, of sincerity and dissimulation, is the prerogative of the one who abides in the relation of absolute frankness, in the absolute frankness which cannot hide itself” (II 38/66). The other can never hide the fact of its presence and alterity, even though it can regulate the manner by which it expresses itself. Its undisguisable alterity precisely offers the possibility to dissimulate. Its essential alterity precisely creates the space for its incalculable alterity time and again, i.e. its untruthfulness and inconsequence in word and deed. The lie or the ‘second word’ is grounded on the ‘first word’ of the speaking itself of the other. The face is and remains throughout every mode of appearance the exceptional presentation of itself by itself, without any common measure with the presentation of other realities in the world. The face is expression because it guarantees itself. Its epiphany is then its ‘word of honour.’ Every language, just like every true or untrue statement, refers, as an exchange of verbal signs, to this original word of honour. The verbal sign is situated at the level where someone else passes on a

‘meaning.’ It then presupposes as well the guarantee and authentication on behalf of the signifier. This authentication ultimately refers back to the direct presence of the other, that ‘commits’ itself to that which was communicated through the speech-act itself. The word that the other speaks can only be guaranteed by means of adding a new word—a guarantee word. But taken by itself, this second word again needs a guarantee, which leads to an infinite series that can only be undone when someone is immediately present in that which is spoken, who on the basis of its very being—its epiphany—makes possible, or rather institutes, from the very beginning the truth of the direct presence. This is precisely the directness and frankness of the face as expression. Its ‘root word’—“primordial word of honour”—is after all its ‘non-mediated’ presence itself (II 177/202).

This implies, according to Levinas, a new concept of truth. What has been discussed above about the ‘teaching’ nature of the face implies already this concept of truth. The truth, after all, is the mode of appearing of the face itself. In that sense, the truth does not have its origin primarily in me, i.e. in the ‘I’ that attempts as faithfully as possible to describe the face and to ‘reflect’ it. Rather, it has its origin in the other that presents its exteriority directly and ‘without mediation and intermediaries’ (II 15/44, 180/206) by means of posing and announcing itself out of itself. The face makes itself visible: it shines with its own light, it places itself in its own light. It reveals and shares itself as alterity in an original honesty so

that it is ‘truly’—i.e. ‘according to the truth’—given, or rather it gives itself, even though it lies—for it lies out of its own strength. Hence, Levinas’ synthetic affirmation that “its exteriority is its truth” (TI 267/291). With this, he makes a direct connection with a redefinition of the concept of ‘objectivity.’ Since Husserl’s phenomenology, the object is seen as the result of the observing and understanding, i.e. ‘objectifying,’ activity of the ‘I’ that gives meaning. But out of the exteriority of the face as truth of the direct self-expression, ‘objectivity’ receives back its original significance. The face is, after all, the ‘object’ *par excellence*. Out of itself, it poses itself against me (‘Gegen-stand’) as a ‘Ding an sich’ (chose en soi—thing in itself) (cf. the German *an sich*) that completely stands on its own and separately (LC 42-43/20-21). Levinas here uses the Kantian expression of ‘noumenon’ in order to indicate the radical exteriority and alterity of the face (TI 39/67): “the noumenal glory of the other alone makes the face to face situation possible” (EN 48/43).

It is then not coincidental that the idea of the ‘objective truth’ of the face brings Levinas to a redefining of the term ‘experience,’ that now no longer starts from the initiative of the ‘disclosing’ subject (‘I’), but from the epiphany of the other. This epiphany reveals itself to me as a “new experience” (HAH 14/6), namely as a radical and absolute experience: “the absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation” (TI 37/65-66, 39/67). Levinas likewise calls it a “pure experience” (TI 46/73). This experience of the other is

literally ‘ab-solute,’ i.e. dissociated from, because it does not begin with the observing, understanding and interpreting subject, but with the way in which the face of the other comes towards me and, as it were, imposes itself unasked: “the coming of the other, visitation of the face” (HAH 48/32). In this regard, the initiative lies no longer with me, the ‘I.’ It is a form of ‘anarchy’ whereby anarchy literally needs to be understood as ‘an-archy,’ in the sense that the ‘I’ no longer is the ‘archè’ or ‘principle’ of experience but rather the epiphany of the face itself is. Pure experience is, consequently, likewise always ‘secondary,’ in the sense that it is only possible as a response to the authoritative self-revelation of the face. In this regard, a “heteronomous experience” (DEHH 190), begins in the face that then arouses within me “a traumatism of astonishment” (TI 46/73). And this in turn elicits from Levinas the synthetic qualification of the epiphany of the face as “radical empiricism” (TI 170/196).

### **From recognizing to acknowledging the other**

Not yet everything has been said, however, with this phenomenology of the face as the ‘first and absolute experience.’ In Levinas, it is a remarkable phenomenology, namely a phenomenology that anticipates ethics or rather one that requires ethics and—stronger still—one that is only possible thanks to ethics. What has been discussed up till now could be described as a phenomenology or description of

‘facts that present themselves,’ namely of the face as ‘the miracle of the fact *par excellence*’ (EN 28/13-14). According to Levinas, however, the face only becomes a ‘fact’ when it is experienced as such. And it is only experienced as a fact when it is acknowledged as such, i.e. when the face is confirmed in its alterity. That, for Levinas, is ethics, understood as the ethical relationship towards the other. This implies that he understands ethics primarily not as a ‘set of rules and codes of behaviour’ (EI 95-96/90), but rather as the ‘event’ itself of my attitude towards the other: “ethics without ethical system” (EFP 135/81). The alterity of the other is, in other words, more than a formal fact, for the face touches me as an appeal—an appeal that summons me to confirm and to promote the alterity of the other. Justice, in the most general sense of the word, is doing what is righteous to the other, is allowing the other to come to its own right. This fundamental justice can also be called ‘respect’ (EN 48/30). Since this response to the epiphany of the other, on the basis of my spontaneous dynamism of ‘disclosing,’ is anything but evident, the temptation to violence as the ‘reduction of the other’ to my grasping and interpreting disclosure again lurks around the corner (II 16/46 ). Hence, respect for the other begins with the prohibition: ‘You shall not kill’ (LC 44/21-22). The fulfilment of this prohibition is concretised as hesitation and shuddering (*frémissement*) (AE 110/87), whereby one goes to meet the other in a reserved and cautious manner (DVI 120/73). The more the one approaches the other, the

more careful the one becomes. In coming closer, the I becomes reticent. In its approach, the one does not seek to lay claim to the other. The one withdraws, becoming careful because of the otherness of the other (NLT 95/126).

To make sure that this ethical relationship of justice, respect and acknowledgement is not misunderstood, Levinas distinguishes it from ‘recognition,’ which is literally expressed by the French word *reconnaissance*. Usually, the encounter between people is seen as reciprocity, based on recognition. Thanks to the other, one seeks to feel at home in oneself: “One is for the other what the other is for oneself. The other is known through sympathy, as another (my)self, as the alter ego” (TA 74-75/82-83). I see myself in the other, in his or her characteristics, and this attracts me to the other. It is the dream of a communal existence that we can experience together reciprocally and as intertwined. ‘Sympathy’ is understood as the relationship of direct exchange because we are accessible to one another and understand each other sometimes with only one word or a fleeting glance. In his or her sympathy, the other adopts my position, and sees and acts in ways that resemble me—and vice versa. Sympathy is based in ‘resemblance’ (DMT 51/40), so that both become one with each other (TA 86/91). This unity of reciprocal participation evokes the ‘wow’ feeling of amazement, and touchy emotion, sometimes called friendship, anyway an emotion to be cherished (EE 89/55).

Levinas also found this vision of *sympathy* in the philosophers of ‘Einfühlung,’ including his own teacher Edmund Husserl: “Ich fühle mich ein” (HS 169/113). Levinas calls this ‘living in the other,’ which nowadays is often called empathy, a form of “intropathy” (HS 166/111). It reminds him of holding hands, whereby the two hands touch. The positive aspect of this approach is that the experience of the other is not an abstract ‘work’ of reasoning, whereby the other is deduced as an idea from the experience of the self. On the contrary, it is a genuine experience (even though it is still understood by Husserl as a form of knowing). The attempt to empathize with the other goes beyond the deduction of the other from the self (EN 39/22-23). The relationship with the other is more than merely knowing by reasoning, it is literally a ‘discovery,’ an uncovering of the other, as source of knowledge. And this ‘experiencing consciousness of others’ or ‘empathic experience,’ this ‘knowledge-beyond-deductive-knowledge’ makes possible the reciprocity of the intropathic sympathy (HS 54/37).

Upon closer scrutiny, however, this intropathic reciprocity continues to be based on ‘recognition’ (EN 40/23). This means that the ‘Einfühling’ of sympathy, beyond deductive knowledge, is positive (AE 164/128; EI 58/58; DMT 50/39), but also that it does not go far enough. Although as a ‘vibration,’ it is an ‘experience-beyond-reasoning,’ it remains a form of reciprocity: “vibrating

resonance” (DVI 63/34; 253/168). The other, which is experienced in the ‘Einfühlung,’ remains an ‘alter-ego’ or ‘re-issue [mirror] of myself’ (IA 75/83). To shake the other’s hand is to ‘perceive’ the other—and thus to know the other—as myself: “mutual knowledge” (HS 151/101). One starts from the perception of the other who has a body as I do and then relates to the other as an ‘other-like-me.’ It is and remains a “gnosis of touching,” based on “double touching” (HS 151/101), namely a form of knowledge that enables one to find oneself in the other. In other words, in the way in which we conceive of ‘Einfühlung’ and ‘sympathy,’ the other remains an ‘other-like-me.’ It remains a “transcendence mid-way” (TI 203/227): a transcendence that is also a reversion, namely a return to the self because of the self. It is a transcendence that is transformed into immanence (TI 232/254).

This raises the question of how we can reach beyond mutuality to see the other as other, and to a relationship that is more—or rather different, radically different—than intropathic knowledge (EN 254/194). This is for Levinas only possible in the ethical relationship of ‘acknowledgement beyond recognition.’ To avoid misunderstanding, we place ‘acknowledgement’ between quotation marks precisely to indicate the non-reciprocity between the other and me in the ethical relationship. Thanks to the ethical ‘acknowledgement’ of the other, the otherness of the other is done full justice. This ‘acknowledgement’ is not based on my ‘recognition.’



Because initially I'm looking for a 'sister soul' in which I can find myself, I'm inclined to ignore or even deny and negate the otherness of the other, but precisely because the face of the other comes from elsewhere, I experience the challenge and the appeal to make a fundamental choice, namely to 'acknowledge' the otherness of the face in its otherness and to do it really and fully justice.

And it is precisely this justice that leads to the different view on knowledge and truth already sketched above. In the West, and even in Husserlian thought, says Levinas, knowledge and truth precede our ethical treatment of the other, or rather they make this treatment—on the basis of observation and 'disclosure'—possible. According to him, it is actually the other way around: it is the ethical treatment of the other that makes possible the 'true knowledge' of the other: "truth presupposes justice" (TI 62/90). For Levinas, "the aspiration to radical exteriority, the respect for the exteriority which, above all, we must 'let be,' constitutes truth" (TI XVII/29). It is only in that ethical relationship that the alterity of the other becomes a 'real reality.' Without the acknowledgement of the other in its otherness, that otherness is 'in distress' in this world, is threatened and even lost, so much so that it even can be destroyed (which for Levinas is the core of murder, namely the total denial and destruction of the other) (TI 17 /198). This means that the ethical act of justice not only makes possible the knowledge and the truth of the other, which were already discussed

above, it likewise institutes it. Only by ‘acknowledging’ the other as other, does knowledge of the other as other become effective: “Truth is founded on my relationship with the other, or justice. To put speech at the origin of truth is to abandon the thesis that disclosure is the first work of truth” (II 72/99).

This ethically founded true knowledge of the other is made concrete in the “attention which exceeds consciousness” (II 73/100). By means of the fact that the other does not proceed out of myself but comes towards me from elsewhere, I am in principle rid of the power of my disclosing meaning-giving. I am reduced to ‘creature,’ or rather to ‘that which has been created,’ in the sense that I no longer am the creator but the receiver that is summoned to receive (LC 45/22). My freedom is not the origin, principle or archè anymore, but a consciousness that is questioned, i.e. a consciousness that is transformed into ethical awareness. Up to my consciousness is my rest disturbed, and that ethical unrest arouses me to welcome the other. The appeal that proceeds from the face of the other transforms my consciousness into an openness for the other, into a hospitality: “the welcoming of the other is conscience. The originality of this situation does not only lie in the formal antithesis it represents with regard to the cognitive [representational] consciousness. (...) In other words again, in [ethical] conscience I have an experience that is not commensurate with any a priori framework—a conceptless

experience. (...) Ethical conscience is not a modality of consciousness among others, but its condition. Concretely it is the welcoming of the other across his [calling into question and] judgement” (TI 74-75/100). To still put it differently, the respect for the other creates the context for true knowledge of the other, without my thereby becoming subjected to the other: “acknowledgement by submission would annul my dignity, through which acknowledgement has validity.(...) To show respect cannot mean to subject oneself; yet the face of the other does command me. I am commanded, that is, acknowledged as someone capable of realizing a work. To show respect is to bow down not before the law, but before a being—the face of the other—who commands a work from me” (EN 49/30-31). This ‘work’ to be done by me is to render justice to the other, so that the face of the other is ‘acknowledged,’ affirmed and promoted in its otherness. And this is its irreducible dignity, which deserves my obedience and responsibility, starting with devotion and attention turning ‘carefully’ toward the other. Only in and through my ethical work of justice, beginning with the choice for non-violence (LC 45/22), do I do justice to the truth of the other, *and* I myself arrive at truth, i.e. at an honest experience of my freedom as an appealed to and inspired freedom, that lays down its supremacy and does away with reducing the other to myself: a radical form of humility without self-humiliation (TI 75/101). We are able to call this, paraphrasing an

expression of Levinas, the ‘wisdom of love,’ in the sense that love—as the just ‘acknowledgement’ of the other—makes possible and institutes a very unique form of wisdom and knowledge, namely the knowledge of the other as other—a knowledge that is only real and effective thanks to the acknowledging of the other.

### **Conclusion: Reversing theory and practice**

From disclosure to revelation, whereby revelation is neither a theological nor a religious category, but a strictly anthropological and philosophical category. In this regard, Levinas radically reverses the order between theory and practice, between consciousness and knowledge, on the one hand, and ethics and actions, on the other. What comes first is not consciousness as observation, understanding and interpretation, as access to the other, but the practice of ethics comes first, in the sense that the face-to-face as the ethical relationship of ‘acknowledgement,’ justice and responsibility form the condition of possibility for truth and objectivity. That is also precisely what Levinas means when he labels the ethics of the *face-à-face* as the first philosophy (EPP). From the beginning of his first major work *Totality and Infinity* he foresees and predicts this reversal, thanks to the trans-phenomenological revelation—beyond all disclosure—of the radical alterity of the other who in its face appeals for ‘acknowledgement’: “The traditional opposition between theory and practice will disappear before the radical

transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely other, or truth, is established, and of which ethics is the royal road” (TI XVII/29). In a Husserlian sense, the relationship between theory and practice was seen as a dependency and a hierarchy, starting from knowledge as ‘disclosure.’ Activity would be based on preceding cognitions that illuminate and orient it. Knowledge, in turn, would then ascribe to activity the mastery over the world, over souls and over society—which would mean that ethics is an outcome of knowledge. Levinas goes farther, or rather transcends this hierarchy of dependence of practice with regard to knowledge, although he is aware of the risk of confusing theory and practice. But this risk of apparent confusion is deliberate because his whole attempt of the trans-phenomenological phenomenology of the face and ethics, as we have sketched throughout this article, shows how both—the ‘acknowledging’ of the other as well as the ‘pure knowledge’ (TI 46/74) that flows forth from that acknowledgement—are “modes of transcendence” (TI XVII/29). And this transcendence, inspired and created by the ethical acknowledgment of the other, is a promise for an infinite future of wisdom, “a love of truth which is always to come” (AE 37/188). “Always promised, always future, always loved, truth lies in the promise and the love of wisdom” (AE 37/29).