

The Power of a Human Face

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The Jewish philosopher Levinas talks about the "meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced me." For Levinas, our ethics are a result of appreciating the existence of another human being, a human face, before us. By ignoring others we shirk our abiding responsibility.

The human face is mysterious, inscrutable, and powerful. Sometimes when we have difficult things to say we avert our eyes, as if it is too hard to look at another when saying something that unsettles our own souls. And the opposite is true — lives can be positively transformed with a single look. In her early work, *Scenes From a Clerical Life* George Eliot wrote: "There is a power in the direct glance of a sincere and loving human soul, which will do more to dissipate prejudice and kindle charity than the most elaborate arguments." In other words to truly see another human being is the most effective philosophy.

The Hebrew word for face is plural, *panim*. The human face is capable of almost infinite shades of meaning — joy, sorrow, skepticism, laughter, love. The truest image of God in this world shines through each.