OVERCOMING RELATIVISM?
Levinas's Return to Platonism

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ABSTRACT
Emmanuel Levinas's concept of "the face of the Other" involves an ethical mandate that is presumably transcultural or, in his terms, "pre-cultural." His essay "Meaning and Sense" provides his most explicit defense of the idea that the face has a meaning that is not culturally relative, though it is always encountered within some particular culture. Levinas identifies his position there as a "return to Platonism." Through a careful reading of that essay, exploring Levinas's use of religious terminology and the (sometimes implicit) relationships of the essay to the work of other phenomenologists and of Saussure, the author seeks to clarify (1) what Levinas retains and what he rejects in returning to Platonism "in a new way," (2) the sense in which this return constitutes an "overcoming" of relativism, and (3) the nature of the phenomenological warrant that he offers for his position.

KEY WORDS: absolute, culture, meaning, other, phenomenology, relativism

EMMANUEL LEVINAS HAS BECOME WIDELY KNOWN FOR HIS DEPLOYMENT of the concept of the face of the Other. For Levinas, the face (visage) is the medium through which the Other is genuinely presented to me, not only revealing an ontological incommensurability between the Other and myself but also, more fundamentally, presenting me with an ethical mandate. While he often displays an acute sensitivity to the cultural relativity of discourse, his ethical understanding of the face clearly rests on the supposition that the face is a phenomenon that is transcultural in some sense. In his 1972 essay "Meaning and Sense," he claims that the way in which the Other is presented by the face is "before culture" and that the encounter with the Other provides a precultural meaning, a "unique sense," which is a precondition for culturally specific meanings.

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Though in one sense he approves of contemporary disavowals of Platonism, he refers to his own defense of precultural meaning as a return to Platonism "in a new way" (Levinas 1972/1987a, 101). It is my purpose to explore the argument of "Meaning and Sense"—also with an eye toward Totality and Infinity—with the aim of clarifying exactly what Levinas means by a "return to Platonism" and how he provides phenomenological warrant for it.

1

Levinas arrives at his understanding of the face through a reflective method that is, he insists, phenomenological. The most surprising aspect of the face in Levinas's work, however, is its "overflowing" of the bounds of experience within which a phenomenology would normally operate. "The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum—the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but καθ' αὐτό. It expresses itself" (Levinas 1961/1969, 50–51). Though the face is first encountered by sensibility, to use the Kantian term with which Levinas is quite comfortable, it opens a "new dimension" of the Other, evoking theological terms such as "epiphany." What is originally grasppable by sensibility "turns into total resistance to the grasp" (Levinas 1961/1969, 197), denying any power that I might have had to subsume it under my own categories or to map it according to my own coordinates. It even denies my very "ability for power" [mon pouvoir de pouvoir] (Levinas 1961/1969, 198). The dimension of the Other that is thus opened in the "epiphany" of the face, "the infinity of his transcendence" (Levinas 1961/1969, 199), is precisely the dimension that is epistemically inaccessible to more Cartesian perspectives, including the phenomenology

1 Because Platonism is pivotal in "Meaning and Sense," the reader might expect me to analyze Levinas's understanding of Plato's writings. Though such discussion would surely be rewarding, it is not required here. Levinas is making an argument that relies not upon any univocal interpretation of Plato's texts, but upon an intellectual tradition for which those texts have been pivotal. In other words, he is using "Platonism" to indicate not the thought of an individual, but a cultural stream of reflection. Hence, questions regarding Levinas's reading of Plato's texts are, for present purposes, beside the point.

2 [T]he presentation and the development of the notions employed [in Totality and Infinity] owe everything to the phenomenological method... Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl" (Levinas 1961/1969, 28). "[F]rom the point of view of philosophical method and discipline, I remain to this day a phenomenologist" (Levinas and Kearney 1986, 16).

3 All emphases are in the original texts, unless otherwise noted.
of Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Levinas, my ultimate attempt to bring the Other under my control by murdering him or her throws the utter transcendence of the Other most fully into relief. "The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other... There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely other, the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance" (Levinas 1961/1969, 199). This "epiphany" of the Other is no mere appearance that may or may not be associated with a noumenal subject. It is no longer epistemic warrant that is at stake, but ethical mandate. In the face of the Other is written the commandment: "[Y]ou shall not commit murder" (Levinas 1961/1969, 199).

According to Levinas, to say that the face of the Other is a window on what is "precultural" is to say that its meaning is precultural. This is the focus of "Meaning and Sense." The essay is Levinas's summary of what he refers to as "the contemporary philosophy of meaning," which arises from a confluence of the phenomenological and structuralist traditions in European thought. The essay synthesizes the perspectives on meaning found in the work of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Ferdinand de Saussure.

For Levinas, the crucial element of Saussure's perspective is an emphasis on the systemic nature of meaning. Levinas summarizes a broadly Saussurean perspective thus:

Already words are seen to not have isolable meanings, such as figure in dictionaries, and which one might reduce to some sort of contents or givens. They could not be congealed into a literal meaning. In fact there would be no literal meaning. Words do not refer to contents which they would designate, but first, laterally, to other words... In addition, language refers to the positions of the one that listens and the one that speaks, that is, to the contingency of their history [Levinas 1972/1987a, 77].

4 The evocation that comes with the face did not altogether escape Sartre's attention: "[I]f consciousness is affirmed in the face of the Other, it is because it lays claim to a recognition of its being and not an abstract truth" (Sartre 1943/1956, 323).
5 As Westphal rightly emphasizes, "murder" here means the primordial usurpation of the Other's place: "The point is simply that prior to any free choice by which I might assume, and perhaps in so doing set limits to my responsibility for the Other, I find myself the bearer of an unlimited obligation" (Westphal 1993, 493).
6 Levinas's treatment of language is very clearly Saussurean, though he does not cite Saussure by name. The connection is made clear in one of Adriaan Peperzak's footnotes (Levinas 1972/1987a, 87 n. 15), which reports that "Meaning and Sense" was written after Levinas had studied Merleau-Ponty's book Signs, in which Saussure is an explicit and ubiquitous presence.
7 Hereafter parenthetical citations of the essay "Meaning and Sense" will supply only the page number. Citations of works by other authors and of other works by Levinas will continue to be given in the conventional author-date form.
The "traditional" view, which Levinas wishes to reject, sees meaning as something that is associated with a sensory "given" after it has been received from the world by a subject. Both Heideggerian phenomenology and Saussurean structuralism assume that meaning cannot be analytically severed from its "content." There is no given that is not already meaningful.

Experience is a reading, the understanding of meaning an exegesis, a hermeneutics, and not an intuition. This taken qua that—meaning is not a modification that affects a content existing outside of all language. Everything remains in a language or in a world, for the structure of the world resembles the order of language, with possibilities no dictionary can arrest [78–79].

This implies that meaning is, in some sense, already present in the world before it is given to human understanding. While this sounds paradoxical to a Kantian, Levinas endeavors to make sense of it using the insights of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. If meaning requires some sort of a priori contextualization, then the world must already be patterned or arranged—"assembled," to use Levinas's term—so as to facilitate this. As he puts it, "[N]othing can be reflected in a thought before the footlights are turned on and a curtain raised on the side of being" (80). What accomplishes the "assembling" that precedes illumination is not something "external" to the perceiver, but the very bodily insertion into the world described in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception. Levinas writes:

It turns out that the subject who is there before being to "welcome the reflection" is also on the side of being, to operate the assembling. This ubiquity is incarnation itself, the marvel of the human body. . . . A being must first be illuminated and take on a meaning by reference to this assembling, in order that a subject could welcome it. But it is the incarnate subject which, in assembling being, will raise the curtain. The spectator is an actor. Sight is not reducible to the welcoming of a spectacle; it at the same time operates in the midst of the spectacle it welcomes [80].

The imagery of the theater might be taken to imply that the assembling in question is undertaken actively or even consciously by subjectivity, yet this is not the point. For Levinas, as for Merleau-Ponty, it is the very fact that I approach the world as someone who is embodied in it that arranges the world relative to me. In Heideggerian terms, the world is a "referential totality" that is organized around my involvement in and with it, around my Dasein (Heidegger 1927/1962, 95–122). This is true not merely in a physical or spatial sense but also, more importantly, in the sense that my embodied life is situated within a certain culture. Cultural expression, inasmuch as it flows from (and with)
my embodiment, delineates the pattern of my experience in such a way that it cannot be distinguished from any sort of content that is being arranged thereby. Compare this statement by the early Heidegger:

[Our comportments are in actual fact pervaded through and through by assertions, . . . they are always performed in some form of expressness [sic]. It is also a matter of fact that our simplest perceptions and constitutive states are already expressed, even more, are interpreted in a certain way. . . . It is not so much that we see the objects and things but rather that we first talk about them. To put it more precisely: we do not say what we see, but rather the reverse, we see what one says about the matter [Heidegger 1979/1985, 56].

Thus, my having a spatiotemporally and culturally situated perspective on the world does not introduce a cultural relativity into what might, in principle, have been a pure, omniscient gaze upon reality. Rather, it is the fact that I am culturally situated that makes it possible for me to perceive the world at all. "We are not the subject of the world and a part of the world from two different points of view; in expression we are subject and part at once" (82).

Neither is the assembling of Being identical to the application of Kantian categories of understanding, though Immanuel Kant was not mistaken in assuming that human understanding must necessarily receive "input" that has already in some way been made compatible with its operations. According to Kant, we are still basically passive receptacles for the manifold of sensibility, which must then be made to conform to our categories in order to be transformed into perceptions. As Levinas might put it, the assembling of Being remains, for Kant, entirely on the side of subjectivity. In other words, Kant places the intelligibility of the world entirely within the confines of subjectivity (what Levinas would call "interiority" or an "egoism"; see Levinas 1961/1969, passim), a placement that entails that the world in itself (an sich) is wholly unintelligible. From the perspective that Levinas is defending, the world is intelligible precisely because we are not radically isolated from it. Succinctly put, our process of assembling the world does not take place in a windowless interiority, but in the world (through our bodies).

In "Meaning and Sense," Levinas clearly endorses Merleau-Ponty's view that our embodiment does not consist primarily in the fact that we are biological organisms with certain physical characteristics. Rather, embodiment refers to our whole "style" of existence, our spatiotemporally specific way of approaching experience, which is simultaneously culturally sedimented and culturally constrained, rather than residing in a concrete consciousness "internal" to individuals.

The incarnation of thought is not an accident that would have occurred to it and would have complicated its task by diverting the straightforward
movement with which it aims at an object. The body is the fact that
thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently, ex-
presses this world while it thinks it. . . . The cultural creation is not added
on to receptivity, but is its other side from the start [81–82].

Summarily stated, then, what Levinas refers to as the assembling of
Being—that is, the “patterning” of the world that must logically precede
perception—is accomplished by our embodiment. This means, as Levinas
explicitly concludes, that the access to meaning cannot be distinguished
from the meaning itself.

However, if the only access to meaning is through culture, which
Levinas has closely associated with the bodily assembling of Being, then
there is no meaning that is not relative to one of the many diverse
human cultures. For the social sciences, of course, this conclusion is a
simple truism and is not obviously problematic theoretically. However,
because we have arrived at this point by following Levinas, we are now
in a position to understand why and how Levinas attempts to argue for
something like an ultimate (that is, not culturally specific) meaning.

“The reflection on cultural meaning,” Levinas observes, “leads to a
pluralism which lacks a one-way sense” (90). The phrase translated as
“one-way sense” is sens unique, which may be rendered as either “unique
meaning” or “one direction,” as on a sign identifying a one-way street.
Levinas is bringing both of these meanings to bear in his discussion.
The plurality of cultures suggests both a lack of any ultimate univocal
(universal) meaning in human life and a lack of unity in direction or com-
mon orientation. One might empirically discover a few apparent cultural
universals, but as introductory sociology and anthropology textbooks
often point out, such “universals” seem devoid of invariant substantive
content.

Yet people are, in fact, able to understand each other to a significant
degree, even across cultural boundaries. Cultures routinely inter-
penetrate. It would seem, further, that some sort of basic orientation
(directionality) must be shared in order for linguistic signs to operate at
all. “Do not meanings require a unique sense from which they derive
their very signifyingness?” (89). The issue at stake here can be better
understood if we cast it in more explicitly Saussurean terms. The arbi-
trary nature of the linguistic sign as a whole, emphasized by Saussure,
seems to suggest that the process by which a system of signifieds is
culturally delineated is ultimately a random process (88). If so, how can
we make any sense of the possibility of cultural interpenetration?
The temptation arises here, according to Levinas, to refer to patterns of action arising from universal human needs, perhaps based precisely upon the (physical) human body. The animal needs of all human beings demand work to meet those needs. The unique sense might lie in economy, in other words. We might say that when we work, we convey a sense that is culturally invariant. Thus, there would be an ultimate meaning insofar as certain needs and patterns of dealing with them emerge everywhere *Homo sapiens* is found. The most fundamental human orientation would then be scientific and technological, though perhaps in the broadest possible sense of those words.\(^8\)

Levinas rejects this temptation for three reasons. First, he notes that seeing economy as a *sens unique* is itself a culturally embedded point of view, for human needs are not univocal in the way animal needs seem to be. “Every human need is from the first already interpreted culturally” (87). Second, he argues that contemporary sociopolitical events make it unlikely that any scientifically or technically derived pattern can function compellingly at the ethical/political level, because culturally relative meanings are not usually recognized as such. That is, as the Durkheimian tradition in sociology has long argued, cultural groups exhibit an enduring tendency to apprehend cultural reality as ultimate reality. “It is as though . . . [national] particularisms corresponded to needs” (87). Third, and perhaps most important, Levinas argues that the search for a *sens unique*, as exemplified by advocates of the scientific/technical orientation, is apparently driven by an orientation that is even more fundamental than needs: “[T]he forms in which this search . . . is manifested are acts aiming at the realization of a society. They are borne by a spirit of sacrifice and altruism, which no longer proceeds from these needs (unless we play on the word ‘need’). The needs which allegedly orient being receive their sense from an intuition which no longer proceeds from these needs” (87).

However, if the orientation is more fundamental than human needs—\(^9\)—and indeed, more fundamental than culture—then it must itself lack a foundation. If, as Levinas’s language suggests, the fundamental orientation is rightly approached with a religious sensibility, then the lack of a *sens unique* amounts to the death of God. If there is no epistemological grounding for a fundamental (precultural) orientation, then how can the apprehension of any sense be seen as fundamental, except as a sort of “leap of faith,” or as an arbitrary choice? These questions amount to significantly more than epistemological puzzles. Value is

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\(^8\) Levinas seems to be thinking particularly of the scientific/technical perspective manifest in “orthodox” Marxism, but his point is by no means limited to that perspective.

\(^9\) It turns out that the fundamental orientation is one of *desire* rather than need, as will become clear in section 5.
radically put into question along with meaning. If all of Being is "arranged" by our culturally situated embodiment, then what sense can we make of good and evil except within a cultural framework?

To pose the question so succinctly makes it appear less than vicious, again because of the ease with which contemporary social science embraces this implication. The urgency of the question for Levinas becomes more evident when we recall that he is writing from a Jewish perspective, and in the shadow of the Holocaust. Levinas's burden, in the face of the contemporary philosophy of meaning, is to argue that, despite our total complicity in the "assembling" of Being, we can still make sense of the idea, drawn from Plato, of the Good that lies beyond Being. As he puts it, his goal is "to conceive of an orientation, a sense which would unite univocity and freedom" (91). Such a sense "can be posited only as a movement going outside of the identical, toward an other which is absolutely other" (91). Thus, Levinas's route to the unique sense is by way of the encounter with the Other. That a face presents me with a "content" that I am fundamentally unable to experience as a determinate content shows the absolute otherness of the Other. That is, the face stubbornly refuses to be contained by any conceptualization. While it is true that, in one sense, the Other first appears to me (bodily, or more strictly, "facially") within the field defined by my embodiment and cultural situatedness, it does not simply appear as one object among others. "[T]he epiphany of the other involves a signifyingness of its own independent of this meaning received from the world. The other comes to us not only out of context, but also without mediation; he signifies by himself. . . . mundane meaning is disturbed and jostled by another presence that is abstract (or, more exactly, absolute) and not integrated into the world" (95). The one-way directionality that is, as Levinas puts it, "before culture" is the directionality from myself toward this absolutely Other.

Levinas refers to the primordial movement toward the Other as a "work," thus underscoring the point that it is not passive. What he has in mind is not just any work, but a work that is undertaken without the usual expectation of personal gain. When my work is genuinely directed toward the Other, it is aimed not only beyond myself, here and now, but also beyond my time; that is, it is indifferent to my own death.

As an orientation toward the other, as sense, a work is possible only in patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering the Promised

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10 Levinas's claim that there is precultural meaning is tightly bound to the claim that the epiphany of the face is not mediated (in the Hegelian sense). See Westphal 1993 for an excellent discussion of the latter theme.
Land. . . . To renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one’s work is to envisage this triumph in a time without me. . . . it is the passage to the time of the other [92].

Thus, the work involved here is not simply one work among others, not simply one of a set of possible morally good actions; it is, as he says, “ethics itself” (93).

Characteristically, Levinas selects a religiously loaded term to signify the kind of work in question:

We could fix its concept with a Greek term “liturgy,” which in its primary meaning designates the exercise of a function which is not only totally gratuitous, but requires on the part of him who exercises it a putting out of funds at a loss.[11] For the moment all meaning drawn from any positive religion has to be removed from this term, even if in a certain way the idea of God should show its trace at the end of our analysis [92–93].

The idea of God “shows its trace” in Levinas’s thought in several ways. One of the most important of these is his indebtedness to the idea of God (or, as he refers to it, the idea of infinity) in René Descartes’s Meditations—an idea from which he draws primary inspiration for his account of the Other. It is surely surprising that Levinas would draw crucial inspiration from a thinker from whom he seeks so often to distance himself. It will become clear in the next section, however, that Levinas is here crediting Descartes with entertaining a very un-Cartesian thought—namely, the thought of an idea that could not possibly have originated within himself.

The ethical relationship with the Other, which arises before culture, sets up an ultimate meaning for which both ethical and religious language are appropriate. Before turning to that, though, let me offer a final clarification of the sense in which the sens unique that Levinas believes himself to have “discovered” constitutes meaning as well as direction (thus fulfilling both aspects of his play on sens). To phrase the problem starkly, how can the “movement” that Levinas argues is before culture be construed as a meaning, when to have a meaning is precisely to be culturally embedded? Levinas provides the beginning of an answer by emphasizing that the Other is not only a fellow participant in cultural expression, but also—and more importantly—an interlocutor:

[Expression, before being a celebration of being, is a relationship with him to whom I express the expression, and whose presence is already required for my cultural gesture of expression to be produced. The other who

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[11] A footnote by the translator confirms that λειτουργία (service to the people) derives from λείτος (of the people) and ἔργα (to work) (93 n. 58). It should be noted that “work,” in this context, does not entail volition in any standard sense.
faces me is not included in the totality of being expressed. He arises behind every assembling of being as he to whom I express what I express. . . . He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is sense primordially, for he gives sense to expression itself, for it is only by him that a phenomenon as a meaning is, of itself, introduced into being [95].

Thus, meaning itself would have no meaning if it were not for the Other. There would be no sense in expression if there were no one to whom the expression was directed. The movement toward the Other is thus a meaning in the most fundamental sense imaginable, namely, in the sense that it gives meaning to the very idea of meaning. There is meaning not only because I bestow it but also, and more primordially, because there are Others who understand, and whom I understand in turn. Thus, Levinas concludes, "Meaning is situated in the ethical, presupposed by all culture and all meaning" (100).

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Even with this clarification, we are perhaps left with the impression that Levinas oversteps the confines of his own phenomenological criteria for intelligibility. Beginning from experience, Levinas seems to claim that we can have some sort of phenomenological evidence for what cannot be experienced because it lies "before" experience. This brings us back to Levinas's retrieval of the idea of the infinite.

A crucial step in Descartes's passage from subjectivity to the external world was an argument for the existence of God. Central to his theological proof was the contention that the idea of God was not an idea that could have originated within himself, since the source of an idea whose content is infinite must be infinite itself. Thus, the only thing that could be the source of a person's idea of God is God (Descartes 1641/1980, 70-71). For Levinas, Descartes's crucial insight was that the finite mind cannot contain an idea whose content is (or includes) infinity. Levinas elaborates:

[Th]e idea of infinity is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea. . . . [W]ithout holding to the Cartesian argumentation that proves the separated existence of the Infinite . . . it is of importance to emphasize that the transcendence of the Infinite with respect to the I which is separated from it and which thinks it measures (so to speak) its very infinitude. The distance that separates ideatum and idea here constitutes the content of the ideatum itself. . . . [T]he infinite is the absolutely other [Levinas 1961/1969, 49].

Inasmuch as the content of an idea is infinite in this sense, it is not really an idea in any strict sense of that term. Rather, the "idea" of infinity is a relation "which the 'I think' maintains with the Infinite [which] it
can nowise contain and from which it is separated” (Levinas 1961/1969, 48). The idea of the infinite is the idea of that which cannot be contained by its idea; what is thought is precisely that which is wholly beyond thought. According to Levinas, the Other is the primary instantiation of this “idea” in subjective experience. The way in which the idea of infinity necessarily fails to contain its own content is exactly analogous to the way in which the face of the Other overflows my efforts to contain it conceptually.

It should be clear, at this point, that the difficulty of Levinas’s prose indicates more than a mere fondness for neologism and poetic style. Like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty before him, Levinas strains toward a form of discourse that is not tied to a Cartesian framework. Beginning with the protocols of phenomenology, Levinas seeks to describe an experience of something that lies, strictly speaking, outside our experience, yet impinges upon it. From the Cartesian perspective, Levinas is attempting to describe what cannot be described. Before discussing further the implications of Levinas’s identification of Infinity and the Other, we need to clarify why this apparent paradox does not constitute a theoretically vicious contradiction.

The radical otherness that is presented by a face, inasmuch as it overflows the horizons of the world as they are constituted in my experience, seems to signify something that is beyond the world. This is so in precisely the same way that the idea of infinity seems to be an idea that “refers” to infinity, as if infinity were straightforwardly its content. However, just as the idea of infinity is not simply an idea with infinite content, the face is not simply a sign that refers to the Other.

[The] wonder [of the face] is due to the elsewhere from which it comes and into which it already withdraws. This coming from elsewhere is not a symbolic reference to that elsewhere as a term. . . . The other proceeds from the absolutely absent. His relationship with the absolutely absent from which he comes does not indicate, does not reveal this absent; and yet the absent has a meaning in a face [102–3].

Levinas describes the manner in which a face carries a meaning (even though what is meant is neither indicated nor revealed) by using the term “trace,” which he draws from Plotinus (105–6). Inasmuch as the transcendence of the Other “refuses immanence” (103), that refusal leaves a trace in my phenomenal field. Whereas there is normally a “correlation,” or a “rectitude,” between a sign and what it signifies, a trace signifies by introducing an “unrectitude” that cannot be forced into the existing order of experience. I obviously do not perceive what is absent, but it does not follow that I do not in any sense perceive the absence itself.
The central point that must be extracted from this paradoxical discussion is that there is, according to Levinas, the possibility of an experience that signifies what lies wholly beyond experience. He summarizes the point by returning to the idea of phenomenological reflection.

If the signifyingness of a trace consists in signifying without making appear, if it establishes a relationship with illeity, a relationship which is personal and ethical, and if, consequently, a trace does not belong to phenomenology, to the comprehension of the appearing and dissimulating, we can at least approach this signifyingness in another way by situating it with respect to the phenomenology it interrupts [104].

_Illeity_ (from _ille_, Latin for "that one") is Levinas's term for the sense in which the absolute alterity of the Other presents itself as "beyond Being"—as existing, for example, in some spatiotemporal frame that is completely separate from the whole of space-time as we know it (cf. Levinas 1967/1987b, especially 71). That this kind of alterity suggests the distinction between the realm of appearance and the realm of ideas, as it was articulated in Plato's thought, is fully in line with Levinas's intentions, as will become evident in section 4. However, instead of depicting phenomena as "participating" in the reality of the ideas, Levinas represents the phenomenal realm as signifying only indirectly—that is (roughly speaking), by its absence—what lies beyond that realm. Yet the relationship that Levinas posits between interiority and what lies beyond is a relationship that has substantive content, despite the impossibility of passing cognitively beyond a certain boundary.

To state the same general point in more traditional phenomenological terms, anything that absolutely transcends consciousness will never emerge in a phenomenological analysis. Nevertheless, the analysis may be "interrupted" precisely by tracing a particular noetic trajectory to an abrupt (and apparently absolute) noetic limit. Such a limit may turn out to be more than a mere boundary; the limit itself may be pregnant with meaning.

Levinas offers a vivid example that serves to make this point more accessible. Consider a criminal who carefully wipes away the fingerprints at the scene of a crime. When the crime is investigated, the fingerprints will be absent, and insofar as identification becomes impossible because of this action, the criminal has "disturbed the order in an irreparable way. He has passed absolutely" (104–5). Even so, the criminal has left traces of having removed the fingerprints, at least in the sense that the fingerprints one would expect to find are absent as well. The investigation is "interrupted" in this situation not by a certain bit of evidence, but precisely by the lack of evidence—or better, by the evidence of the removal of evidence. This example clarifies the way in which an absence can be every bit as significant, from a phenomenological point of view, as
a presence. What is absent can be more than simply absent; it can be significantly absent. The latter is the case, Levinas contends, with regard to the trace of the Other, which is given in a face.

It is at this point that the import of Levinas's more "religious" turns of phrase can be made more clear. Near the end of "Meaning and Sense," Levinas returns explicitly to the theological discursive context from which he has drawn many of his conceptual "raw materials." He does not hesitate to use the word "divinity" in connection with our experience of the Other as presenting a moral imperative, noting that "[o]nly a being that transcends the world, an ab-solute being, can leave a trace" (105). He also clearly accepts the "religious" connotations of the term "trace" in Plotinus. "A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past. Plotinus conceived of the procession of the One as compromising neither the immutability nor the ab-solute separation of the One. It is in this situation . . . that the exceptional signifyingness of a trace delineates in the world" (105–6). Hence, Levinas does not stop short of attributing the trace (the illeity) within which the face "shines" to the absolute transcendence associated with God. The idea of infinity does not afford a proof that God exists, as Descartes believed, but it does afford a way—articulated within the cultural tradition of Greek philosophical reflection and Western theism—to understand how the whole of Being derives a sense (that is, a sens unique) from "without." He summarizes the relationship between the trace and the sens unique thus:

To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace. The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal "order" itself. He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity. It is through this illeity, situated beyond the calculations and reciprocities of economy and of the world, that being has a sense (106–7).

Two crucial points should be grasped here. The first is that Levinas implies an identification of the experience of the Other with the experience of the sacred. The second is that this experience, even though it apparently opens a precultural sens unique, is still apprehended from beginning to end in culturally specific terms—specifically, the terms of

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12 The translator hyphenates "ab-solute" here in order to emphasize the play on "abso-
lute" and "absolution" in the text: "[I]t is in the trace of the other that a face shines: what is presented there is absolving itself from my life and visits me as already ab-solute" (106, emphasis added).

13 For present purposes, I am leaving aside the distinction between the sacred and the holy found in Levinas 1977/1990. I hope to deal with this distinction in another context.
the Western religious tradition. The encounter with the Other cannot be described or understood in any way that is not culturally and historically situated, yet the nature of the experience points emphatically beyond that situatedness.

The phenomenological perspective with which Levinas begins, even though it has supposedly been detached from Cartesian moorings, might seem to remain thoroughly subjectivistic, but this is not the case. If it were simply a matter of pointing out that the Cartesian subject experiences itself as being embedded in the world, as being a nexus of intentional interconnections with objects and persons experienced as other, then the conclusion would be justified. A subject that experiences itself as being in the world is still a subject, and the embeddedness may still be an illusion continually generated by an Evil Demon. But the experience of the Other that has been my focus is not simply the experience of a particular alterity within my phenomenal field. Rather, it is a primordial experience of alterity, of the "idea" that would make sense of this or that particular alterity. It is not simply otherness, but transcendence in the most primordial sense.

The perspective that emerges from Levinas's work, then, is not one in which subject and object have been artificially linked or fused. Rather, it is one in which the primary divide between immanence and transcendence does not correspond to the divide between self and Other, as it apparently did for Descartes. If it must be related to any other divide in human experience, it is probably best seen as roughly corresponding to the divide between appearance and reality. Merleau-Ponty and Levinas deny that the distinction between appearance and reality should be identified with that between self and Other because meaning only makes sense if it is shared. Meaning is cultural. To view the self as social, that is, to view it as culturally embedded, is thus to presuppose that it is not alone. It is, in other words, to make the wholly plausible assumption that solipsism is false.

Once this assumption of sociation is "secured," so to speak, the importance of Levinas's use of religious language becomes clear. For the modern tradition of social thought, religious symbols and meanings have generally been considered culture par excellence. By using religious language to speak of the encounter with the Other, Levinas is trying to show, phenomenologically, that what is at stake is not simply the subjective experience of individuals, but a culturally apprehended experience, an experience that prompts the evocation of modes of discourse most closely bound up with ultimate concern, or "sacred cosmnization," to borrow Peter Berger's term (Berger 1967). The problem of the "limitation"

14 See Watson 1986 for an insightful discussion of the archive (to borrow Michel Foucault's term) behind Levinas's claim that the face of the Other is the site of the encounter with the Holy.
of individual standpoints is thus replaced by the problem of cultural relativity. When Levinas asks whether there can be any meaning apart from a cultural viewpoint, he is not asking whether there is a world external to the individual subject. He is already assuming that the latter question must be answered in the affirmative. The primordial experience is that of a “we” rather than an “I.” The problem now is not whether there is anything outside one’s mind, but whether it is possible to make sense of anything outside one’s cultural standpoint. A central thrust of Levinas’s work is to show how the latter question might also be answered in the affirmative.

Levinas’s argument, then, is that Western culture possesses the resources to make sense of the idea that cultural relativism, while theoretically or methodologically unavoidable, is not the last word. To suggest how these resources might be tapped, Levinas evokes the thinker whose work lies at the very origins of the Western distinction between appearance and reality—Plato. A look at what Levinas means when he writes of returning to Plato will enable us to discern more clearly the strength of his claim that cultural relativism may be overcome.

According to Levinas’s account in “Meaning and Sense,” midcentury European philosophy of meaning is “antiplatonist” in that it rejects the intrinsic transcendence of the sensible world by intelligible reality (83). For Plato, the meanings behind the sensible phenomena are ahistorical and precultural, and they are accessible to the intellect insofar as the latter is able to detach itself from history and culture—that is, from its embodiment. The phenomenal provides the initial access to meaning, but the intellect must transcend the phenomenal in order fully to grasp meaning. The account of embodiment provided by Merleau-Ponty, insofar as it renders the human subject intrinsically incarnate, also renders intelligibility fully contextual, both historically and culturally. “[A] meaning cannot be separated from the access leading to it. The access is part of the meaning itself. The scaffolding is never taken down; the ladder is never pulled up” (85).

It is quite clear, in “Meaning and Sense,” that Levinas himself accepts, and even applauds, this anti-Platonism for its relativization of every cultural and historical perspective. The assumption that there exists a privileged perspective tends to encourage the identification of one’s own perspective as that privileged point of view, the lack of entailment notwithstanding. As Levinas puts it, “[T]he emancipations of minds can be a pretext for exploitation and violence” (101). Historically, the belief that one has unequivocal access to the meaning of Being itself, beyond its culturally mediated expressions, has led to the
belief that one has warrant for the enforcement of universal conformity to whatever mandates are putatively entailed by that meaning. That the contextualism of the contemporary philosophy of meaning apparently rules out the possession of such warrant is, for Levinas, its most salient virtue.

Levinas's affirmation of this anti-Platonism is far from unqualified, however. For beyond the mitigation of cultural imperialism, the implications of this relativization of perspective quickly turn vicious. Even if it has the advantage of showing that the atrocities of history are without epistemological grounds, it also seems to entail that the opposite move—judging such atrocities to be unequivocally immoral—is equally arbitrary. The anti-Platonism that accomplishes the needed relativization of cultural perspectives has itself arisen within a particular cultural perspective, namely, the perspective of contemporary Western European culture. From the point of view of "objective thought," to recall Merleau-Ponty's phrase, the circularity involved here is a fatal one. The basis for challenging violent ethnocentrism is equally a challenge to itself; in the language of analytic philosophy, it is "self-defeating."

The necessity for moving beyond this way of looking at the problem is evident, for a failure to make some sort of primordial sense of judgments of value would be just as unthinkable, for Levinas, as a failure to make sense of the very idea of meaning. Thus, the problem of "moral epistemology" is exactly parallel to the problem of meaning dealt with above, and in section 6 I will show how we can begin to address the problem of warrant that arose with reference to meaning.

It is the relationship to the Other that gives meaning to meaning at the most primordial level, as we saw in section 2. Likewise, it is the "directionality" of that relation that gives a directionality (in a moral sense) to human sociation. The sens unique that is discernible (that is, from its trace) in the encounter with the Other is what provides the basis for both meaning and morality. However, if Platonism is emphatically disallowed, then how can we have recourse to what seems to amount to a Platonic realm of absolute transcendence? Levinas nicely summarizes the bulk of what is at stake as follows:

The saraband of innumerable and equivalent cultures, each justifying itself in its own context, creates a world which is, to be sure, de-occidentalized, but also disoriented. To catch sight, in meaning, of a situation that precedes culture, to envision language out of the revelation of the other (which is at the same time the birth of morality) in the gaze of man aiming at a man precisely as abstract man, disengaged from all culture, in the nakedness of his face, is to return to Platonism in a new way. It is also to find oneself able to judge civilizations on the basis of ethics [101, emphasis added].
Embedded in this passage are two crucial and intertwining ideas: (1) within and through culture, we gain “access” to meaning and value that are pre-cultural, and (2) the Western cultural tradition (here characterized as issuing from Platonism) is the source of the view of humans as “abstract man.”

The first idea, that of “access” to what is transcendent, is the precise point at which the contemporary philosophy of meaning is clearly at odds with Platonism. For the latter, as has already been mentioned, access to the true world of the Forms is possible through a liberation of the intellect from its bodily imprisonment in the phenomenal realm. Such liberation is associated, in Plato’s dialogues, with bodily asceticism as well as philosophical contemplation. The account of embodiment provided by Merleau-Ponty, and accepted by Levinas, allows access to the transcendent only by way of the phenomenal—or the sensible, to recall Levinas’s Kantian terminology. He considers the transcendent to be accessible from within the phenomenal realm only because he (unlike Descartes and Husserl) follows Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger in situating subjectivity itself in the phenomenal world.

His assumption, then, is that there is no route to the transcendent that does not ultimately begin with sensibility. While this assumption is emphatically non-Cartesian, in the sense noted, it remains thoroughly Kantian. That is, Kant’s “Copernican revolution,” though cast in a somewhat different light here, is not reversed. We still apprehend the reality that transcends our understanding only insofar as that reality “conforms” to our understanding. The barrier between understanding and reality in itself (an sich) has become semipermeable, so to speak, but it has not been removed.

That the view under consideration remains Kantian in this sense provides the first clear indication of how it remains Platonic as well. From the absolute heterogeneity of appearance and reality in Plato, both Descartes and Kant inferred an absolute epistemic boundary. In the same way that removing the absoluteness of that boundary from Kant does not entail removing the boundary itself, so it does not entail the rejection of Plato’s positing of a reality that is radically other than reality as it appears to us. The Platonic “mistake” lies not in positing a realm that is wholly other than the realm of appearance; rather, it lies in locating too much of “what there is” (to borrow Willard Quine’s phrase) in the transcendent realm. Put another way, Plato assumed that what is transcendent is what is knowable, strictly speaking. The view articulated here assumes that what is transcendent, though not knowable, is

15 “The idea of infinity is revealed, in the strong sense of the term. There is no natural religion” (Levinas 1961/1969, 62).
nonetheless the source of the meaning and value that inhere in what is knowable. In Levinas's terms, it is what is transcendent that provides human understanding and human action with a sens unique. That is one reason why, for Levinas, religious language is wholly appropriate in this context.

At the same time, Levinas is careful to note that the radical nature of the Platonic distinction helps to prevent the opposite "mistake," that is, the "mistake" of pulling too much of what is transcendent into the realm of appearance. He states this very succinctly in terms of the religious tendency to undermine the absolute otherness of God:

The distance between me and God, radical and necessary, is produced in being itself [that is, by the encounter with the Other]. Philosophical [that is, Platonic] transcendence thereby differs from the transcendence of religions . . . , from the transcendence that is already (or still) participation, submergence in the being toward which it goes, which holds the transcending being in its invisible meshes, as to do it violence [Levinas 1961/1969, 48].

The "violence" that is envisioned is a discursive violence, a failure to recognize the analogical character of discourse about God. Just as theistic thinkers of the Middle Ages insisted that our discourse can never straightforwardly "capture" God as its referent, Levinas claims that the infinity from which the Other comes can never be conceptually integrated into the world.

A better way to put this same general point, perhaps, is to say that the rejection of Cartesian dualism does not entail the wholesale rejection of Platonic dualism. Insofar as the two have been inextricably linked historically (a linkage that is still assumed by Heidegger), the primary alternatives have seemed to be idealism and materialism. Levinas's "return to Platonism" provides a possible way of moving beyond this apparent dichotomy.

Levinas's return to Platonism may be fleshed out a bit more fully with reference to his retrieval of the idea of desire, which serves as a focus for his treatment of the relationship between transcendence and moral value. Just as he retrieved the idea of infinity from Descartes (without the Cartesian framework) to elucidate the radical otherness of the face,

16 For Heidegger, the differences among Plato, Descartes, and Kant seem to be relatively insignificant compared to what they share. The exhaustion of their shared project is what Heidegger refers to as "the end of philosophy" (see Blum 1990). Levinas breaks decisively with Heidegger by arguing for a (non-Cartesian) return to Platonism.
so he retrieves the idea of desire from Plato to clarify the response to the encounter with the Other. Because of the Other's stubborn refusal to be subsumed under one of my categories, his or her presence calls my being into question—not because I am shown to lack something which the Other provides, but precisely because I lack nothing.

To speak of the self as "lacking nothing" might at first seem to be a surprising move, given Levinas's commitment to the sociocultural embeddedness of interiority. Indeed, the phrase is compatible with other aspects of his argument only because it has a narrow and specific meaning. Levinas is obviously not claiming that the individual self has no need of sociation, nor is he advancing the even less plausible claim that every individual possesses adequate resources for survival. Rather, he claims that the experience of interiority is primordially an experience of being "at home" [chez soi]. The world in which I live—of which I am, in fact, the center—is, practically speaking, a "site" in which I may freely impose my will through my actions. The objects that I encounter in my site are ordered in relation to the projects that I would engage in. There is resistance to my whim in the objects I encounter, but there is at the same time a plasticity:

In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means. . . . [17] The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same. I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession [Levinas 1961/1969, 37–38].

This "possession" is not simply ownership in a material sense. What Levinas has in mind is the Kantian point that I normally experience the world as an ordered whole rather than as a chaotic mass of sense impressions. From the point of view of interiority, the world is a totality, such that every particular that is experienced has a discernible place within the system. Every phenomenon may be subsumed under a category. This is what Levinas means when he speaks of the Other being reduced to the same.

It is this normal "totalizing" mode of being of interiority that the epiphany of the Other radically interrupts. The Other is not some thing that can be located within a frame of reference ordered according to my will or my projects. Inasmuch as the Other does not fit into my world, I have no basis for understanding "it" as something that was "missing" before. It simply would not have occurred to me that I might in any

[17] Consider, in this regard, the encounter of the Little Prince with the businessman who claims to own the stars (Saint Exupéry 1943/1971, 52–57).
sense *need* the Other, but its presence draws me nonetheless. I desire
the Other, but because the Other is wholly outside my site, and because
my desire is not based on need, it is a desire that is deepened rather
than satisfied by its object. It is, in Levinas's terminology, *metaphysical*

The movement toward the other, instead of completing me and contenting
me, implicates me in a conjuncture which in a way did not concern me and
should leave me indifferent—what was I looking for here? Whence came
this shock when I passed, indifferent, under another's gaze? ... The desir-
able does not gratify my desire but hollows it out, and as it were nourishes
me with new hungers [94].

This notion of metaphysical desire provides a "model," so to speak,
that illuminates the possibility of thinking what is, strictly speaking,
beyond thought. Recall that the face of the Other signifies as a trace and
that what is signified is not signified directly or positively. A barrier is
reached, but the barrier hints at what lies beyond. In what sense does
the understanding lay hold of what is thus hinted? The notion of meta-
physical desire provides a partial answer. I can desire the Other even
though it is neither something I need nor something I can attain. The
desire operates on a level that is deeper than the desire for this or that
object or state of affairs. To desire is, Levinas says, "to burn with an-
other fire than need, which saturation extinguishes, to think beyond
what one thinks" (97). What cannot be grasped as a part of the world,
what cannot be subsumed under any category, and thus cannot be an
object of thought in any normal (Kantian) sense, can nevertheless be
graped at a deeper level. This is because the thought of the Other is not
one that I initiate. Rather, it is one that is evoked in me by the Other's
refusal to be contained by any thought that I initiate.

Metaphysical desire also plays a second, more important role for
Levinas. The desire that is awakened by the Other is deeper than ordi-
nary desire because it is inseparable from the ethical mandate discussed
earlier. The refusal of the Other to fit into my categorial scheme is as
much a moral revelation as an ontological resistance. The world in
which I am at home is shown to be less than the whole of reality. The
face makes apparent, according to Levinas, that I am somehow answer-
able to the Other, even responsible for the Other: "The I before the other
is infinitely responsible. The other who provokes this ethical movement
in consciousness and puts out of order the good conscience of the Same
coinciding with itself involves a surplus for which intentionality is not
adequate" (97).

Further, my responsibility is not eliminated even if I eliminate the
Other physically. The face commands me not to murder; that I am capa-
ble of breaking this command does not silence it. That there is an Other
means that I am perhaps not the center of the universe after all and that I am not the only one who might possess all that I possess. To go on as if I were the center, as if I were the only possessor, would be to position myself over against the Other in a way that would necessarily impact the Other. "I did not know I was so rich, but I no longer have the right to keep anything for myself" (94). Metaphysical desire is as much a compassion and a generosity as an appetite.

The tension that becomes evident here between my metaphysical desire and my attempt to subsume the Other is a tension that others before Levinas have cast in religious terms. Mircea Eliade, for example, describes the contrast thus:

[H]omo religiosus always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real. He further believes that life has a sacred origin and that human existence realizes all of its potentialities in proportion as it is religious—that is, participates in reality. . . . [N]onreligious man . . . regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence, . . . Man makes himself. . . . The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. . . . He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god [Eliade 1957/1959, 202–3].

"Killing the last god" may be understood in Levinas's terms as the attempt to eliminate every potential cosmic center that is not constituted by my incarnation. The religious person desires to be near to God, we might say, while the nonreligious person desires to be God.18

The experience of transcendence is, at bottom, the experience of having my interiority brought into question ontologically, epistemologically, and morally. Ontologically, I find that I am not the only possible source of reality. Although I am capable of creating, I experience a presence within the world that so overflows and escapes from my experience that I could not have created it. Epistemologically, I find that my perspective on the world is not the only possible perspective. There is a point of view that I can never occupy, because the only way of defining it relative to my point of view is that it is not mine. Because the Other so radically escapes my cognition, it simultaneously threatens my freedom (to such a degree that I am inclined to murder) and awakens my desire (to such a degree that I am inclined to awe, and even to worship). The Other is at once the mysterium tremendum and the mysterium fascinans.

18 Eliade is careful to point out, of course, that his distinction is a typification: "[N]onreligious man in the pure state is a comparatively rare phenomenon, even in the most desacralized of modern societies" (Eliade 1957/1959, 204). What concerns us here is that the distinction points to a tension that is presumably never wholly absent from individual experience.
If morality is understood as arising in the context of sociation, then the insight that the limits of my understanding become apparent precisely in this context would seem necessarily to have moral implications. Inasmuch as the Other fundamentally escapes my understanding, the forced totalization of the Other—murder, in the extreme case—is an imposition of my will for which a justification is, in principle, unavailable. As Levinas puts it, murder is impossible—not physically speaking, of course, but morally speaking (Levinas 1961/1969, 198–99). If I kill someone, it is fundamentally because I wish to be rid of the limits that are imposed by his or her presence. The cognitive and moral limits that are illuminated by the face, however, are not eliminated by removing the face from the purview of sensibility. The infinite distance between myself and the Other, once opened in my experience by the Other's epiphany, will remain open. My responsibility, once illuminated, is seen as a part of what I am. The commandment that was initially inscribed on the face of the Other is now inscribed on the heart of the same.\(^{19}\) “To be an I means . . . not to be able to escape responsibility. . . . The uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me” (97).

We can now comprehend more fully the thrust of Levinas's retrieval of Platonic dualism. For Plato, cognitive access to transcendence is never divorced from moral considerations, since truth is never divorced from goodness. Though Plato (that is, the Western tradition issuing from Plato) is perhaps more optimistic regarding univocal access both to truth and to warrant for action than we find ourselves able to be, he is nonetheless correct to emphasize the necessity of a sens unique, a sense prior to culture, to render both meaning and judgment intelligible.

The overcoming of Platonism in the more narrow (culturally imperialistic) sense has been accomplished, Levinas says, by means of resources drawn from the very cultural tradition within which it arose. As he puts it, “[Platonism] is overcame in the name of the generosity of Western thought itself, which, catching sight of the abstract man in men, proclaimed the absolute value of the person, and then encompassed in the respect it bears it the cultures in which these persons stand or in which they express themselves” (101). What Levinas seems to be suggesting here is that the universalizing tendencies of Plato's thought have had a dual influence on Western culture. On the one hand, the belief in the

\(^{19}\) Compare Jeremiah 31:33: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (New Revised Standard Version).
human ability to gain access to the truth has encouraged many Westerners to assume that they have, in fact, laid hold of it, and that they therefore are licensed to impose (often violently) its putative implications upon those who are less epistemically fortunate. On the other hand, however, the belief that truth must be universal has helped to give rise to a view of human value as essentially transcending cultural boundaries. What ultimately renders human beings valuable is precisely their humanity, and not their race, tribe, country of origin, and so forth. Every human individual, according to this view, takes on an absolute value by virtue of sharing in the essence of humanity.

Insofar as this emphasis on “the absolute value of the person” (101) is underwritten by Platonic essentialism, it is clearly undermined by the contemporary rejection of Platonism—that is, by the rejection of the assumption that there is an unchanging “human nature” that is shared by all human beings, above and beyond what characterizes them physiologically. Paradoxically, however, it is this very assumption that has given impetus to contemporary cultural relativism, according to Levinas. The respect uniformly afforded each human individual (in principle) has been naturally extended to each human culture. Without this extension, the problem of conflicting claims made by different cultures would not have arisen. To be sure, extensive contact with non-Western cultures has been a prerequisite to the development of contemporary cultural relativism. Still, the imperialism of Western culture has historically been brought into question not primarily from without, but from within. Respect for other cultures increasingly leads us to question the ways in which we have (collectively) related to them, to the point where the assumption that the West is culturally superior—that is, more “advanced”—is no longer tenable.

Even though he takes for granted that the West can no longer be understood as being superior in any sense that would license any kind of imperialism, Levinas is not prepared to conclude that it is not superior in any sense at all. That the West developed the resources radically to question its own cultural imperialism is the accomplishment that Levinas apparently wishes to characterize as a move beyond the cultural level. Rather than viewing the self-undermining of Platonism as some sort of contradiction or incoherence, Levinas sees it as a vindication. Even if the ontology has failed to hold up in detail, Platonism has been correct in one of its central emphases. That “the very excellence of Western culture [is] culturally and historically conditioned” does not entail that it is not, after all, an excellence (101).\(^{20}\)

\(^{20}\) For a similar argument, in connection with Kant, see Kolakowski 1990b.
In what sense, though, is this a move to a perspective that is pre-cultural? On the one hand, it is clear that Levinas believes that the insight of cultural relativism is an insight the validity of which transcends the particularity of Western culture. However, if, as Levinas would surely admit, this judgment itself is culturally rooted, then does he really have any basis for it? In other words, from a point of view concerned with epistemological justification, does Levinas's belief amount to anything more than wishful thinking? Clearly, there is no demonstration available. However, if Levinas's account of the encounter with the Other is phenomenologically accurate, then it does provide a sort of warrant for the belief in question.

Sometimes when Levinas describes the way the face resists totalization, he refers to its "nudity" (see, for example, Levinas 1961/1969, 74–75). He uses this term to convey the way in which the face strikes sensibility without any cultural overlay. The suggestion of the absence of clothing vividly conveys the point, since clothing is one of the more obvious material manifestations of culture. A person who is absolutely nude—that is, who has not subjected his or her body to any cultural modification—would be impossible to identify with a particular culture. Unlike a Saussurean sign, which signifies by fitting into a system of signs, the face signifies by refusing to fit into a system. It carries a self-contained meaning, but that meaning is first of all ethical rather than epistemic. "The relation of the face is not an object-cognition" (Levinas 1961/1969, 75). The κοθοτο of the face is not found, strictly speaking, in my turning toward it in my perception. "The face has turned to me—and this is its very nudity. . . . The nakedness of the face is destituteness" (Levinas 1961/1969, 75).

If there is a crucial mistake in the Western idea of "abstract man," according to Levinas, it is not in the claim that there is a universal meaning associated with humanity. Rather, the error lies in taking that universal meaning to be signification in an ordinary (Saussurean) sense. In the same way that this encounter with the Other, which "opens up" a pre-cultural sense, nonetheless always occurs within a particular cultural context, so the insight of cultural relativism may be seen as having transcultural significance, even though it is (and always must be) formulated within a particular cultural tradition. The end of Levinas's argument is not the absolute truth of a proposition, but an absolute responsibility. "The transcendence of the Other, which is his eminence, his height, his lordship, in its concrete meaning includes his destitution, his exile [dépaysement], and his rights as a stranger" (Levinas 1961/1969, 76–77).

The "overcoming" of cultural relativism in Levinas's thought, then, is by no means a repudiation of the relativity of cultures. Rather, it is a decisive step toward differentiating the necessary demise of cultural
imperialism from the equally necessary survival of our ability to call evil by its name. In Levinas's words:

Neither things, nor the perceived world, nor the scientific world enable us to rejoin the norms of the absolute. As cultural works, they are steeped in history. But the norms of morality are not embarked in history and culture. They are not even islands that emerge from it—for they make all meaning, even cultural meaning, possible, and make it possible to judge cultures [101–2].21

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21 Leszek Kolakowski has argued, in a similar vein, that the loss of a distinction between sacred and profane, which he identifies with the human refusal to accept limits, deprives “evil” of meaning: “To say that evil is contingent is to say that there is no evil, and therefore that we have no need of a sense that is already there, fixed and imposed on us whether we will it or not. But to say this is also to say that our only means of decreeing sense is our innate impulse; and this means that we must either share the childlike faith of old anarchists in our natural goodness or admit that we can affirm our identity only . . . as undomesticated animals. Thus the bottom line, as it were, of the ideal of total liberation is the sanctioning of force and violence and thereby, finally, of despotism and the destruction of culture” (Kolakowski 1990a, 73).
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