

## FOREWORD

As I sit down to write these words of introduction to Joshua Shaw's excellent book on Emmanuel Levinas, the morning's news is filled, as it regularly is, with stories about the plight of the victims of floods and tornadoes, about the hopes and suffering of war-torn peoples, about violence in neighborhoods and schools, and in general of the troubled, uncertain lives we live in our society and elsewhere around the world. The twentieth century saw the invention of modern warfare and a scale of violence and catastrophe previously unknown, and we are its heirs. For all their successes, modern science, advanced technology, and bureaucratic sophistication have provided us with nothing less than more efficient tools to injure and annihilate; and religion, for all its advocacy of decency and humanity, has also cultivated fanaticisms that live on the violent hatred of those deemed enemies of what is holy and right. It may be that the vocabulary of crisis is overused, but who can deny that it is appropriate. We are in a bad state and one that does not promise to abate.

In such a situation, it is tempting to believe that what is required to renew our lives—individually and collectively—is a kind of perception

or knowledge that we have somehow lost, or, alternatively, that we need to recover emotions and feelings that we no longer have. Indeed, it may be that we require both, that our problems arise from both cognitive and motivational or attitudinal deficiencies, and that we therefore need to acquire a vision or understanding and a set of feelings or attitudes that have been overwhelmed by views and emotions that threaten to destroy us and our civilization. On such a diagnosis, our plight requires therapy; we need to be cured of our ignorance and our emotional defects, and what this means is education and affective training.

As I see it, this is the human and historical situation with which Emmanuel Levinas sought to cope. The aftermath of World War One, the rise of fascism, the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, the incomparable threat of annihilation associated with Hiroshima, and all the atrocities and catastrophes that followed in their wake shaped Levinas's world and engaged him as a philosopher and as a human being. In philosophy—which probably was conveyed to him by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy before he studied Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger—Levinas found a path to a response to a world plagued by violence and suffering. But it was a conception of philosophy not as doctrine or method, rather it was a conception of philosophy as a way of living that arises from a critical engagement with alternative philosophical approaches, both those of the past and those of the present. It is not philosophy as science or philosophy as doctrine; it is philosophy as conduct, as living with others in the world. It is philosophy as ethics.

Western philosophy, one might argue, has always had links with religion on the one hand and science on the other. Viewed in one way, Levinas's work seeks to reestablish its connection with religion after a period, at least since logical positivism, when philosophy's primary association has been with science and especially the natural sciences. Viewed in another way, Levinas can be seen as someone for whom philosophy's most intimate association is with ethics, in the broad sense of all that is relevant to human character and social life, someone for whom ethics is more primary than either science or religion—or art, for that matter. However one understands Levinas's central teaching, it is not

sufficient to state it in such elliptical ways. What is needed is a deep and probing examination of what he says in order to clarify its meaning, to show how Levinas reaches out to the ethical and the religious in very compelling ways, and that he does so in order to help us to reorient our lives and perhaps to find hope in the midst of destruction and despair.

Joshua Shaw's wonderful book on ethics and politics in Levinas's work seeks to do just this. Unlike so many of Levinas's interpreters, Shaw writes with stunning clarity and grace, and in an engaging and accessible way. Reading Shaw, one is not dismayed by Levinas's obscure terminology or confused by his views; rather one is drawn into a process of thinking about serious and deep problems. It is a methodical yet appealing itinerary of raising questions, proposing and considering solutions, revising and debating, that invites the reader to just the kind of attentiveness and responsiveness that Levinas takes to be fundamental to all of our experience and our lives. The reader cannot help but be enlightened and provoked by Shaw's patient and thoughtful prose. It is a combination of perspicuousness and philosophical depth that is rare in writing about Levinas.

Shaw raises a central question: does Levinas, for all his attention to what he calls the ethical, avoid concrete engagement with justice, with our ethical and political lives? Has he been correctly criticized as abstract and irrelevant? Indeed, is the very idea of his giving ethical advice and counsel and providing an account of justice somehow incoherent? Once he has clarified exactly what this challenge means, Shaw proceeds to defend Levinas against this charge and indeed, in the course of so doing, to defend a reading of Levinas that he calls "pragmatic." The argument he provides will no doubt find its opponents. As he points out, many believe that for Levinas the ethical is inexpressible and hence no articulation of it for practical purposes is possible. But Shaw's argument is subtle and nuanced, attentive to what Levinas says and also to the philosophical issues involved; it deserves careful scrutiny. As he sees it, Levinas does offer a justification for the ethical character of the particular relation each of us has to each and every other person; for Levinas the ethical arises first, so to speak, in our interpersonal relations, and from it advice

about justice can and does flow, albeit in highly particularized contexts. If we generalize about what is required, such generalizations are rules of thumb or recommended policies. Deriving them and then acting with respect to them and the demands of the particular situation require deliberation and reflection and an appreciation of what is demanded of each of us. There is no recipe for how to act in a given type of situation, but there is much that one can and ought to do to determine what would be caring and just.

In the course of developing his argument and his view of Levinas, Shaw draws on a variety of interlocutors, some the continental figures who are considered members of his own philosophical tradition, others members of the analytic or Anglo-American tradition which he did not know. In this respect, Shaw's book is indeed special. Only a few books and articles attempt to place Levinas in conversation with figures such as John Rawls, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, and Hilary Putnam. Shaw does this in a natural and effective way, for these figures are introduced not simply to draw a comparison or to make a contrast; rather they are called upon to address objections to Levinas or to offer alternative answers to questions raised of him. These philosophical voices, then, become participants in the drama of the argument, so to speak, and the reader is thereby shown how he or she too can—and might profitably—enter into a similar dialogue with Levinas and his work.

In the end, Shaw underlines a point about Levinas that is powerful and important. Much of Western philosophy is grounded in ontology or epistemology. Its starting point is an account of what there is or what we know. Shaw's book argues that for Levinas, ethics is primary, but more importantly he shows what that means. He shows, that is, what it means to say that Goodness comes before Being and Truth. Levinas often points out that Plato in the *Republic* saw that this was so, but it is one thing for Plato to have said that the Good is beyond being and the ground of being, it is another for us to be able to understand this priority. As Shaw shows, for Levinas every relationship we have with every other person is grounded in the preciousness of that other person to us, and that preciousness requires our acknowledgment and support before it does or

says anything else to us. *Ought* is prior to *is*, the good to the true. How we understand the world around us is determined by what matters to us, and what matters to us first and foremost are other people. Levinas, I think, wants us to appreciate this about our lives in part because it is what characterizes all social life, but also in part because we ought to live this way. Indeed, living in such a way that we are indeed responsive to others is the ground of any hopes we might have that the next century will be able to alter the tendencies that we have inherited from our recent past. Our best hope of overcoming atrocity and suffering, poverty and need, is to be summoned by the face of the other person and to respond to that summons with care and concern.

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## PROLOGUE

# LETTING LEVINAS WAKE US UP

*To think is no longer to contemplate but to commit oneself, to be engulfed by that which one thinks, to be involved.*

—Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”

### 1. WHY THIS BOOK WORRIED ME

I found myself worrying, as I wrote this book, that its point became less clear the harder I tried to explain it. I imagine that most writers experience this worry, but I found it particularly worrisome.

First, one of my goals is to be especially clear. Emmanuel Levinas’s writings are notoriously difficult, riddled with quasi-technical terms, rhetorical flourishes, and deliberately paradoxical turns of phrase. Many commentaries borrow his terminology without making much of an effort to paraphrase it, so that they are only marginally more accessible than Levinas himself, despite their claims to clarify him. I do not necessarily mind this obscurity, but I found it alienating when I first read Levinas. I recall feeling as if I had discovered someone whose work

seemed vital yet impenetrable, and I remember seeking out literature on him with uncharacteristic desperation. I felt I had a duty to understand what he was saying about ethical responsibility, but could not do it on my own. I often found myself just as perplexed by the secondary literature on him and the familiarity with contemporary European philosophy it assumed. Since then, I have had much time to study Levinas and recent European philosophy, and I no longer feel this frustration. Yet I do worry that the esotericism of some of the scholarship on Levinas prevents his writings from achieving the influence they deserve, and one of my aims is to explain his ideas as clearly as I can. So, it troubled me that my book's point seemed to become more distant the harder I tried to clarify it.

However, I had a more significant reason for worrying. What drew me to Levinas was the note of moral urgency in his writings. I had the sense when I first read him that he was issuing a personal call to responsibility to me, his reader. A friend tipped me off to him as I was graduating from college, and I read *Totality and Infinity* for the first time while living as a graduate student in Chicago. I recall reading the discussion of morality and violence in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* one evening and feeling compelled to put the book down and to stare out the windows of my apartment. I could not have explained what I had read, but I felt I understood that it had said *something* about the need to put the book down, to stare out those windows, and to honestly face the world on the other side of them—a world where people are victimized far too routinely; where, for example, one out of every three women will be sexually assaulted; where one out of every three African American men will be imprisoned; where, chances are, the clothes you are wearing as you read this were sewn by a woman who did not receive enough money for her labor to buy herself the food she needs to survive; where each of us, it often seems, can excuse our indifference if we are eloquent enough to craft an elegant political justification or stubborn enough to pretend not to notice; and where the only thing able to block this process is the fragile awareness that each of us is incomparably precious and that some incalculable crime is done whenever any of us suffers.

The other philosophy books on my desk seemed shallow. Not intellectually shallow. Many of them were, I still believe, far more intellectually rigorous than *Totality and Infinity*. It was just that they seemed complacent in their failure to address themselves to the world outside those windows. It was hard to return to them without feeling guilt. It was not that I felt like I was selling out in reading them, that the only proper response would be to put aside philosophy as elitist or self-indulgent and to become a full-time activist. It was more that the stakes of doing philosophy had been clarified. The fact was that the world beyond those windows would be there if I chose to recognize it or not, and it changed the moral stakes of studying those books. It changed everything. To borrow from Levinas, it “de-neutralized” the safe, insulated world of my apartment.<sup>1</sup> I was still free to read my books and to write essays on them, but there was a glaring question as to the value of this writing. Would it be a tool for producing indifference? Was I using it to distract myself from the world beyond those windows or to excuse myself for not doing more to intervene in it? Would it allow others to evade their responsibility? Or would it attempt to intervene in that world, if only by sharpening my own sensitivities to the suffering of others?

The Levinas I admire is the Levinas I intuited on that first night of reading him. This Levinas is defined by his insistence on the absolute need to help those who are vulnerable. He is concerned with sensitizing his readers to their calls for help, and the chief philosophic puzzle that obsesses him is how we manage to ignore these calls. Why aren't we stopped in our tracks by statistics like those quoted above? What intellectual crutches do we rely on to convince ourselves that we are not responsible? In what ways have various philosophic systems been complicit in abetting such self-exculpation?

I think that many are drawn to this Levinas. My sense from talking with other Levinas scholars is that several had similar “conversion experiences” the first time they read him. I find, however, that this emphasis on the need to help others is oddly absent from the secondary literature, where there is a tendency, instead, to dwell on broadly epistemological debates over the limits of language, comprehension, and the consistency

of Levinas's critiques of other philosophers. This shift in focus is somewhat understandable. Simon Critchley asks in the *Cambridge Companion to Levinas* whether "ethics [is] the right word to describe the experience that [Levinas] is trying to express?"<sup>2</sup> Critchley's contention that Levinas does not have a true theory of justice is a target of criticism in this book, but it would be obtuse to deny that he has a point. For all his talk about ethics, Levinas does *not* say much about what norms should regulate conduct; he *does* spend a lot of time discussing language and comprehension. It makes sense that much of the literature should follow him in focusing on epistemological issues as well.

Yet it is difficult not to feel that something important has been lost. Here I find it useful to borrow a distinction from a colleague who told me that I was interested in the "spirit" and not the "letter" of Levinas's philosophy. His own view was that Levinas makes the same antifoundationalist points about language and Western metaphysics as does Jacques Derrida, but that Derrida explores them with greater subtlety. He added that he knew a lot of people like me—people who admire Levinas because they perceive him as having something valuable to say about the need to help others. For his part, he did not see it. When he turned to Levinas's writings, once he got past the rhetoric about ethics, all he found was a simplistic form of deconstruction. I suppose that one way to describe this book would be as an attempt to do justice to the "spirit" of Levinas's philosophy by showing that it is present in its "letter" as well. Levinas does talk a lot about language, comprehension, and Western metaphysics, but the driving force behind his claims, I argue, is his conviction that we cannot help but acknowledge others as having an unconditional claim on our care and support.

I will have more to say about this thesis. For now, I just want to point out why my concerns about this book's clarity troubled me. I found myself worrying as I wrote it that I may have replicated the sin I was railing against. At the foundation, my goal is to share a reading of Levinas that does justice to his claims about the priority of ethics. The Levinas I admire is the one who tells us that nothing matters more in this world than helping others. My worry is that this emphasis on service to others

has gotten lost in the secondary literature, where the tendency is to focus on epistemological issues instead. This book tries to correct this error by showing how Levinas's epistemological insights flow out of his claims about ethics, hence the title *Putting Ethics First*. However, there is a difference between establishing this *interpretive point* and the larger insight it is intended to convey. For me, Levinas's novelty consists in how thoroughly he appreciates how urgent it is to help those who are vulnerable. From this perspective, many of the debates over whether he violates his own claims about the limits of language and comprehension strike me as missing the point, which is precisely to set aside such theoretical debates in order to actually help those in need. I believe that I succeed in establishing this book's interpretive point, but I worry that in doing so I may have fallen into this pattern of focusing too heavily on the theoretical at the expense of the ethical.

So, what I wish to do in this prologue is allow myself to indulge in a different style of writing. I try to be clear throughout this book, but I do write in the voice of a philosopher who is concerned to defend an interpretation of Levinas. I think that I succeed in establishing this interpretation, but I worry that in the process, I may have failed to say enough about the book's larger point in an appropriately emotional or passionate tone of voice. For now, then, I want to take a step back and allow myself to write in a looser, more direct way about what I hope to show. To do this, I want to say something about what I think Levinas has in mind when he talks about "face-to-face encounters with the other." The face-to-face encounter with the other is arguably the cornerstone of his philosophy. Here, then, is the best example I can give of an encounter.

## **2. FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTERS ON INTERSTATE 84**

It is December 24, 1999. My father is driving home along I-84 toward Brookfield, Connecticut. Here is how I picture him in my mind.

He is happy. Ordinarily, he loathes this part of the day; it is the worst part of an unpleasant job. He works as a tool and dye maker at

a woodworking mill in Danbury, Connecticut. The hours are long. He works six days a week. Over the years, he has acquired a hacking cough from the sawdust and metal shavings he has swallowed. He is partially deaf from the roar of the machinery. His hands are riddled with scars. But, it is the long drive home in bumper-to-bumper traffic that he hates the most. In a few years, he will treat himself to a new truck, one with a CD player and air conditioning, and the commute will be bearable for a few more years. However, on the day of this story, he is still driving a ramshackle Nissan pickup: no air conditioning, no radio. The truck is barely functional; its frame is all but rusted away.

But, he is happy. First, it is the end of the workweek and the beginning of the winter vacation. Second, his family is together, his son and daughter home from their respective colleges. Third, he is driving home from the annual Christmas party.

Years ago, he resented having to work the day before Christmas. It was not the work he minded so much as the forced pleasantries at the annual party: the small talk, the cookies and punch, the miserly token “thanks” extended by management to the workers. However, as the mill has hired on more South American workers, the food and atmosphere at the annual party have become better. Gone is the watery punch; the workers bring in jars of *horchata* and heaping plates of foods my father relishes but has difficulty naming afterward. They even bring in a radio and dance on the floor of the factory. My father does not dance, but he allows himself a vicarious dancing in their presence, letting himself imagine what it is like to turn and strut among the band saws, grinders, and lathes.

He is driving home, then, feeling uncommon contentment. His worries will return in a few days: worries about whether he has wasted his life, his family’s safety, the state of the world. But, for now, he is happy. I picture it this way: him smiling, the truck’s heater ticking as it churns out hot air, a light snow blowing across the highway.

A car speeds past him on the left, threading through the thick lines of traffic. It hurtles toward the cars blocking its path in the left lane, then turns sharply into the right to avoid them, cutting off a red minivan. The van brakes to avoid the car, teeters for a second on two wheels, then

tumbles, end over end, off the road and down into the ravine alongside the highway. My father pulls over to the side of the road and runs down the ravine to see if the driver is okay. At this point, I have trouble visualizing all that he saw. He later tells me that there was a woman in the van, that she was unconscious, bleeding from where her head struck the steering wheel. A crowd begins to form around the wreck. The woman awakes from her concussion but seems disoriented. She asks for her baby. And it is then that my father notices the hole in the windshield and, further down the ravine, an infant's car seat resting in the snow.

He later tells me about how surreal it was, picking his way down to base of the gorge, with the sun setting on the hills, to look for this dead child. The sheer stillness of those long moments is what he found most unsettling—the way time drew to a crawl, as if to offer plenty of opportunity to dwell on his anxiety, both the anxiety at the prospect of finding the child and the anxiety of having to carry that news back to the child's mother. Fortunately, it turns out that there is no dead child. Someone from the crowd calls down and tells my father to come back. Someone has found the woman's license, has called information to find her home phone number, and has called her home. Her husband answers; he explains that he has already picked up their child from daycare. The baby is safe at home.

There are more details to this story, such as the conversations that pass among the crowd as they wait for the ambulance, how the man who ran the woman off the road returned to see if she was okay but sped away. However, we can pass over these details. It is enough to mention one more moment. My father comes home. He embraces us: my sister and my mother and me. And he cries. And it takes him some time to explain why he is crying.

This is a face-to-face encounter. The moment when my father pulls over to the side of the road. The moment when he rushes to the wreck. The long drawn-out moments when he wanders along the ravine. And, perhaps most of all, the moments afterwards, when he is holding us and, over the next few days, when he keeps puzzling over why it has upset him so much. All of it is a face-to-face encounter. Perhaps even

I now, at this moment, writing these words, trying to understand what he experienced, trying, at the same time, to say something to you about the point of this book and why this moment lurches out of my memory when I think about what Levinas means by face-to-face encounters. This too is a face-to-face encounter.

### 3. WHAT IS A FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER?

Levinas gives, of course, several examples of his own. Often, he asks the reader to imagine looking into the faces of persons who are helpless. We are asked to imagine passing by “the stranger, the widow, or the orphan” who is begging for help and feeling our hearts go out to them, feeling obligated to “tear the bread from our mouth to nourish the other.” Other examples are not so dramatic. Levinas gives the example of holding a door open for a stranger as a mundane example of a face-to-face encounter. It is a simple act of civility, but Levinas is struck by the poetry of this gesture, the message it conveys about ceding one’s place in the world to make room for others, about how easily such selflessness filters through our daily lives.

Two of my favorite examples come from interviews he gave in the eighties. At the time, Levinas was fascinated by Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, a novel about the siege of Stalingrad and life in Stalinist Russia.<sup>3</sup> He cites two scenes from *Life and Fate* as illustrating face-to-face encounters. In one, Grossman describes a line of people standing outside of the notorious Lubyanka prison in Moscow. The line forms each morning, with hundreds of families waiting to make inquiries and to pass along packages and notes. A detail obsesses Levinas: Grossman describes how each person cranes their necks as they approach the prison’s windows, hoping to glimpse their loved ones inside. Levinas dwells on this image, imagining each person among the hundreds staring at the neck of the person in front of him, each “reading on the nape of the person in front of him the feelings and hopes of his misery.” This image of “the nape” can be understood, he says, as the “welcome of the face.”<sup>4</sup>

In the other scene, a Russian woman encounters a captured German officer in the ruins of Stalingrad. The siege has been broken, and the officer is being forced to retrieve corpses from the rubble. A crowd gathers to watch him, among them a woman who has endured some great harm over the course of the war. The sight of the officer fills her with rage. She picks up a brick, moves to strike him down, but at the last moment throws down her stone. “Not understanding what was happening to her, governed by a power she had just now seemed to control,” Grossman writes, “she felt in the pocket of her jacket for a piece of bread that had been given to her the evening before by a soldier. She held it out to the German officer and said: ‘There, have something to eat.’”<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, particularly in later writings, Levinas’s examples of face-to-face encounters are, arguably, less sanguine and more confrontational, involving elements of violence.<sup>6</sup> He associates the encounter with the other, what he comes to term “proximity,” with situations involving what he variously calls “accusation,” “persecution,” “subjection,” “obsession,” “passivity,” and being “held hostage” by the other. The other is not simply the colleague for whom I politely hold open a door, or the defenseless stranger to whom I beneficently offer help. The other is the “oppressed who is other than myself” who accuses me for my complacency and affluence.<sup>7</sup> The other is, for example, like the colonial subjects in John Coetzee’s stories, the oppressed person who confronts her oppressor and accuses her for profiting from long-accepted injustices. Even more strikingly, the other can be the person who oppresses me, the victimizer who harms me yet for whom, Levinas claims, I am still “infinitely responsible.”<sup>8</sup>

What do these examples tell us about the idea of face-to-face encounters? Levinas uses them, first, to link humanity with vulnerability. One of the terms he uses to talk about the other is *autrui*. *Autrui* corresponds to our use of the word *others* to refer to other persons. Some of Levinas’s peers used it in discussing the “problem of other minds.” For example, Sartre writes about solipsism and *le probleme de l’existence de l’autrui* in *Being and Nothingness*. Levinas distinguishes his use of this term, however, from its use in these debates. He insists that the other person is not

fundamentally an “alter ego,” another I, another mind or consciousness, and writes that “[t]he Other is the weak, the poor, the widow and the orphan, whereas I am the rich or the powerful.”<sup>9</sup> He notes that “to recognize the other is to recognize a hunger.”<sup>10</sup> So, Levinas uses *autrui*, in keeping with its standard use, to refer to other persons, but his examples of face-to-face encounters develop a suggestion about what situations most perspicuously reveal humanity. We are most keenly aware of other persons *as other persons* in situations where their vulnerability moves us to feel responsible for them. To recognize another person *as a person* is not to recognize a mind but a being that can be victimized, a being who depends on me for help.

Levinas’s examples also illustrate a point about the force of the responsibility we feel for others. His examples of face-to-face encounters involve spontaneous acts of kindness. The woman in the second scene from *Life and Fate* cannot explain why she gives up her bread. She does not understand the “power” that moves in her, and her behavior seems foolish to her afterward. Similarly, holding a door open for a stranger is an act of kindness that we perform without thinking about it. Now, one might read Levinas as endorsing a kind of moral anarchy, suggesting that rules and norms get in the way of kindness and that we should engage in random acts of charity.<sup>11</sup> However, he is making a different point. What impresses him about these cases is not that they involve going *against* moral rules;<sup>12</sup> they inspire him because they show that ethics does not depend on rules for its authority. The woman who gives up her bread, despite her hatred, or who manages to show compassion even towards those who have harmed her, does not reason her way to this action. She finds it inexplicable, yet she still does it. Because her action is inexplicable, it shows something about the authority of moral responsibility. In a face-to-face encounter, one recognizes oneself *unconditionally* responsible for the other, so responsible that one feels obligated to give *even though* one may not be able to rationalize it.

I can think of moments in my life that match these descriptions. There have been moments when I have seen strangers suffering and have been

moved to help them. There have been more dramatic moments, too, of witnessing horrific acts and feeling as if my life was held hostage by them, as if it would be libelous to let myself forget or return too easily to day-to-day life. I think of watching news reports in 1994 of the genocide in Rwanda, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or, most recently, watching documentaries on the genocide in Darfur and feeling shamed by my powerlessness and the world's reluctance to do anything to stop it. There also have been small moments of everyday kindnesses. However, for me, in my own life, it is the story my father told on December 24, 1999, that stands out as the best example of a face-to-face encounter I have experienced. Why?

Levinas associates the encounter with the other in places with “awakening” and “sobering up.”<sup>13</sup> Levinas was fascinated throughout his life with wakefulness. He repeatedly uses it and insomnia as metaphors for consciousness and for human life in general, and they play a complex role in his work. Nonetheless, it is possible to skirt some of these details and to offer rough suggestions as to what he has in mind in associating face-to-face encounters with sobriety.

Levinas claims at one point in *Time and the Other* that our relationship to the other tends to be obscured in our everyday lives. It is “veiled by decency.”<sup>14</sup> Typically, I am not aware of others *as others*. I live in a kind of fog composed of *my* beliefs, *my* desires, *my* ambitions, *my* life projects. I interact with others in this fog, but do not relate to them as unique individuals in their own right; I relate to them as if they were actors and actresses, *dramatis personae* in the story *I* am living, the unfolding story of *my* world. These interactions are structured, finally, by the social rules and etiquette of my tribe, my community's collective “veil of decency.” Levinas's claim in *Time and the Other* is that there is something beyond these rules and this fog. His metaphor of a veil is crucial. Just as a face gives shape to a veil, so too the world of our everyday lives is shaped and given meaning by others. At the same time, this veil threatens to obscure this ground. There is a danger of getting lost in social rules and in our own personal life dramas, of forgetting what makes them meaningful.