Encountering the Face of God: A Levinasian Exploration of Theistic Existentialism

LAURA DUHAN KAPLAN

Department of Philosophy
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Charlotte, NC 28223
ldkaplan@email.uncc.edu

Abstract: This essay explores the intersection of the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas and theistic existentialism, by exploring the metaphor of being confronted by the blank face of God in times of great stress. Levinas criticizes the history of metaphysics for focusing exclusively on the analysis of objects. He aims to redirect philosophy towards the study of relationships, and focuses on the experience of being confronted by another human face. Jean-Paul Sartre's proof of the nonexistence of God illustrates Levinas's critique. Sartre treats God as an object with determinate properties, and concludes that all who believe in God are seeking a false sense of security. Many theistic existentialists, however, speak of God as a partner in relationship, rather than as a thing, and do not expect to be freed from uncertainty or responsibility through a relationship with God.

Learning to Speak About God

As the Jewish religion has filled my home these last few years, so has it begun to bud in my psyche. When I provisionally revisited theism, I began to learn a new language to talk about familiar phenomena. For example, "luck" became "God's grace"; crashes of thunder or sudden flashes of silence became, in the words of the Biblical psalmist, "God's voice." At first, these names were merely metaphorical. I did not believe that thunder actually is God's voice, but simply found this a poetic way of noting thunder's startling power, while remembering that it is only one among many natural phenomena that the Torah says are created by God. But language is powerful. It educates and persuades, it directs our thinking. It wasn't long before I heard God's message thundering through my life, or began to practice listening to the silences to hear what God is telling me.

In their important book, Metaphors We Live By, Lakoff and Johnson write that a metaphor generates a "network of entailments." Once one aspect of a phenomenon is reframed by a metaphor, then other aspects of the phenomenon also become so reframed. That a phenomenon is susceptible to this reframing often reveals riches hidden within the phenomenon, connections with other phenomena that would previously have gone unnoticed or unexplored. In fact, the mark of a fruitful metaphor may well be the reach of its network. A fruitful metaphor quickly grows into a literal expression, naming a real and substantial experience. Religious metaphors can be fruitful in just this way.

One of the most interesting questions for those interested in theology and metaphysics is the question
of finding appropriate metaphors for God. All agree that whatever God is, literal description is impossible. So the questions fly: should God be likened to an intelligence, as Descartes and Leibniz suggest? To a lover, as Margery Kempe and Judah the Hasid of Regensburg suggest? To a watchmaker, as Hume’s Cleanthes suggests? Each metaphor will have its own network of entailments, directing and structuring experiences believers call “spiritual” in different directions.

In this essay, I want to explore one tiny fragment of this question, by exploring a metaphor suggested in an early essay by Emmanuel Levinas: God as a face. Here I note some of the metaphor’s entailments, as Lakoff and Johnson would do. If God is, or has, a face, we respond to God’s expressions and God responds to our responses. Our relationship with God is revealed through give and take. Yet God also has the option of turning a blank face towards us, or of showing us what we least expect or desire to see. This option, too, calls for our response.

May, 1997: The Blank But Present Face of God

Cradling my nineteen month old son after his surgery this morning, I had one of those rare reflective moments that reveal how well life and emotion swirl way past the boundaries of the intellectual constructions we try to place on them.

The recovery room was a corporate cubicle, two chairs and a portable IV unit surrounded by a checkered curtain. Yet I felt bathed in sunlight, glorying in nature’s swirl of leaves, its mad dash of insects, birds, and other beautiful creatures. I could smell my son’s pure skin, feel his youthful warmth, be reassured by his calm and steady breathing. I was comforted by the fact that my presence comforted him; the simple anchors of the universe still held.

Moments earlier they had not, as his body, racked simultaneously with anesthetic and pain, lurched rhythmically, as he sobbed, unable even to right himself. I sang baby songs softly in his ear—what else was there to do? But I knew now that it would be all right, all right... He would live, he would be healthy, he would still be mine for a little while longer. And now it was my turn to cry, softly, as if I were singing a baby song over and over, my own exultant baby song.

To go from helplessness to competence, or at least a maternal miming of its gestures, so quickly, left me drained physically, wondering intellectually. Those moments in between helplessness and competence... I didn’t know what they were. Were they a prelude to the horror of loss, loneliness, my family’s history repeating itself in a freak accident? Or were they simply the enactment of a parent’s predictable emotional routine as the clock ticked on and the good news had not yet been delivered?

Were they moments in which God sharpened the machete, about to rend my life savagely? Or was God just taking the time to perfect the layout of the sweet white chiffon that frames happy memories of babies? Or nothing? Just me, the medical establishment, a bunch of technology, and a sick baby?

And what I am to learn from contemplating these moments in between? Empathy for those lashed by the machete? That it will never touch me, I am chosen, untouchable? That people get nervous, it’s normal to fear, we just are that way? Or nothing, nothing at all, as the memory of these moments gets dimmer and dimmer until only the narrative of external events, if even that, remains?

God, I feel exhausted. My husband and I don’t know what to do with ourselves. “We’re wandering around in a daze,” he says. It’s a cool sunny day. My feelings, my surroundings, remind me of the days after I gave birth. But my baby’s asleep in a crib, instead of cradled in my arms.

An event like this ought to be a birth of meaning, in which what was hidden is now brought out into the bright light, in which what was once half-formed and pliable now declares its definite shape. I ought to be the illuminator, the herald of self-definition. In professional life, I am a philosopher, illuminating the hidden patterns in events, ideas and texts. In personal life, I am a mother, giving substance and shape to new creatures. Yet with all my skills, all my words, all my tools, today I cannot alchemize meaning. Today, a space is opened between the crowded noises of socially received meanings. But when I listen, all other, small voice comes, making clear the reason we are here, the reason I have been tested with death, the reason I have been rewarded with life.

Years ago, the Hebrew Bible reports, God said to Moses, by way of introduction, “I am that I am.” Years earlier, also by way of introduction, God had said to Eve and Adam, “Be fruitful and multiply.” On this day, these two revelations happen to come together for me. Have children, and risk losing them. Then you shall know Me, you shall know the mysterium tremendum. You shall explore the sharp, painful gap where you perch in between familiar guarantees of safety and security, preparing to call the world “indifferent,” yet hoping to call it “hospitalite.” All that you rely on to give life its concrete shape and philosophical meaning is called into question, yet no easy answers are offered.
This God is the one whose mystical face passed before me today. I want to find comfort, somehow, in this God who disrupts the comfortable. Perhaps this is a God who consistently mimics the Hindu God Shiva the Destroyer, who habitually takes away the old before offering anything new in its place, who requires us all to relive the forty years of wandering through the wilderness that the ancient Israelites suffered between their liberation from slavery and their readiness to become a nation. What comfort can I find in this implacable mystical face that throws me back on my own resources when I have none?

Perhaps the face of God is the face of change. I see God’s face when the old is overthrown. Sometimes I blame that face for my bitter losses; sometimes I search it for a trace of healing sympathy. Yet I also see God’s face when the new emerges, even when that emergence can be credited largely to my own efforts. At those times, I beam at God’s face with joy, seeing my own light as a reflection of its brightness, and its brightness as a reflection of my own light, in an endless exchange of luminous mirrors. Today, finally, I bathed in the sunlight of my son’s good health. But I will not forget my anxious moments of searching God’s blank face, wondering whether it would explode with light or eclipse into seeming indifference, as it waited for me to find my way through the next challenging desert crossing.

Six Months Later, November 1997:
Atheistic Versus Theistic Existentialism

Jean Paul Sartre, not an enthusiastic fan of theism, suggests that fear of loneliness is one of the reasons people turn to God. In his popular work *Existentialism*, Sartre lays out a desolate vision of the human condition. Basically, he says, we don’t know who we are. Had there been an inventor of human beings, that inventor would have had in mind the function humans are to fulfill and would have designed us to fulfill the function. But there is no such inventor, because there is no God. Without God the inventor, we have no one to give us the definitive account of our function and design—in philosophical language, our essence. Since we do not know our essence, we are unsure about how to distinguish a good human being from a bad one.

According to Sartre, human beings are not particularly comfortable with this ethical void. Our real problem, of course, is not in judging others (we usually find that quite easy), but in judging ourselves as we inch through life choice by choice, decision by decision. Because we have to make ethical decisions in the absence of knowledge about their rectitude, we feel weighted down by anguish. Because no being exists who can relieve the anguish, we feel alone, and hence forlorn. Because there is no hope of depending upon others to define or bring about the good, we feel despair. However, for Sartre, these painful emotions are positive ones. If we recognize the realities that provoke them, they can force us to take responsibility for our decisions, and hence, for the creation of our moral and psychological selves.

Unfortunately, says Sartre, most people do not turn responsibly towards these painful emotions, but instead turn away from them and try to cover them up with feelings of certainty, belonging, and hope. One of the simplest and most popular ways to create comfort, says Sartre, is by embracing theism, or, in simpler terms, believing in God. Although Sartre encourages people to create themselves through their choices, he does not seem to respect theism as a responsible choice. To Sartre, theism appears to be submission to the will of an imaginary being who has all the answers, and is therefore a disingenuous flight from the bald, lonely truth about human nature.

This seems radically wrong to me, because theism simply does not offer all the answers. I am not alone among theists in thinking so. Theistic existentialists who believe in the importance of human self-determination, freedom, creativity, and choice have tried to rescue theism from Sartre’s condemnation of it. Soren Kierkegaard, for example, and, similarly, David Roberts, have argued that embracing theism is a valid choice. Far from a naive flight from the truth, it is instead a bold leap into uncertainty; a leap, however, that carries the passion of absolute commitment to an ideal whose rocky path has not yet been revealed. Taking a different tack, Gabriel Marcel has shown that Sartre has radically overestimated the reach of theism. Belief in God hardly solves all human problems and indeed, from a philosophical perspective, the mysteries of what constitutes personal identity, true knowledge, and human connection are deep puzzles for theists as well as atheists.

Levinas’s Critique of Ontology: The Face of God

Emmanuel Levinas, in an early essay titled “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, takes yet a third tack, speaking of theism as a mysterious relationship. Levinas’s view of God is rooted in his critique of western metaphysics and, as it became called in contemporary continental philosophy, ontology. The goal of western metaphysics, says Levinas, has been to move beyond our typically trivial and inaccurate everyday perceptions in order to comprehend things
as they are in themselves. For example, Plato rejected the sensible world of becoming in favor of the intelligible world of Being. Immanuel Kant described the region of phenomena, or appearances, circumscribed by our perceptual and conceptual apparatus, by opposing it to the region of noumena, things in themselves, known only through pure reason. Even Martin Heidegger, whose analyses begin with phenomenological descriptions of human engagement in concrete practical and existential concerns, repeats this pattern. For Heidegger, we comprehend a particular being only when we place ourselves beyond the region of concrete beings, and allow Being itself to shine through, that is, when we step back from the particular onto what appears to be a larger vantage point.

But there is one experience, says Levinas, whose reality completely defies traditional metaphysical analysis. We cannot say about this experience that it will be better understood if we stand back from it and view it abstractly. This is the experience of relationship with other human beings. In relationship, says Levinas, we are confronted with a face, and we respond to that face. Comprehension of another person is expressed through, or perhaps, is a give and take with that particular person in a particular situation. Viewing that other person purely from the intelligible, noumenal, or ontological viewpoints of Plato, Kant, and Heidegger is impossible without disengaging from, and therefore abandoning, the concrete relationship.

I might rephrase Levinas’s point as follows: the history of western metaphysics is consumed by a preoccupation with things, and study of it leads philosophers to reason about all beings as if they were things. Sartre, for example, treats God as a thing when he conceptualizes God as a being with certain determine properties, specifically, a plan for human beings. This being, a thing-in-itself, can be found to exist or not exist. Sartre finds it does not exist, and therefore its properties do not exist either. Although Sartre recognizes that people create themselves through social interaction, it never occurs to Sartre to treat God as a partner in relationship, as a face to whom we respond, its nature revealed through give and take. That, however, is Levinas’s preferred understanding of God. For Levinas, the essence of religion is not comprehension, but relationship. “Religion,” says Levinas, “is the relation with a being as a being” (1951, 8). Here Levinas wants to stress that he is speaking of “little b beings,” those who call upon us in concrete situations, rather than “Big B Being,” the abstract perspective that illuminates the nature of reality beyond particular human concerns.

From this understanding of religion as relationship, it is possible to move in at least two related directions. One stresses Levinas’s definition of religion and suggests that responsibility in human relationships constitutes religious experience and practice. The other uses Levinas’s analysis of relationship to think about experiences that are more typically thematized as direct encounters with God.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas takes the first turn. He puts aside the possibility of a direct mystical encounter with a wholly transcendent God, a God who corresponds to Big B Being. Instead, he sees each encounter with a human being, little b, as a religious moment, a moment invoking the possibility of an ethical response. In this, Levinas blends the Hebrew Bible’s insistence that ethical treatment of others makes us holy with his critique of western metaphysics’s object-orientation.

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas lays the foundation for following the second thread. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas identifies our ability to respond to alterity, i.e., otherness, i.e., the call of other persons, as the foundation for our movement towards the future and therefore of our experience of time. Alterity moves us forward in part because it is surprising. In an ideal relationship with another, one does not reduce the human being before them to a definition or a narrow characterization. Instead, one is open to the continual mystery that is another person. I like to think that relationship with God is therefore openness to the mystery, or, as theologians often put it, the *mysterium tremendum*. This openness to the mystery includes the possibility of upsetting neatly packaged characterizations of God’s properties, such as the one Sartre offers. This openness is a form of theism, but it also can be seen as a form of existentialism. Even if we try to take God as our guide, this line of reasoning suggests, we still must struggle with foundational questions in our ever-unfolding relationship with that God.

If relationship with God is anything like the relationship between human beings, it may well offer an escape from forlornness, the sadness we feel when we perceive ourselves to be alone. However, relationship with God certainly does not offer escape from anguish and despair. Who in relationship has not felt anguish, the weight of making decisions in the absence of knowledge? Who has not felt the paralysis of despair? Relationships are simply not easy. People are strange: they have moods, illnesses, personality quirk. Commitment takes us on some rocky roads over those rapids. Much of the time we fume and swear under our breaths that we’re jumping out of the canoe right now...but we don’t, because life is with people, and most of us prefer the heartache of conflicted companionship to loneliness.
The work of Levinas sits squarely within the Hebraic tradition of avoiding idolatry. According to that tradition, any determinate image of God is reductionistic, providing us with a fetishized fragment of the divine nature that we could worship only mistakenly. Levinas allows his image of God to have a face, in order to show that God calls for our response. However, he leaves open what we will see when we confront that face. Possibly that face is ever-changing, just as a human face profoundly changes in the thoughts, emotions, and life circumstances it expresses. Possibly that face changes as our responses to it change.

This last claim is consistent with the approach to Judaism offered by the denomination with which I identify, Reconstructionism. Reconstructionism suggests that Judaism has always been syncretistic, that Judaism has continuously recast its basic theological and ethical understandings in terms accessible to Jews of the time. Rather than tell that process be haphazard, members of the Reconstructionist movement try self-consciously to understand Judaism in terms of modern notions of spirituality, science, society, and personal identity. Translating the effort into theological language, one might say that although God remains the same throughout history, the face we see in each era differs.

In each era the cultural climate constrains the range of our likely possible responses to God. My own view of relationship with God, however, goes beyond this basic Reconstructionist understanding. On the one hand, what we bring to the encounter affects the face we see. On the other hand, a truly deep spiritual experience draws us out of our expectations, and we are changed even as we encounter God's face. I see this understanding of relationship with God as an existentialist one, hospitable to most elements of existentialism as Sartre defined it. For I have described atheism in which each human being co-creates herself or himself in partnership with God, and in which the embrace of anguish and forlornness are the triggers that lead to spiritual and personal growth.

Works Cited and Consulted


