

# Levinasian Intentionality: Seen Through the Veil of a Muslim Woman

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The recent killings in Paris sparked by critical cartoons aimed at Muslim culture by the satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, raises ethical and political questions about freedom as such and the extent of and limits to free expression of speech and religious practices. In this paper, I use Emmanuel Levinas's teaching on intentionality and the face-to-face relationship to highlight the challenging complexity of these questions. In keeping with the way that Levinas prioritizes ethics as our fundamental normative approach in our daily, ordinary interactions with others in the world, what are the salient ethical issues that call for attention in the *'affaire du voile* (the veil affair), as it has come to be known in France?

In a 2011 article from the Week in Review section of the New York Times, entitled "The French, The Veil, And the Look," Elaine Sciolino commented on the 2004 French law that officially banned the wearing of full-face veils by French Muslim women.<sup>1</sup> In her article, Sciolino examined what she calls the "fuss" surrounding this question "about a minority of women who wear odd-looking dress in a country that is the world's creative headquarters for odd-looking fashion." Her critical, feminist response was that "In French culture, the eyes are supposed to meet in public, to invite a conversation or just to exchange a visual greeting with a stranger. Among Muslims, the eyes of men and women are not supposed to meet, even by chance, and especially not in public or between strangers."<sup>2</sup>

My intent is not to question ontic or legal/political issues surrounding potential problems of enforcing such a law or why the customs regarding veils in

France differ from those in Saudi Arabia, Iran, or the United States. Nor do I take issue with her final point, that “France will remain France—the land where the uncovered body is celebrated...[the land where the figure of Marianne, the flag-waving woman in a white peasant blouse with her breasts exposed]...remains, as she has always been, the French republic’s idealized national symbol.” Rather, for me, the issue provides a *lived world* opportunity to examine the extent to which Emanuel Levinas’s theory of intentionality that he sets out in *Totality and Infinity* can be applied to evaluate the ethics that normatively structure the political perspectives that define this political issue, because of the ethical demands implied in the face-to-face relationship. One of those implications that condition my socio-political action is to not only account for the radical alterity or the radical difference that I experience in the face of the other but that such an accounting presupposes that I am compelled to “intervene” and thus to exercise my power of sovereignty in such a way as to create the actual, material conditions to have the very opportunity to positively or adversely affect others and their relations in the world. Thus, from that perspective, intentionality, ethics, and optics go hand in hand for Levinas as does *le regard* for the other.

Levinas sets the tone for establishing such a stance in the opening pages of *Totality and Infinity* by identifying morality with the experience of an excess of signification “as such,” that he calls “the eschatological vision”:

The eschatological vision breaks with the totality of wars and empires being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality. The first “vision” of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reveals the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a *signification without a context*. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision—it *consummates* this vision; ethics is an optics. (TI, 23)<sup>3</sup>

One way to take this passage is that, for Levinas, ethics is a “vision” but a vision without image, deprived of totalizing and objectifying capacity, a deprivation that indicates an image without derivation from the political interests that contextually define our “principles” that then motivate our actions. It is a “vision” without image that presupposes that I am able, metaphorically speaking, “to keep my eyes closed” and thus allow for another possibility horizon—with other perspectives—to open up and reveal itself. In this case, “optics” means a special kind of refraction that forms an ethical perspective that does not come from the appearances of “things” but, instead, this “vision” presents a peculiar kind of “image” that nonetheless signifies without “derivation from” existing structures of socio-political organization. It is an an-archic vision that questions the very principles, any and all principles, that are employed to rationally justify (to rationalize) the

ethical force of this or that political system.

Moreover, it is a vision that exceeds the totality and institutes a relation with the infinite in what I interpret as Levinas's reworking of Husserl's presentation of intuition, that I set out a sense for the whole and then through the course of experience, have that intuition verified in its coming true by actually happening.<sup>4</sup> Experience of morality does not proceed from the vision, as if it could be deduced from a set of rational principles, a la Kantian ethics or utilitarian ethics (or even given character traits of virtue ethics) but "consumates" the vision. That is, morality is validated with the act of responding, informed by an ideal or infinite metaphysical desire of being open to responding to the other.

Indeed, the attempt to understand the ethical as an expression of a non-representative capacity of the visual, as a way to express ethical directionality and thus see through actions that are taken that signify directionality without being dictated to or co-opted by the tyranny of an established political order, is already a crucial project. In bold strokes, Levinas deconstructs the very language of ethical inquiry and challenges, along the way, the whole tradition of Western philosophical discourse. Those are the first few strokes; however, in the course of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas does not give us any further direct explanation of this "ethics as optics." Our task in reading his text become a constructive one, as we are compelled to respond to the open question: how do the respective languages of "vision," the "ethical," and Levinas's phenomenology of intentionality relate with each other? And, what does that mean for determining the ethicality of our relationships with others? In part, the answer has to do with the way that Levinas connects his "other" sense of vision to the structures of intentionality and thus to the process of grasping "intentional" totalizing that he sets out in the first sections of *Totality and Infinity*.

### **"ENJOYMENT AND REPRESENTATION"**

Levinas notes that enjoyment is the "way life relates to its contents, [and is thus] a form of intentionality in the Husserlian sense...as the universal fact of human existence. Every moment of life is in relation with an *other* than that moment itself." (TI, 122). What this means is that enjoyment is necessarily embedded not only in a phenomenal continuum that entails both desire and temporality but that takes shape as a referential "aboutness." Every idea is an idea of, every desire is a desire of, every emotion an emotion of...some concrete something. This position inferentially entails a locative and orienting task, namely, that the something is an unspecified referent. Levinas identifies the problem complex, linking it with the project of Husserlian phenomenology, by noting that, "Yet already with the first exposition of intentionality as a philosophical thesis there appeared the privilege of representation. The thesis that every intentionality is either a representation or founded on a representation dominates the *Logische Untersuchungen* and returns

as an obsession in all of Husserl's work" (ibid). But Levinas pushes that thesis in another direction by asking: "What is the relation between the theoretical intentionality of the objectifying act, as Husserl calls it, and enjoyment?" (Ibid). His claim is that representation seems to be oriented in the opposite direction of enjoyment, enabling him to show, by contrast, how the 'intentional' pattern of enjoyment and sensibility takes shape, parenthetically remarking that representation is woven into the very repetitive event of separation.

Intentionality, as repetitive event of sensible separation woven into patterns of representation, can also be understood in terms of a Cartesian norm of clarity as adequation. In this regard, the normative judging of a given object is represented as clearly matching point by atomistic point the image I have given it in my mind, and thereby "the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes" (TI, 124). It is a total mastery of the object that takes shape as a creative act and as meaning-bestowal (as *Sinngebung*): "the object of representation is reducible to *noemata*." In fact, all representations in Husserlian intentionality are intelligible in the sense that they are understood in categories of clarity and light. "In the intelligibility of representation the distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced" (ibid). It is entirely present, without any clandestine mystery or novelty, "surrendering in clarity and without modesty its whole being to thought." For Levinas, this also amounts to surrendering any sense of the inviolability of the other to the inexorable logic of representational reductions and deductions. What remains should be no surprise.

Indeed, and especially from a Husserlian Cartesian lens, "Clarity is the disappearance of what could shock. Intelligibility, the very occurrence of representation, is the possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it; it is a free exercise of the same, of the I opposed to the non-I" (124). The key issue becomes the issue of touch and the extent to which the other becomes subject to the dominating envisioning structures of my representational project that, by definition, can only function by means of the distancing that must occur when all otherness is reduced to the representing logic of my self-determination. The work of intentionality is always when the same determines the other, "But it determines him without touching him, without weighing on him" (ibid). The thinker submits everything to his thought, and with such grace that it appears as if he had thought it all out beforehand. Or, with such majesterial authority, that makes it seem as if some god must have thought it all out beforehand.

But for Levinas, the act of representation, of intentionality, is like an act of groping, where the thinker finds nothing before himself "acting" with pure spontaneity and freedom, as if the intention was prior to all activity. "At the very moment of representation the I is not *marked* by the past but *utilizes* it as a represented and objective element" (TI, 125)., Representation is the force of an illusory forgetting of its past determinations (of forgetting its history!) such that as

a pure present “without tangential ties to the past.... Representation involves no passivity” (ibid). But because it is a spontaneous groping in the pure present and a forgetting of the past, which would entail being open and patient and passive before the memory of the past, its first movement is to find itself in exhausting the meaning of exteriority, “precisely in converting it into *noemata*. This is the movement of the primary level of the Husserlian *epoche* that is characteristic of representation; it can also be correlated with the Kantian unity of apperception, where the same defines the other in its synthetic universalizing work. But “Representation is bound to a very different intentionality” (TI,126). It is different in a way that is especially suited to reflection. In this way, in the non-reciprocal determination of the same determining the other, “the I loses its opposition to the object” which brings out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of objects; it is the unalterable identity of the I (ibid). “To remain the same is to represent to oneself. The “I think” is the pulsation of rational thought” (ibid). “The subject that thinks by representation is the subject that hearkens to its own thought.... Its own spontaneity is a surprise for the subject” (ibid). Levinas calls this inspiration. It is one with the same and is that which speaks to itself, with its daemon, and is the “natural passage from the particular to the universal” (ibid). And as spontaneity, it is thought in the first person since representational thought is idealist thought understood as creation, but a representational spontaneity that dissolves all otherness into the work that it comprehends. “To reduce a reality to its content thought is to reduce it to the same” (TI, 127). To represent is to reduce to the present, to an actual perception that flows on and thus disregards time. It is to reduce everything to the instantaneousness of a thought, to reduce to a *noema* the very being of the existent.

This *noematic* reduction is precisely what is at stake in evaluating the veiling of Islamic women, as such, because it has to do with how understanding intentionality is bound up with the ethics of our corporeality, that is, with our embodied way of being in the world and with others. The key distinction is setting the phenomenon of enjoyment over against the process of representation, as a transcendental method:

The intentionality of enjoyment can be described by contrast with the intentionality of representation; it consists in holding onto the exteriority which the transcendental method in representation suspends. To hold onto exteriority is not simply equivalent to affirming the world, but to posit oneself in it corporeally. The body is not only the elevation but the whole weight of position. The body naked and indigent identifies the *center* of the world it perceives, but, *conditioned* by its own representation of the world, it is thereby as it were torn up from the center from which it proceeded as water gushing forth from rock washes away that rock. (ibid)

The body naked and indigent is not reducible to thought but is the reverting of the representation of the subjectivity that represents and that is sustained by these representations and lives from them. Its indigence is its needs that are prior to all affirmation. What this means is that *assuming* objective exteriority is to *impose* my intention on that which exists, to give form and function to the mass of metal that is a knife, to rejoice that the form that emerges out of the fog is one's loved one, and that the stranger I attack and murder does have enough money so that I can buy more drugs to feed my addiction. Levinas makes the less than common-sensical observation that "To assume exteriority is to enter into relation with it such that the same determines the other while being determined by it" (TI,128). But he cautions us, this determining is not simply the Kantian version of being determined that we find in the third iteration of the categorical imperative, namely, that my duty is to harmonize my acts with those of each and every individual rational agent in order to further the progressive development of an enlightened kingdom of ends, of an enlightened *communis sensus*. Instead, for Levinas, what is at stake is the *living from* sort of intentionality of enjoyment that can only be "brought about by the body whose essence is to *accomplish* my position on the earth, that is, to give me as it were a vision already and henceforth borne by the very image I see." Recall here Levinas's claim that ethics is *already* an optics which is a sensual condition but which resists the move to the representational image as "derivation of." "To posit oneself corporeally is to touch an earth, but to do so in such a way that one finds itself already conditioned by the position, the foot settles into the real which this very action outlines or constitutes—as though a painter would notice that he is descending from a picture that he is painting" (ibid). By virtue of my embodied condition as an intending human being already entangled in an already existing earth, I constitute the reality of that earth by my intentional engagement with it, but in a planned or creative engagement that is one's very own. This is intentionality and only with this kind of intentional engagement can interiority commence.

Representation, on the other hand, accounts for the world *as if* it is constituted by a thought, *as though* it were a noema, thus reducing the world to an "unconditioned instant of thought." Whereas, in "living from" (in enjoyment) the process of constitution is reversed; what I live from is not the represented in representation, in the eternity of the same or the "unconditioned present of cogitation." For Levinas, that which is constituted—the very earth in and over which I step in my intention—is that which overflows its meaning and that then becomes the condition of constituting. Representation can never "overflow its meaning" and must ever retain its fixed, formally symbolic definition. The movement of intentionality, in so far as it is original, becomes the condition of the constituting act or the nourishment of the constituting process itself; it is an overflowing of alimentation itself but as establishing a 'between-ness' of separation that allows for otherness to emerge. For Levinas, "the originality of the

[intending] situation lies in that the conditioning is produced in the midst of the relation between representing and represented, constituting and constituted—a relation which we find first in every case of consciousness” (TI, 128). I should add that the caveat added by Levinas—“in every case of consciousness”—carries with it the qualifier that situations occur, and occur often, when actions are undertaken that are bereft of the sort of awareness of “between-ness” stipulated by Levinas in his account. Such situations entail sorts of relations that are self-reflexive in that the production of self-sameness comes to be known for what it is, for how it originates, and for the work that it does. What needs to be asked is whether such a recognition of the organized rhythm of intentional acts, as self-reflexive acts, be ready or open for an unexpected interruption that overflows the coherent structure of meaningful language? What this revised critical understanding of representation introduces, as counterpoint, is the possibility of disruption, interruption, darkness and the ambiguities of masks and faces. Additionally, what also becomes possible for the first time is the fluidity of an actual pluralism that opens up a realm of ambiguous meanings and directions, precisely because there is that which overflows my constitutive and constituted grounding intention. This is what Levinas means by the other that is non-representable in conventional terms.

What can this elaboration provide us with to assess what is at stake in the law forbidding face-coverings in France? Based on my provisional interpretation of Levinas’s position, I find the practice of wearing the *niqāb* or *burqa* by orthodox Muslim women problematic for a number of reasons related to the structures of Levinasian metaphysics of intentionality, enjoyment, representation, and the ethicality of the face. Determining the possible intention for wearing the mask in this particular case is what appears to be at stake. On the one hand, the act appears as a public gesture that concretely expresses the development of a separateness that seems to preserve the inviolability of a dimension of interiority that is essential for the possibility of ethical relations to occur at all. Muslim women seclude themselves, or are secluded, from *le regard* of those who are not their chosen intimates—husband or family members. If a genuine dimension of interiority were thus produced—and how can one speculate in this regard?—then it seems I would have to support the wearing of the veil in public and defy the French law. On the other hand, the act seems also to put the socio-ethical relation that Levinas envisions as the face-to-face in question because it *prima facie* denies even the possibility of proximity and approach. Much ink has been spilled on this issue, but let us consider the position staked out by Slavoj Žižek’s critique of what he took to be the putative Levinasian position. Žižek begins by assuming that Levinas’s position is based on the phenomenon of the natural physiognomy of the human face, with ‘natural and thus authentic’ ears, eyes, nose, and mouth:

But what if the case is the opposite one? From a Freudian perspective, face is the ultimate mask that conceals the horror of the Neighbor-Thing: face

is what makes the Neighbor *le semblable*, a fellow-man with whom we can identify and empathize. (Not to mention the fact that, today, many faces are surgically changed and thus deprived of the last vestiges of natural authenticity.) This, then, is why a covered face causes such anxiety: because it confronts us directly with the abyss of the Other-Thing, with the Neighbor in its uncanny dimension. The very covering-up of the face obliterates a protective shield, so that the Other-Thing stares at us directly (recall that burka has a narrow slip for the eyes: we don't see the eyes, but we know there is a gaze there). (Zizek 2-3)

I find this position less than convincing and unpersuasive for the following reason. From a Levinasian perspective, it seems to me that the *niqāb* or *burqa* provides the *absolute* closing off of the one to the other by protecting a racialized-as-religious entity. Simply put, the secluding of exclusively the feminine face is an act of ideological patriarchy cloaked in ethical rationalizations, that is, ethical conceptualizations that violate both the women who unconsciously (in the Levinasian sense) adopt the veil and those members of the general public who would constitute the constitutive grounding and condition out of which any actual relation with an other could occur. The gesture itself is the ultimate in securing sovereign separateness—but not for the sake of producing the enjoyment of interiority (as Levinas would have it) but for the sake of retaining control of an atomistic tyranny. And it is that patriarchal tyranny, unacknowledged by the many Muslim women who adopt the veil, that is at the core of this issue. It is not the French law itself that is problematic. The imposition of that law, as any national law, is a cultural issue in the first place and is already a step removed from a fundamental ethical assessment and evaluation. A national society based on a system of laws presupposes a more fundamental metaphysics of ethical relations that itself establishes the parameters for this or that epistemological language game.

There can be no enjoyment in wearing the veil under the existing conditions of an oppressive Islamic patriarchy because enjoyment—in the Levinasian sense of “living from”—can only be realized without genus, without conceptualization. Thus, because the veil is apologetically defended as an aesthetic conceptualization based on an epistemological theory that prioritizes representation over original acts of intentionality, it excludes even the very possibility of interiority and enjoyment. More damning yet, the act embodies a forgetting of one's past in the immersion of a false present because it is caught up in the formalizing mode of a highly entrenched and ritually dogmatic form of representation. The other is lost, irretrievably lost, behind the veiling by groping Islamic men of “their” women in the dominating and possessive structures of their visionary appropriating projects. The added shame of this current phenomenon is that Muslim women continue to defend their very demise, reducing themselves to the structures of self-same



repetitive representations of the non-ambiguous, homogenizing, dehumanizing masking of what *could be* the beautiful mystery of their very own otherness. The phenomenon itself appears to me to be a systematic propounding of a fundamental disrespect for the public display of the unavoidable sexual nature of the other. What I mean by this is that by adopting the veil, the other builds a wall around herself—or better put, allows for a wall to be built around her—that removes the very possibility for both men and women to both constitute and be conditioned by the otherness of gendered others and thereby the infinite depths and ethical engagements of our sensible lives.

Jouman Haddad, the Lebanese journalist (who published *Jasad*—“body” in Arabic—a quarterly erotic magazine—and edits the cultural page of the Lebanese daily *An-Nahar*), makes the point more boldly about the “honor killed, acid-scarred, burqa bound Arab female,” when she makes the simple, but directly honest claim that, “If a man puts it on as well, I accept that it’s a choice. But why should she—the woman—be the bearer of this so-called traditional outfit? Why? Because she is the object of temptation and she needs to protect herself and the man from the temptation. She is held responsible for what she is. Her very identity is an accusation” (Haddad). And it is the very identity, in the sense of a life that is lived in enjoyment—again, in the Levinasian sense—that is not available *for these women*.

From the perspective of the social, and thus sexual relations, the *niqāb* or *burqa* throws the *image* of desexualized being in the face of the other, and thus maintains a position that denies proximity and approach and thereby remains impervious to ethical vulnerability. It is the very “intentional” rejection of the possibility of a social, and thus of an ethical relation. From my perspective, informed by my reading of Levinas’s phenomenology of intentionality, the act appears to be an impersonalizing and arrogant hardening of one’s heart in the face of the other.

## NOTES

1. The bill passed France’s national legislature and was signed into law by President Jacques Chirac on 15 March 2004 (thus the technical name is **law 2004-228 of 15 March 2004**) and came into effect on 2 September 2004, at the beginning of the new school year. The full title of the law is “*loi n° 2004-228 du 15 mars 2004 encadrant, en application du principe de laïcité, le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics*” (literally “Law #2004-228 of March 15, 2004 concerning, as an application of the principle of the separation of church and state, the wearing of symbols or garb which show religious affiliation in public primary and secondary schools”).

2. New York Times, April 17, 2011, Week in Review, p. 4

3. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and infinity: an essay on interiority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969; first published The Hague

Netherlands: Martinus Nijhof, 1961). Unless otherwise noted, all quotes within the body of the text are from this text and take the form of (TI, xx).

4. What Hintikka gets wrong in his analysis of intuition in Husserl's philosophy is that Hintikka argues to retain a simplistic understanding of the function of intuition in Husserl's thought as merely a transparent marker for indicating the fact of having an immediate experience. In this, Hintikka attempts to shore up the epistemological bulwarks of logical positivism and their way of prioritizing a reductive sort of logic. (see Hintikka, Jaakko, "The Notion of Intuition in Husserl" in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 2003/2 no. 224; p. 57-70). Instead, a Levinasian interpretation of intuition recognizes that for Husserl, intuition has primarily to do with 'meaning' and the role of evidence in a process of validation of a truth judgment over time (see Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. By Andre Orianne; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, Second Edition, 1995; first published as *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*. by Felix Alcan, Paris in 1930..

