

THE RIGHT TO BE ADDRESSED BY YOUR PROPER NAME¹

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When we meet someone and ask, “Who are you?,” we’re looking for all sorts of information to get to know ‘that person’ better, whereby the other becomes a (potentially interesting) ‘object.’

Seeing and Knowing the Other

To know others, we rely primarily on observation, that is, on ‘seeing.’ I ‘catch sight’ of the other person and am struck by certain qualities in one’s appearance, behavior, or postures, which express one’s temperament and personality.

This resonates entirely with the Greek concept of knowledge, which always begins with observation. Observation, and by extension empirical research, is the foundation of our knowledge, and thus also the basis for our approach to others. Hence, in line with Greek thought, the human sciences, such as medicine, psychology, and sociology, hold "diagnosis" in high regard. Literally, “diagnosis” is a form of “seeing.” The so-called Western “spirit” is fond of describing, categorizing, collecting data, and diagnosing in order to determine and understand the uniqueness and differences of people (and animals, plants, and beings). We love classifications and distinctions, which are then “summarized” in representations and images. Everything is filmed and captured instantly by smartphones these days!

The other’s face is thus understood, from the still-prevalent Greek thought, as the ‘appearance’ of the other. Through its visibility and ‘describability,’ the other can also be represented and understood, and we can take pictures of it, through which we know who the other is and thus gain access to her or him. Through one’s face, the other acquires a knowable and recognizable profile, which allows the other person to be registered and identified in all kinds of files and documents by ‘social’ institutions.

¹ Dedicated to Sr. Jeanne Devos, founder of the National Domestic Workers Movement (India).

The Other is Invisible

This leads the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995) to the bold proposition that the other is invisible. However visible and tangible, the other never coincides with her or his face, with her or his appearance, image, or photo... (Consider also the biblical assertion that God, the radically Other, is and remains invisible, including the prohibition of images). The face of the other is more than one's face, i.e. more than one's physiognomy, plastic form, and features. The other is more than what one shows. More than one's specific personality and temperament. More than one's family, economic, and social status or situation. Despite all representations, however attractive they may be, the other never coincides with those representations. The other is infinitely different from any characterization or classification. We can never reduce the other to one's history, nor with one's psychological, sociological, ethnic, cultural, and philosophical makeup. Hence, Levinas also describes the face of the other as a 'swooning in one's own appearance,' and thus as a radical alterity: a strange other marked by an insoluble secret, a riddle par excellence. The face is what escapes our gaze and our scrutiny in the face of the other. And this not once, but again and again, 'to infinity.' Hence, Levinas initially describes the face negatively as 'the infinite,' literally as an 'infinetizing retreat.'

The other I encounter is always infinitely more and different than the images, representations, photos, interpretations, and stories I (like to) invent to gain access to her or him. The other, even the closest and most familiar, remains the strange other, who turns my existence upside down and plunges it into crisis. The other in whom I believe I recognize myself is and remains the greatest surprise: a wonder that both astonishes and disturbs, "a pure experience, a traumatism of astonishment."²

I do not know if one can speak of 'phenomenology' of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned towards the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. (...) You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1979) 71.

observes the color of the eyes one is not in social [ethical] relationship with the Other.³

From “Seeing” to “Listening”

The other’s face not only escapes my understanding, but in its otherness, it also expresses itself to me. The other breaks through one’s physiognomy—my representations and images—by directly addressing me and speaking to me. The face is ‘expression,’ ‘self-expression,’ according to Levinas (even though the other may say nothing...).

This entails a shift from seeing to listening. And this listening is radical, because it focuses on the newness that reveals itself from the other. In this respect, the other is my teacher. The word, or the wordless word, of the other’s face is masterful: it teaches me about the other and one’s otherness. I don’t know in advance what the other will tell me. Nor do I find the other’s story within myself. The fact that the other speaks to me from within oneself literally destines me to ‘obedience.’ I am not the creator, but the receiver. Knowledge here begins not with myself, and with self-knowledge (cf. the Greek ‘know thyself’), but with the strange other who, from one’s ‘own irreducible otherness,’ offers me all sorts of lessons, often the most strange and unruly. If the other doesn’t reveal oneself, I remain in limbo, and even guessing is useless. The otherness of the other makes all curiosity ridiculous! Only by listening, not just once but repeatedly, ‘infinitely listening’ to the other, does my acknowledgment of the other become real, tangible, and palpable. Through my listening, I literally become a ‘responsible’ being, someone who responds to the address. No longer “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes), but: “I answer, therefore I am.” This is how true dialogue arises: ‘one who speaks and the other who responds differently.’ Thus, we become true ‘conversational partners’ (interlocutors), intervening and also interrupting each other.

The Right to Face-To-Face Contact

This conversation with the other reveals the fundamental dynamic of our humanity, namely, “face to face,” as Levinas puts it. With this, he renders the Hebrew word for ‘face,’ ‘panim.’ The remarkable thing is that there is no singular form of this word. In the plural, ‘panim’ means that we are

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1985) 85.

only face in our encounters with one another, namely when we address and speak to each other (even though we may say nothing, or merely stammer, or contradict each other). Alone, I have no face, not even when I look in the mirror, because then I only see myself as a reflection. Only in the direct reciprocity of face-to-face do we—the other and I—have a face. This founding relational condition of our humanity reveals how direct and truly human contact is a ‘fundamental value.’ This applies to education and upbringing, social issues (healthcare, economy and business, law, politics, etc.), and friendship and love—even though AI already makes it possible to “virtually flirt and make love” (sic!). The use of AI and robots or other technological interventions can never replace concrete human-to-human interaction. ‘Face-to-face’ is a fundamental value that deserves to be legally protected as a ‘fundamental right’ for every human being, wherever and in whatever context they were born and live or work.

This shift from seeing to listening resonates with the Hebrew source of thought. All too often, we have placed too one-sided or even exclusive emphasis on the Greek source of thought, namely Athens, while Jerusalem is equally a ‘founding’ source of our thinking. Not perception and concept that give us a grasp of reality, but the spoken word of the (strange) other is the source of revelation and the call to listen and learn, think and act, and to respond.

Addressing the Other by Proper Name

An essential aspect of this listening and responding, of this face-to-face interaction, is addressing the other by one’s proper name. Only when we greet and address the other by one’s proper name do we acknowledge the other’s irreducible and unique alterity. In this respect, the proper name is the ‘effective sign’ of the unique person, in the sense that by pronouncing the proper name, the other also becomes a unique person. Only when you address the other person personally does that other person become truly and fully unique!

Both in one’s face and in the signs it gives, the other expresses oneself as a unique other, namely as ‘first person’ (from within). Hence the foundational meaning of the proper name. The other is not a human being in general, which we can talk about in the third person, namely as an object of comparative description from a larger totality or context, for example social function (as ‘domestic worker’). This means a shift from the question ‘what?’ to ‘who?’ To be sure, most of the time the who is a what. We ask ‘Who is Mr. X?’ and we answer: ‘He is the President of the

State Council,' or 'He is Mr. So-and-so.' The answer presents itself as a quiddity; it refers to a system of relations. To the question *who?* answers the non-qualifiable presence of an existent who presents himself without reference to anything; and distinguishes himself from every other existent. The question *who?* envisages a face. The notion of the face differs from every represented content. If the question *who?* does not question in the same sense as the question *what?* it is that here what one asks and he who one questions coincide. To aim at a face is to put the question *who?* to the very face that is the answer to his question; the answerer and the answered coincide."⁴ With the question *who?* I ask about the other person as a unique person, who addresses oneself in the first person – in one's own name! – to me as a second person. The essential here is the interpellation, the vocative: "The invoked (...) is not under a category (...); he has no quiddity."⁵ The other is the one to whom I speak and the one who speaks to me! The other as a unique person appeals to me, if necessary by giving me a sign, which also makes me a unique person. Hence the great importance that cultures, societies and religions attach to 'naming,' namely the giving of a personal name (as, for example, Christians do at the start of the ritual of baptism, so that the child—or the baptized person—is included and respected in the community as a unique and irreplaceable person).⁶ Thanks to the proper name, the other can express one's

⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 177-178.

⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69.

⁶ Giving a name is a big responsibility, because it determines the way people experience themselves and how others will "view" or "approach" them. In a Christian context, it is suggested to give children the first name of a saint. In a post-confessional, secular context, giving a name seems to become more and more a matter of subjective preference or taste of the name-givers; this is a result and expression of individualization. Thus we see how people give names that refer to the new "saints," the "stars" of music or film or car racing... Some names are truly "strange" or "odd," such as: Peanut, Whisky, Blitz, Joghurt, Satan, Lucifer, Judas, Adolf Hitler, Popcorn, Porsche, Ferrari, Crazy Horse, Thanatos, Pillula... In Germany these first names were rejected, even though other "weird" names were accepted, such as Tarzan, Winnetou, Schneewittchen, Fanta, Chanel, Pepsi-Cola, Jazz, Sheriff... We read the legal argument for not accepting certain first names in: "Das Namensrecht in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland" ("The Law of Names in the Federal Republic of Germany"): "Das Standesamt verweigert die Eintragung des Vornamens ins Geburtenregister, wenn der Vorname das Kindeswohl zu gefährden droht." ("The civil office will refuse to register a first

irreducible uniqueness. And thanks to our use of that proper name, we acknowledge and affirm the other as a unique person. By calling each other by name we welcome each other as dialogue partners. It is therefore no coincidence that when we experience how our own name is misused or our uniqueness is not acknowledged, we rebel and express this in some way, so that we 'put' or 'affirm' ourselves as a unique face to others: "That is me and no one else!" Isn't it true that people's respect for each other starts with pronouncing the proper name, i.e. by addressing the other ones by their own name?

But this question already presupposes the ethical relationship to the other. After all, pronouncing and using the other person's name respectfully does not happen automatically. The proper name can even be abused to hurt or deny the other in one's unique otherness. A proper name can also become a label or a fetish, with which one 'objectifies' or 'stigmatizes' another (e.g., when someone from a different culture is denied access to certain services or renting a home). Using or sharing someone's proper name can also be a form of betrayal, in the sense that one hands the other over to 'destructive powers.' The privacy or safety of persons may require that they be 'anonymized,' precisely to protect their human dignity as unique human beings. This implies that the use of one's proper name must not be categorized and absolutized into an 'unrelenting norm' or 'dogma.'

Yet the ethical plea for the use of the proper name must remain "standing" as an 'appeal' and 'challenge' to address and treat the other as a unique you! In this sense, the ethics of the encounter with the other begins with the invocation of the other as unique person, symbolized and expressed in one's proper name. The essentiality of a proper name as an expression of the unique person is demonstrated by situations in which the use of a proper name is forbidden or when a person's proper name is replaced by a 'number,' as in concentration camps, thus objectifying people (even though a 'residue' of uniqueness remains, because one number is not the same as another, and therefore people remain identifiable). Or consider the mass graves where violently killed people are thrown together namelessly and 'disappear,' are erased and exterminated.

name in the birth register if the first name risks to endanger the child's well-being.") This argument is undoubtedly valid, whatever choice the civil servant makes in practice, whether to register a given first name or to reject it.

Unlike the generic name, which brings together beings as similar on the basis of common properties under one denominator, the ‘small word gesture’ of the proper name expresses the uniqueness of a person. The distinction between people that is thus established is not based on differences, this is on properties that people do not share with each other, but on the uniqueness of the person oneself who is above all qualifications: “You and no one else!” This makes the other person a ‘chosen one.’ And in turn, this also makes me, who addresses the other by her or his own name, a chosen one. We can call it a mutual election, without, however, eliminating the asymmetry between the two—from one to the other and from the other to the one. This shows how the use of the proper name also has an ethical meaning, namely the acknowledgment and confirmation of the other in her or his uniqueness, as a result of which the person addressed also acknowledges and confirms me – the person addressing the other—as unique. In other words, the address with the proper name establishes an ethically qualified relationship between people, as a springboard for a further humane and humanizing relationship.

As an example of this ethical meaning we can refer to education. It is not only ‘nice,’ but also ‘desirable’ that educators (parents, supervisors, etc.) address children and young people by their name, i.e. by their first name, because this is the beginning of any further acknowledgment and confirmation of their unique otherness. It is important to avoid any sloppiness. Children and young people (but also adults) do not like it at all when people do not pronounce their (first) name correctly. Perhaps one may consider this an exaggerated sensitivity, but it is a sensitivity that shows how people consider the correct (given) name to be addressed as appropriate and fair.

The same respect shown by addressing others by their proper names also applies in the social context, namely to ‘domestic workers,’ who are all too often subjected to objectification and, without a name, are considered and treated as ‘means for others.’ Addressing others by their proper names is a first, essential step beyond the ‘reduction of the other to the same,’ that is beyond all social labels and prejudices! This is a call to both domestic workers and their employers to develop a ‘culture of the proper name and thus of the unique other,’ as a beginning of humane and just treatment. This is not a ‘favor’ but a ‘right’ that acknowledges and confirms the unconditional dignity of every human being, created in God's image as a unique person! Using one's proper name, therefore, also means protesting against growing inequality based on wealth, property, power,

color, position, origin, religion, and the destructive war of inequality between sexes, castes, and peoples.

To Conclude

We conclude our anthropological and ethical plea for the proper name in Levinas' own words: "The names of persons whose *saying* signifies a face—proper names, in the middle of all these common names and commonplaces—can resist the dissolution of meaning and help us to speak."⁷

ABSTRACT

Addressing human beings by their proper name expresses the ethical acknowledgment of the other as a unique 'you.' This transcends the 'knowing' of the other—knowing, which, based on perception, is so central to Greek thought. In contrast, in Hebrew thought a shift occurs from seeing to listening and thus it focuses on the direct relationship with the other—face-to-face—as invocation and response. Humans are 'responsible' beings, literally 'answerable-by-and-for-the-other,' according to Emmanuel Levinas. This leads to a reformulation of the Cartesian "cogito, ergo sum" into "respondeo, ergo sum." As 'human condition' this responsibility implies the ethical call to acknowledge and affirm the other as a unique person, always and everywhere. We can also call it a right, even a fundamental right, in the sense that the direct interpersonal relationship ('face-to-face') forms the basis and modality of all humanity, and therefore of all education and counseling, all care, all sociality, economy, and politics. Artificial intelligence and robotization cannot, or rather, should never, replace direct face-to-face interaction, even though they can certainly be useful tools (and remain tools, subject to face-to-face interaction). The use of personal names expresses direct face-to-face interaction in a special, even essential, way, even though proper names can be misused to label, exclude, or persecute others. For privacy and security reasons, it may be necessary to 'anonymize' people, but this should never prevent people from addressing and acknowledging the other as a unique person! Hence the great responsibility when people give their children a (worthy, not crazy) name, precisely so as not to compromise the dignity of the other.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 4.