

Ethics and Sense

In his essay “Meaning and Sense”, Levinas not only puts forward an original account of the nature of meaning, both experiential and linguistic, but also on the basis of this argues for the necessity of a primary orientation, or *sense*, underlying all meaning, and that this sense provides the root of an ethics beyond the differences of culture. Levinas locates this sense, and the ethics it grounds, in the original experience of the infinite Other, who, as the face of the abstract man, calls the subject's very being into question. It is this 'calling into question', in its invoking of a responsibility on the part of the subject toward the Other, that initially constitutes the subject, and constitutes it as *free* in its capacity to deny this responsibility. Levinas is as such unique in locating the very origin of the subject in the call of its ethical responsibility, in that for him there can be no subjectivity which would antecedently *become* responsible. It is also thus the case that this responsibility can never be discharged, but *haunts* the subject as the very condition of their subjectivity. In showing how this originary experience of responsibility constitutes the subject and as such provides the orientation on the basis of which all meaning is possible, Levinas thus claims to have located a common ethical responsibility which must be prior to any cultural elaboration or organisation of this meaning, which as such would enable one to judge between cultures. The task of this essay will be to examine Levinas' conception of meaning and sense, and to evaluate his argument for this priority of ethics over culture. This will be achieved by first unpacking his conception of meaning and sense, comparing them in part with the early work of Heidegger. This will culminate in a critical comparison of Levinas' conception of radical otherness and subjectivity with that of Heidegger and Foucault, drawing out the flaw in this conception.

Levinas begins by making a distinction between the contents given to receptivity in experience and the *meaning* they take on. The constitution of this meaning, or significance, is the very act of transcending, or moving beyond the given, toward that which is not presented in it – the *absent*. This transcending toward the absent is what Levinas identifies as the function of metaphor. So, in order that our sensuous experience of a brown, rectangular and solid object can gain the significance of being a book, and all that might entail for our comportment (or intentional relation) to it, we must transcend what is simply given – the brownness, rectangular shape and solidity – toward the features of the book *qua* book that are not given – the ways it can be used by us, its value, perhaps even a certain sacredness that someone might attach to it. The important question for Levinas is whether this absence which provides experience with significance is *simply* absent, that is to say that what is absent is a potential content that is just not given, but must be inferred, or whether the absence is irreducible to any potential given. Levinas identifies the former position as intellectualism, which holds that all meaning is supplied by and thus reducible to some form of

intuition. Importantly, Levinas includes Husserl within this category, even though he breaks with the crude empiricist sense-datum account of perception. This means that Levinas is not simply opposing accounts of experience which attempt to reduce its significance to pure qualia, but rather any which would locate the source of the intelligible purely in receptivity, even though the contents received might bear a much more complex structure. On such a view, the expression of any meaning by the subject is just a recapitulation of some intuitive content, the act of expressing having no effect on the meaning of what is expressed. In asserting the irreducibility of meaning to receptivity, Levinas challenges this conception of expression.

Levinas argues that there must already be meaning before receptivity, in order that what is received can be transcended, through a transcending toward this meaning. This is not to claim that all possible meaning must be available to the subject in advance of any experience, or that the meanings toward which the subject transcends are fixed and unchanging, but rather that there must always already be some meaning out of which to make sense of experience. As such, the idea of a *pure* receptivity is a myth. There is always meaning in advance of all receptivity as a condition of this receptivity, and this meaning organises experience as the very horizon within which beings can be experienced or encountered. Following Heidegger¹, Levinas identifies this horizon, within which received content takes on significance, as the *world*. The world is structured by language and culture, and is for the subject the totality of “everything that is historically adventitious and “already happened””². The subject thus relates to the world as the totality of beings.

For Levinas, there is no primacy of literal meanings in language, because words do not refer to potential contents to be given in receptivity, but always first *laterally* to one another. This is because of language's function in structuring the horizon of meaning which comes before experience. Different words and their meanings must first be situated in relation to one another, such that this totality of significance can organise the beings which are revealed within it; as Levinas puts it, the meanings of terms “precedes the data and illuminates them”³. This situation of the meaning of words *prior* to experience is what enables these meanings to extend beyond what we might normally take them to literally refer to. This is why the transcending of the given is understood as metaphor, because the literal use of meanings is something which arises *after* their full extension, which includes what is subsequently non-literal. The idea of 'spring' does not first denote the season and then subsequently, within my experience, come to non-literally indicate the renewed energy I have found in my work, but is prior to the experience of either, and illuminates both in a way that is only divided after the fact.

Language has a founding role. It 'marks' culture, in that the cultural is incorporated in the

1 *Pathmarks*, pg 109; *Being and Time*, Part One, Division One, Section III

2 *CPP*, pg 77

3 *Ibid.*, pg 78

world through language, but more importantly it enables the assembling of the totality of being which is the world, or what Heidegger termed the *projection* of the world⁴. This assembling or totalisation cannot be seen as a summation, but more of an arranging of beings within the world, an arranging which is the very condition of their appearing within it and taking on specific meaning. The world as totality is neither on the side of the subject entirely, as it must be that *toward which* the subject transcends, nor can it be objective, as it is still properly the activity of the subject that constitutes it in its transcending⁵. Levinas extends this latter point by appealing to Merleau-Ponty, and specifically his claim that all perception is properly embodied. It is this essential embodiment, the necessity of being part of the world in sensing it, that necessitates that the activity of totalisation cannot reach an objective totality. So, in surpassing the given in the direction of world, the given receives meaning; this is meaning as part of an arranged whole, whose arrangement is fundamentally *prior* to the appearance of the given. This anteriority is itself established in the projection of the world, which in projecting the limits of history is itself the temporalisation of time, and thus *always already past*.

As has been mentioned, for Levinas, the subject is also “on the side of being”⁶. It is within the world that it transcends toward in assembling it, not outside it or originally prior to it, as would be the case with Husserl. As Levinas notes: “Sight is not reducible to the welcoming of a spectacle, it at the same time operates in the midst of the spectacle it welcomes.”⁷ It is only the incarnate or embodied subject, that in enacting the assembling of being, or projection of the world, can allow beings to appear for it, or “welcome” beings. However, this activity of assembling is not just the *bare* projection of the world, as a simple *homogeneous unity*, but involves the activity of the embodied subject within an engagement with a concrete culture, which continuously reorganises the world as a *heterogeneous yet unified totality*. Cultural objects – “language, poems, paintings, symphonies, dances”⁸, etc. – are themselves incarnate, they are beings within the world. However, they uniquely bear the function of *expressing* being, which, as Levinas discussed earlier, cannot simply be reduced to the communication of some prior thought or specific meaning. This expression is a totalising which takes part in the assembling of being that makes meaningful experience possible. This is to say it is the expression of a *facet* of the world, constituting a part of the horizon of significance. It is the gesture which creates a cultural object, or what might be thought simply as the activity of expression in general, which realizes the subject's status as both subject of the world in receptivity and part of that world in expressing its facets. To be incarnate is

4 *Pathmarks*, pg 127

5 Heidegger makes a similar point – that the world, although it is subjective, cannot “fall, as a being, into the inner sphere of a “subjective” subject. For the same reason, however, world is not merely objective either, if “objective” means: belonging among beings as objects.” (Ibid., pg 122)

6 *CPP*, pg 80

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., pg 82

to express: "Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. They are the ontological par excellence: they make the understanding of being possible."⁹

There is, as such, a reciprocity of receptivity and expression, whereby the expressed horizon of significance organises what is received, giving it meaning, but on the basis of this continued receptivity the subject expresses anew, reconfiguring and reorganising the world. This is what was meant earlier by the claim that meaning, although necessarily in advance of experience, is certainly not for that matter fixed, but rather it changes and develops along with culture and its expression. Importantly, the 'innovations' in the assembling of the world produced in expression are themselves beings within the world, so as to be accessible publicly. It is this public space of expression which constitutes the cultural domain. As such, the cultural domain stands between the subjective and the objective, as properly *intersubjective*¹⁰. Importantly, Levinas draws the conclusion from this that artistic expression, and the general forms of culture, provide a light which is borrowed by scientific cognition¹¹. This is to say that art and culture already organise the way the beings that science concerns itself appear. This also means that language and its signification is no longer the attenuating of our lack of perfect, universal perspective, or the Kantian intellectual intuition, as there is no perspective that is not embodied¹². Expression does not *make up* for any lack, but is precisely that which *makes* that lack or absence toward which the subject transcends in transcending the given.

Now, because of the differing ways in which expression can arrange and re-arrange the world, there are different cultures, which are not only diverse between one another but also in themselves, given the varying expressive activity of the subjects that compose them. Levinas identifies the modern philosophical tradition as anti-platonic in that it denies the existence of meaning that lies behind the incarnate activities which are productive of it. As such, it affirms that the cultures, in providing access to meaning, are part of this meaning itself. Although this denial of a separate realm of intelligibility is the common understanding of anti-platonism, Levinas takes this a step further, claiming that the proper anti-platonism of the tradition lies in its denial of the possibility of a *higher culture* that would be true to the intelligible, or meaning itself. The modern tradition denies the separation between the plane of intelligibility and the plane of the intellect which would correspond to it, and thus also that this correspondence between them is to a greater or lesser degree. Culture is inseparable from meaning to the extent that no culture could be judged as providing 'better access' to what lay beyond it. All cultures, all incarnate intellects are thus placed on the same plane. Levinas points to Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology as the best, and perhaps most explicit

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 The conception of God that Levinas develops will reflect this, as it will try to divorce God from a conception of intellectual intuition.

example of this approach¹³. Levinas also identifies this form of cultural relativism as the modern expression of atheism.

Levinas continues to outline this modern standpoint as that which thinks a radical incommensurability between cultures. This standpoint accepts that one can move between or translate cultures, but not that this transition is made possible by an underlying meaning that they share. Levinas claims that this would mean that the assembling of being was purely arbitrary or random in each culture and for each individual within that culture. Essentially, Levinas argues against this position that there must be a univocal *sense* or *orientation* of being which underlies the plurivocity of cultures, so as to enable transition and communication between them. The crisis of meaning, or the problem of a lack of a common sense between cultures, as brought about by what Levinas has characterised as the modern expression of atheism, is thus the “crisis of monotheism”¹⁴ - it is what Nietzsche referred to as 'the death of God'. Working against this view, he finds the thread of a univocal sense in the very willingness to communicate and transit, in the orientation which lets us see the other culture or individual *as* meaningful despite their difference. In essence, in order for us to engage in translation, communication or even argument, we must be willing to accept that the other is meaningful, that its point of view *is* a point of view. This will enable Levinas to reinstitute God, but it will not be the a God whose action is felt within the world, who is thus immanent in it, but a truly transcendent God purged of all such immanence. Levinas cannot just assume such a God, but must uncover him through his inquiry into the univocal sense of being.

However, before he can do this he must defuse what is commonly seen as an alternative orientation, that would provide the conditions of communication between cultures. He identifies this as economic *need* or what we might also call *utility*. Levinas characterises the technical or scientific attitude as being guided by this economic attitude, in that this standpoint tries to reconstruct literal meaning, purging the figurative meaning supplied by culture, and it does this by pursuing utility. This attitude takes all cultural meaning to be in a sense superfluous or at least something which is added on top of the literal meanings oriented by utility. In response to this, Levinas claims that this technical attitude is itself a cultural phenomena, rather than underlying culture. This is extended by the claim that there is no realm of (animal) need that is unmediated by culture, that culture and expression are involved in the very formation of needs. This is not to claim that human beings do not share basic biological needs such as food and oxygen, but rather that all positing of ends, all reasoning upon action, is already taking place at the level of cultural meaning; thus pure utility is not something underlying all posited ends, but merely another end itself. Economy “derives its forms from culture”¹⁵.

13 *CPP*, pg 86

14 *Ibid.*, pg 89

15 *Ibid.*, pg 90

In providing or appealing to something beyond the indifferent diversity of cultures, sense must constitute a leap “outside-of-oneself toward the *other than oneself*”¹⁶. In opposition to this, Levinas places philosophy (here synonymous with ontology), which always attempts to reincorporate this other within the Same, within the identity of the self. This is to say that philosophy, or *free thought*, aims for an *intentional plenitude* – a complete and self-conscious grasp of the matter at hand. On the other hand, sense must be a move from a self-identical ego, the Same, toward an other that is an absolute Other, radically different. Levinas defines this *free* movement from the same to the absolute Other as a *work*. Such a work can neither be thought in terms of a self-identical substrate which would be worked upon, nor in terms of a form that the subject would impose upon it, as either constitutes a return from absolute otherness to the identity of the ego. The Other must lack all identity in its radical difference from the ego. Thus, a radical work must move toward the Other in a way that never returns to the ego. In order for this to be achieved there can be no requirement of reciprocity on behalf of the other, nor any expectation of achievement on the part of the subject. The work must aim at an end that is in no way subordinate to the ends of the subject, so much so that Levinas describes it as a *being-beyond-my-death*, in that what is aimed at must be indifferent to the death of the subject¹⁷. This being-beyond-my-death is aiming at a time beyond the time of the subject, this aiming is as such “the passage to the time of the other.”¹⁸ Although it is an appeal to a future time, beyond the subject's time, it does this in appealing to the eternally past time of the infinite Other which temporalises the time of the subject. This is an obvious overturning of Heidegger's conception of *being-towards-death* and its involvement in ectases of time¹⁹, in which precisely the concern with one's own death is from the first abnegated, and it is this very abnegation which opens up the horizon of the future, rather than the concern itself. This radical work is a *liturgy*, and it is not one ethical work among others, but is *ethics* itself²⁰.

As opposed to the notion of need discussed earlier, which Levinas defines as the return into the 'I' itself²¹, Levinas posits the liturgical orientation of sense as *desire*. This desire is however as pure desire, equivalent to both *goodness* and *sociality*, that is born without need. This is not to say that it can only arise in those who are completely satisfied, but rather that it is prior to any need whatsoever. Whereas need strives to be sated (to return to itself), this pure desire for the other is insatiable – an encounter with the other does nothing but intensify it. As Levinas continues, it is this “desire for the other, which we live in the most ordinary social experience,” that “is the fundamental

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., pg 92

18 Ibid.

19 *Being and Time*, pg 378-380

20 *CPP*, pg 93

21 Curiously, this is very close to the conception of desire put forward by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, pg 105), which should still be thought to be closer to need despite Levinas' juxtaposition of desire.

movement, a pure transport, an absolute orientation, sense.”²² The desire for the other constitutes an orientation for meaning because it is *to the other* that we express in expression. The desire for other, as sociality, underlies all our expressive cultural activity as the very role of an *interlocutor* for this expression. The absolute Other is as such not within the world, not of the order of being, but the very condition of assembling being into a world, as that toward which this expressive activity is directed.

We must here draw an important distinction between what we might call the *real other*, which is to say the concrete other human being, and the *infinite Other*, the abstract or absolute other that is not equal to any real other. The real other appears within the world in the way that other beings do, and is given meaning through our expressive cultural gestures. However, the infinite Other cannot appear within the world, its meaning is radically isolated from that of culture, and because of this isolation any encounter with it serves to disrupt the interconnected meanings of the world. The encounter with the infinite Other is as such always out of context and unmediated by the cultural trappings of the world. Levinas call this encounter the *visitation* of a *face*²³. Although the visitation of a face can take place through the encounter with a real other, this is not to say that the real other *represents* the infinite Other, or even instantiates it as if it were a genus. The face of the Other is *nude* in its abstractness, and the very process of visitation is its *denuding*, the removing of all concreteness of the real other. Rather than the addition of meaning through representation, the “signifyingness” of the face is a radical stripping away of all the concreteness of a real man, leaving only the face of the “abstract man”²⁴. However, there is in truth no final product – a completed face – the face is nothing but the very denuding itself, it has no form other than the loss of its form. This stripping away of form which constitutes the face is experienced by the subject as the Other's distress. It is this distress which call the subject into question.

The experience of the Other's distress is the calling into question of the subject's being. This is to say that the desire for the other is a responsibility toward the Other, a primordial desire to assuage its distress. Given that the face of the Other simply is its denuding, it simply is its distress. This means that the desire to assuage the Other's distress is properly unquenchable, as the Other's distress is unassuageable. This is what Levinas means by the idea that the desire for the other is not satisfied by the Other, but is only intensified. The subject's responsibility toward the Other is thus properly *infinite*. Levinas thus identifies the relation between the subject and the Other as the idea of infinity itself²⁵. Returning to the calling into question of the subject's being, it is important to distinguish this from any consciousness by the subject of its being. The responsibility evoked by the Other is

22 *CPP*, pg 94

23 *Ibid.*, pg 95

24 *Ibid.*, pg 101 (modified)

25 *Ibid.*, pg 97-98

not a content for the subject to think through, or reflect upon, because this would be a return to the identity of the ego: the Other “resists it to the extent that even its resistance is not convertible into a content of consciousness.”²⁶ This is why a visitation disrupts the meaning within the world, it confounds any intentional relation, which would of necessity return into the self-identity or self-consciousness of the ego. The subject is not turned upon itself by this call to responsibility, as if it pre-existed this call, but is initially constituted as a subject by it. Again, this is an overturning of the Heideggerian schema, in which Dasein is constituted by itself as a self in being the being for whom “*what is at issue is its potentiality for being*. Dasein is in such a way that it exists *for the sake of itself*.”²⁷ Dasein is a free self first and foremost in so far as it can be obligated to itself, rather than to another, or even the Other²⁸.

It may seem as if Levinas has confused things here – how can a visitation be a particular encounter at a particular time and yet the call to responsibility it invokes originally constitute the subject? There is no confusion here however, because, as noted earlier, the Other is both beyond the world and beyond its time. The relation of the subject to the Other which gives the subject orientation, or sense, unifies the various acts of expression as expressing *different facets* of the *same world*, in virtue of their expressing *to the Other*. Sense thus is a condition of all meaning produced in expression, which itself is a condition of all meaningful experience through receptivity. It is the initial condition of the reciprocal activity of receptivity and expression which constantly reorganises the world and the beings that appear within it. As such, it is this relation to the Other which temporalises time, and enables intentionality to extend to beings within the horizon of this time. This temporalisation, as discussed earlier, proceeds through opening onto a future which is beyond the subject, constituting the subject as being-beyond-its-own-death. So, to clarify, a visitation is precisely not a representing of the Other or an instantiation of the primordial relation to the Other, but a moment within lived time in which the eternal time of the Other shines through, and does so precisely in the stripping away of a concrete being; to put it another way, in the privation of any return-to-self that would be added on top of (indeed made possible by) this primary sense.

So, in response to Heidegger, Levinas has put forward a conception of subjectivity whereby the subject is fundamentally ethically responsible. Indeed, for Levinas, the very uniqueness of the subject lies in its inability to pass on this responsibility to an other, in the very inescapability of ethics. The God that Levinas has excavated from sense – the infinite Other – is that which is in excess of all intentionality, but makes it possible by lying before it in the eternal time outside the world and its history. This God is thus radically transcendent in relation to the world, shunning all immanent appearance within it, manifesting only in breaking through the world, disrupting it and its

26 Ibid., pg 97

27 *Pathmarks*, pg 121

28 Ibid., pg 126

cultural expression, and calling the subject back to the ethical responsibility that lies at its origin. The freedom of the subject is found precisely in its potential to reject this call, and in this Levinas has bound freedom and responsibility together inseparably. The call is the moment of *epiphany*, and once more it stands in contrast to Heidegger, and his conception of the mode of authenticity. Rather than recoiling from the 'They' with whom Dasein has been bound up inauthentically, realising the potential of being authentic which underlies this inauthentic mode, Levinas' subject is pulled out of its free, independent thought, including authentic *ontological speculation*, and back into its relation to others, back into sociality, in *ethical action*. It is as such that Levinas has attempted to make ethics prior to ontology by upturning the Heideggerian philosophy.

Returning to Levinas' critique of the modern philosophical tradition, he claims that the overcoming of platonism was its convergence with contemporary ethnology, in situating all cultures on the same plane. However, he argues, insightfully, that the gesture that enables this involves an appeal to a higher universal of precisely the kind it tries to abolish. It is precisely the desire for the other, the will to see other cultures as expressing meaningful points of view, to see them as *interlocutors*, that drives the equalisation of cultures. Levinas is thus not opposing this movement, but co-opting it, bringing out its appeal to a universal ethics so as to enable this ethics as a ground to judge these newly equalised cultures. As Levinas himself says: "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."²⁹

However, there is a problem with this univocal sense providing a universal ethics. This can be explained if we think through the Other's calling of the subject into question. This calling into question initially constitutes the subject as a free subject, and the subject is free precisely in its possibility for rejecting this call, for denying its ethical responsibility. However, for there to be the possibility of rejecting this responsibility, that responsibility must have some determinate content. Even if what I am called to do can never exhaust my responsibility to the Other. In order that I could not do it, it must be something in particular that I am called to do. Of course, there can be many real concrete situations in which the face of the Other shines through, situations which seem to call for different ethical responses (from giving to the homeless man you meet on the street to throwing oneself on the grenade to save ones comrades), and it would seem that these must indeed elicit different specific responsibilities, none of which exhausts my *fundamental* responsibility. However, in each case the call is not elicited by the specific meanings of the concrete situation, but by the very stripping away of this concreteness, by the *abstract man* which shines through in the

29 Ibid., pg 101-102

real man. Each visitation is as such not a new call, a new specific responsibility, but the re-emergence of the underlying sense. It is in this that Levinas thinks that this sense can provide the content of an ethics which lies in advance of any and all concrete situations, as well as all cultural contexts. The problem with this is that even if Levinas never completely formulated the content of this ethics, nor even thought that there could be an exhaustive formulation of it, to do what he requires its content must be in some ways determinate, it must have intelligible meaning. But if the Other can provide such meaning in abstraction from all else, it cannot be radically other, it cannot be the absolutely different which is unintelligible. Even though Levinas specifies that the Other is not a genus of which the real other would be an instantiation, an even though the relation to the Other is not an intentional relation, the status of the Other as abstract *man* supplies it with an identifiable content, even if such an identification could never be completed.

We can contrast this to Heidegger's conception of earth, which much like Levinas' Other lies outside the world, and disrupts the world when it erupts within it. Dasein constitutes itself as self in projecting a world, a horizon of its own potentialities for being, or concerning itself with its own being, but it does so *in the face of* that which lies beyond it, the radically unintelligible earth whose very conflict with the world, or strife, constitutes the movement of Truth³⁰. Similarly, Foucault's conceives the subject as instantiating a form of subjectivity, which is essentially a form of self-relation or self-mastery in response to what one has no control over, the Outside, the radically different or other than oneself³¹. In both of these conceptions, the subject is fundamentally constituted by a relation to that which is radically different or other than it, and this relation is in surplus of any intentionality, or any form of appropriation or identification of this other. It is also the case that this self-relation is conceived as specifically non-egoistic. Dasein's concern with itself "contains neither a solipsistic isolation of [itself] nor an egoistic intensification thereof."³² Similarly, it is in self-relation that Foucault locates ethics, other-relation itself becoming a self-relation³³. But, in each case, the radical unintelligibility makes no specific demands upon the subject. The disruption of the subject's grasp of its potentialities for being comes without warning, as with the ethical call, but it demands no specific response, it simply demands *a* response. New expression, the reorganising or reassembling of the world, is demanded by the encounter with the unintelligible, it *forces us to think*, though not to think anything in particular³⁴. Likewise, this unintelligible beyond

30 *Basic Writings*, pg 172-177

31 Interestingly Levinas explicitly denies the possibility of self-mastery as providing anything like sense (*CPP*, pg 98).

32 *Pathmarks*, pg 122

33 There is no single place in which Foucault lays out his whole conception of subjectivity and its relation to ethics, but his best discussion of what ethics or morality in general is can be found at the beginning of the *History of Sexuality: Volume 2*, with his own peculiar ethics being formulated across the various papers collected together in the *Ethics* collection, his paper "What is Enlightenment?" providing the best synopsis.

34 This is Deleuze's understanding of the encounter with the radically unintelligible, difference-in-itself or nonsense, which is of course much influenced by Heidegger's *What is Called Thinking?* (*Difference and Repetition*, pg 176-183)

is never exhausted, it perpetually forces the subject to re-evaluate its possibilities for being. In attempting to find ethics in the radical Other, Levinas has sacrificed its radical unintelligibility and as such the limitless potential for change which this radical difference brings with it. The ethical encounters which force us to reconfigure our conceptions of world, either individual or cultural expressions, are a *kind* of encounter with radical difference, they are not the *archetype* of such encounters.

For all of this criticism, Levinas has still made a valuable point: our expressive activity of organising the world, so as to illuminate or bring meaning to the experience of beings we have within it, does seem to involve the pure form of an interlocutor to whom we express. It seems as if our own meanings can only be meaningful if they are opened up to the possibility of their potential falsity, which is to say if they are situated within a space of possible meaning the limit of which must be some *other* unspecified meaning – a potential position held by a purely potential *other*. It also seems correct to say that it is the very appeal to this potential other which drives the modern attempt to situate all cultures on the same plane, to accept them all as meaningful. It may even be possible to use this structure as a way to judge cultures, or perhaps even to develop some further, more concrete ethical considerations. However, what must be recognised is that this structure, although it might be the most general feature of all culture, is not for that matter beyond the world which these cultures express. Sociality is a contingent feature of the form of *our* subjectivity, not necessarily the locus of subjectivity per se. Levinas, in providing a phenomenological analysis of this sociality, appears to have confused this structural other, which is a part of a concrete structure within the world, with the radical difference which can never be incorporated within any concrete subjectivity, but as such forms its condition.