SJIF Impact Factor (2026): 8.863| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 11 | Issue: 9| September 2026 - Peer Reviewed Journal

THE FACE AND THE WORLD: LEVINAS ON CULTURE AND MORAL VALUE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines Emmanuel Levinas's ethical theory to scrutinize the moral underpinnings of culture in contemporary times. This study argues that Levinas's ethical framework, based on the face-to-face relationship, necessitates a profound reorganization of culture as an ethical domain defined by responsibility, alterity, and responsiveness to the Other, rather than just as a compilation of social or symbolic constructs. Although most of the current Levinasian literature emphasizes interpersonal ethics or theological ramifications, this study proposes a novel interpretation by applying Levinas's notion of the face to the domains of cultural development and digital mediation. It contends that Levinas' ethics, which are based on infinite obligation to the Other, might provide light on contemporary culture's moral difficulties, notably the loss of ethical immediacy in virtual and globalized environments. This article presents a novel approach by applying Levinas's ethics to the intersection of digital culture and environmental responsibility, two areas that are seldom explored concurrently within a Levinasian context. The study posits that the 'face' serves as a metaphor for ethical visibility in social, ecological, and technological contexts, suggesting that culture should be seen not just as a system of shared meanings but as an ethical domain defined by responsibility, vulnerability, and care. This new way of thinking connects phenomenology ethics with cultural philosophy, giving us a new moral framework for judging how people behave in today's cultures.

KEYWORDS: *The face, Otherness (Alterity), Cultural ethics, Ethics of responsibility, Moral value*

INTRODUCTION

There is a lot of friction between ethical standards and cultural practices in the moral landscape of the twenty-first century. Globalization, digital connectedness, and environmental change have changed how people see the world and how they interact with one other. Culture now goes beyond location and tradition. It works via screens, algorithms, and mediated interactions that sometimes make it hard to see how quickly people are responsible for their actions. Emmanuel Levinas's ethical theory provides a profound reevaluation of ethical living in a communal and linked environment. Levinas repositions ontology, the examination of being, as the cornerstone of philosophy, asserting instead that ethics is the primary philosophy (Levinas, 1969). He believes that seeing the face of the Other is the first experience that gives birth to moral significance and worth. The face is not a tangible substance but a manifestation of ethical demand, an appeal that summons the self to boundless obligation beyond reciprocity or calculation.

This article, titled '*The Face and the World: Levinas on Culture and Moral Value*,' examines Levinas's ethics through the lens of cultural philosophy. Although Levinas never formulated a systematic theory of culture, his ethical framework—anchored on asymmetrical responsibility—provides a robust foundation for reconceptualizing the moral aspect of culture. Modern culture prioritizes representation, identity, and consumption at the expense of ethical engagement, diminishing humans to mere actors in mediated systems. Levinas's concept of the face-to-face confronts this totalizing inclination by reinstating ethical immediacy: it emphasizes that culture should originate not from uniformity but from otherness, not from subjugation but from hospitality.

1. Levinas's Key Concepts — Face, Other, and Responsibility

The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, which prioritizes ethics above ontology, represents a significant turning point in twentieth-century thinking. In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Levinas rejects the Western obsession with existence and identity and claims that 'ethics is first philosophy,' inverting the ontological primacy of the subject as it is seen in Descartes, Hegel, and Heidegger. His ethical approach revolves on three interconnected ideas that collectively reinterpret the moral foundation of culture and human existence: *responsibility*, the *Other*, and the *face*.

1.1 The Face: Ethical Encounter

According to Levinas, the face (visage) is an expression of ethical transcendence rather than a tangible or beautiful appearance. It occurs when the vulnerability of the Other dictates, "Thou shalt not kill" (Levinas, 1969, p. 199). The face cannot be understood or represented; it resists absorption and therefore disrupts the autonomy of the self. Cohen (1985) notes that the face signifies 'an infringement on my autonomy by the existence of the Other.' It puts the subject in a position of limitless responsibility and forbids dominance.

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This undermines the representational framework of art and media in cultural contexts. While society often converts the face into an object of exhibition or interpretation, Levinas asserts that the ethical face cannot be reduced to a mere picture. The 'nudity' of the face—its unadulterated exposure of the Other—serves as a reminder that the purpose of culture is not representation, but the preservation of individuals' ethical dignity.

1.2 The Other: Transcendence and Alterity

The Other (*Autrui*) is crucial to Levinas' criticism of totality. According to Levinas (1969), the Other is 'absolutely other,' and cannot be reduced to the self's categories or cultural systems. The connection with the Other is asymmetric: I am indefinitely responsible for the Other, regardless of reciprocity (Levinas, 1981). This contradicts the principles of Kantian mutual regard and Buber's I–Thou symmetry. The ethical relationship is characterized by duty devoid of expectation, rather than equality.

In the context of culture, this signifies that an ethical existence relies on receptiveness to diversity rather than uniformity or agreement. Cultures, by structuring meanings, risk confining alterity inside recognizable frameworks—a phenomenon Levinas designates as *totality*. Rather, true culture must continue to be receptive to the *infinite*, to the unknowable. Thus, the Levinasian Other serves as a moral buffer against cultural uniformity.

1.3 Responsibility: The Ground of Subjectivity

Responsibility is the essence of Levinasian ethics and the fundamental condition of selfhood. Levinas (1981, p. 114) says, "To be a self is to be responsible." Responsibility comes before freedom, the law, and permission; it is pre-rational and unchosen. Levinas makes a distinction between the saying (the moral act of exposing) and the said (language as content) in Otherwise than Being (1981). The saying that comes before language systems and cultural standards is 'responsibility.'

According to this perspective, moral worth is a relationship rather than a property. Human life is valuable because of the fragility of the Other, which demands care, not because of reason or cultural standing. A society that disregards this and views people as consumable or ideological objects loses its moral foundation. On the other hand, a society based on Levinasian duty develops into a 'culture of care,' where caring for others sustains meaning.

1.4 The Infinite Demand and the Limits of Culture

According to Levinas, responsibility is limitless and hence unachievable. Culture cannot claim moral wholeness or close upon itself because of this unrelenting pressure. The Other's face constantly challenges complacency by highlighting the limitations of ideologies and institutions. Levinasian ethics is a 'demand without final satisfaction,' as Critchley (2002) puts it.

This unending transparency characterizes Levinas's view of culture as an ethical calling rather than a feat. In constant tension, the Other exposes transcendence, the face reveals vulnerability, and duty ties them together. Together, they challenge any society based on ownership or dominance and advocate for one based on vulnerability and hospitality.

Thus, Levinas's central ideas set the stage for a reinterpretation of moral worth as relational encounters rather than as cultural consensus or an objective ideal. As covered in the following sections, this framework offers the moral basis for investigating how Levinas's ideas might be applied to the problems facing the ecological and digital worlds.

2. CULTURE IN LEVINAS — ETHICS BEYOND TOTALITY

Culture is at the ethical heart of Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy, despite the fact that he never approached it methodically. He investigates how human meaning—through language, art, and tradition—can stay open to what surpasses it in his works from *Totality and Infinity* (1969) to *Otherwise than Being* (1981). Levinas regards culture as a place of moral tension, between *totality* (close and systematization) and *infinity* (openness to the Other). This is different from anthropocentric perspectives that see culture as mastery. Culture is thus not a static accomplishment but a continuous ethical endeavor—an sensitivity to alterity.

2.1 Culture as Totality: The Risk of Closure

Levinas characterizes wholeness as the intellectual and institutional frameworks that arrange experience into coherent systems. Totality is essential for comprehension, but it poses the danger of diminishing the Other to the Same. Culture, by establishing meanings and traditions as authoritative, often engages in this reduction. It establishes a 'home' (*chez soi*) that provides stability while excluding the unfamiliar (Levinas, 1969, p. 173). This kind of closure stops transcendence and turns culture into a self-contained identity.

Levinas does not dismiss totality; rather, he advocates for its perpetual disruption by the Other. Culture must maintain ethical vulnerability—open to scrutiny that challenges its assumptions. According to Hand (1989), Levinas reinterprets culture as 'a locus of ethical exposure rather than domination.' Its life hinges on receptiveness to transcendence.

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2.2 Language, Expression, and the Trace of the Other

Language is how the Other gets close: Levinas (1969, p. 195) says, "Language is the condition for the Other's approach." But language both shows and hides at the same time. Every word has the ability to freeze meaning, which could mean breaking the ethical relationship it comes from. Levinas makes a distinction between the saying (*le dire*), which is the act of ethical exposure before the theme, and the said (*le dit*), which is the culture's written material (Levinas, 1981, p. 46).

Culture lives in the said, but for it to live an ethical life, it needs to keep its humility. If we forget where culture came from, it turns into theory or show. Paying attention is needed to renew the 'trace of the Other,' especially in this digital age where faces are shared as pictures without being met.

2.3 The Stranger and Cultural Identity

The stranger (*l'étranger*) strengthens Levinas's concept of hospitality and represents cultural alterity. According to Levinas (1969, p. 177), ethics involves accepting the stranger—not out of kindness, but as a basic component of subjectivity. Openness, not exclusion, must be the foundation of cultural identity. Hospitality must remain unconditional, beyond reciprocity or shared heritage, Derrida (1999) underlines.

Levinas's viewpoint acts as a mediator in a pluralistic society between ethnocentrism, which eliminates diversity, and relativism, which runs the danger of negating moral responsibility. Rather than originating from common identities or conventions, true culture emerges from an ethical obligation to the stranger.

2.4 From Totality to Transcendence

Levinas challenges traditional ideas of culture as Bildung or paideia, in which moral development results in identical selves. Rather, exteriority—the ability to maintain diversity within a common life—is what gives culture its ethical value. Moral worth is relational, a constant balancing act between alterity and system. Bergo (2018) asserts that Levinas reconceptualizes culture as a dynamic realm of ethical obligation rather than a fixed assemblage of significations. Therefore, evaluating whether politics, religion, or art retain or eradicate the trace of the Other requires ethical cultural critique. Cultural worth is measured by ethics rather than beauty.

2.5 Toward an Ethics of Cultural Openness

Globalization and digital technology exacerbate ethical dilemmas. Faces circulate as marketable pictures; diversity is commercialized; ecological degradation reveals anthropocentric constraints. Levinas's concept of duty 'beyond being' broadens ethics to include non-human entities, including ecosystems, as integral participants in moral existence.

Living ethically within a society necessitates a 'restlessness of responsibility' (Levinas, 1981, p. 110)—eschewing closure, maintaining responsiveness, and sustaining openness. Culture constitutes a conversation between the limited and the infinite, a continuous endeavor to maintain the visibility of the Other inside human history.

3. THE ETHICS OF CULTURE IN A GLOBAL AND DIGITAL AGE

Globalization and digital technology have changed culture in the twenty-first century. They have both brought people together and broken them apart. People can talk to one other right away, yet they are still stuck in algorithmic bubbles. Identities can be found all around the world, but they can also be reduced to photos. In this context, Emmanuel Levinas's ethical theory becomes more pertinent. His concept of the face—the irreducible presence of the Other—offers a vital foundation for comprehending moral responsibility within global and digital culture (Levinas, 1969, p. 66).

According to Levinas, communication transcends simple transmission and embodies responsibility. Speaking is a response to the ethical imperative arising from the vulnerability of the Other (Levinas, 1969, p. 198). Global connectedness does not inherently foster ethical relationships; digital culture often illustrates the 'reduction of the Other to the Same,' converting alterity into data, information, or imagery. This part examines two urgent crises: the erosion of ethical presence in digital interactions and the abdication of moral duty in global and environmental settings, emphasizing Levinas's significant contribution to cultural ethics.

3. 1 The Ethics of Culture in a Global and Digital Age

Levinas's ethics are fundamentally rooted in the face-to-face interaction; however, digital platforms frequently render the face into an object for consumption. Virtual meetings, online communities, and social media replace the immediacy of ethical relationships with representations, transforming presence into abstraction. This is referred to as 'the transparency of the image' by Han (2017), in which visibility replaces the genuine appearance. The ethical imperative in the digital domain is to foster digital responsibility: engaging with mediated presence as if interacting with an individual face-to-face.

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Even if avatars, filters, and algorithms control how visible people are, the digital face may nonetheless show a hint of vulnerability—the call to duty beyond presence (Caputo, 2000). An ethical digital culture necessitates opposing the simplification of individuals to mere material, so maintaining the inherent asymmetry of relationships central to morality.

3.2 The Global Other and Moral Responsibility

Globalization exacerbates ethical difficulties since human acts influence faraway persons and ecosystems. However, awareness does not imply accountability. According to Levinas, responsibility is limitless and precedes social contracts: "I am responsible for the Other, without waiting for reciprocity, even if I must die for it" (Levinas, 1981/1998, p.98). In the global era, mediated representations of suffering render the Other both ubiquitous and unseen, fostering moral apathy. Levinas changes global ethics from an abstract universalism to a phenomenology of responsibility, where moral significance comes from being attentive to others. He says that each individual is accountable "for all and before all" (Levinas, 1987, p. 75).

3.3 Environmental Responsibility and the Non-Human Other

Levinas's ethics include ecological responsibility. Levinas does not often speak explicitly about it, but the ethical summons may be extended to non-human people as well. The destruction of the environment, including the loss of species and the collapse of ecosystems, necessitates a reaction. Cohen (2019) and Critchley (2015) see the 'face' as a sign of alterity, which makes a post-human ethics possible. Cultural duty for the environment means fighting the urge to see everything as one thing. It means seeing the earth not as an object but as an Other that needs our ethical attention.

3.4 Toward an Ethics of Cultural Attentiveness

Levinas reconceptualizes culture as the discipline of attentiveness—staying receptive to that which defies understanding. Ethical culture maintains the presence of the Other inside institutions, technologies, and representations, against what Han (2017) refers to as the 'aestheticization of ethics,' when morality is transformed into spectacle. Responsibility, rather than virtue, serves as the criterion for value. This serves as a practical framework for education, the arts, media, and governance: teaching as hospitality, creativity as a moral sacrifice, representation as accountability, and policy as moral interaction with invisible people.

4. TOWARD AN ETHICS OF CULTURAL RESPONSIBILITY: LEVINAS IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

When applied to culture, Levinas's ethical theory reinterprets what it means to live a moral life in an increasingly interconnected society. Culture is an ethical interaction between the self and the Other that takes place in history and society, rather than just being a collection of ideals or artifacts. Whether it exposes or hides the Other's face determines its moral value. When we talk about cultural responsibility via Levinas, we are asking whether our creative, technical, political, and ecological practices are still open to otherness or if they give in to the totalizing drives of sameness and control.

4.1 The Ethical Demand of Cultural Encounter

Contemporary philosophers such as Axel Honneth (1995) and Charles Taylor (1992) associate moral being with recognition; yet, Levinas diverges from these perspectives. For him, ethics is not about mutual recognition but about asymmetrical duty, which is responding to the Other who summons me before equality or reciprocity (Levinas, 1981).When applied to culture, this challenges liberal principles of multicultural tolerance and necessitates a radical hospitality: the self must embrace the alterity that disturbs it.

So, true intercultural discussion doesn't start with claiming identity; it starts with accepting being displaced by the Other's presence. Culture's grandeur resides not in mastery or advancement, but in openness. Levinas substitutes cultural autonomy with moral humility, establishing an ethics rooted on the vulnerability of the face rather than the sovereignty of reason or aesthetics.

4.2 Cultural Violence and the Loss of the Face

Levinas' criticism of totalizing cognition demonstrates how culture may carry out subtle violence by reducing variation to sameness. In their claim to universality, dominant cultural institutions often repress marginalized voices or aestheticize pain. Postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1988) share this concern, demonstrating how hegemonic narratives erase hybrid and subaltern identities. Levinas lays the ethical groundwork for such criticism: cultural violence starts with a refusal to recognize the face.

In media culture, the face is turned into an image and a spectacle. Attention economies take the role of ethical presence on social media. So, the Levinasian face needs to be rethought as something that doesn't want to be represented—a moral call that breaks the visual economy. This is an important moral job to do in a time when algorithms can be hacked and people are constantly being watched online.

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4.3 Levinas and the Ethics of Environmental Culture

Levinas's philosophy also provides a novel foundation for environmental ethics. Although his emphasis was on interpersonal responsibility, other theorists, including Derrida (1999), Calarco (2008), and Llewelyn (1991), have broadened his concepts to include non-human entities. In this larger sense, culture encompasses all of the ways that people, animals, ecosystems, and the earth live together.

The 'face' might be seen figuratively as the visage of the earth: the delicate manifestation of nature that requires ethical stewardship. A Levinasian ecological culture emphasizes sensitivity to non-human otherness, seeing woods, rivers, and wildlife as interlocutors rather than just resources. This methodology anchors environmental ethics not in utilitarian assessments or rights-based paradigms, but in the phenomenology of responsibility—an ethics of hospitality towards all manifestations of otherness.

4.4 Toward a Culture of Infinite Responsibility

Levinas ultimately conceptualizes a civilization of boundless responsibility—one that defies finality, honors otherness, and maintains ethical unease. This culture flourishes not via harmony or expertise, but by openness and closeness, where moral meaning emerges from collective vulnerability rather than common opinion.

In a globalized, digital world characterized by rapidity and spectacle, Levinas presents a contrasting perspective: culture is defined not by performance but by contact. Each picture, word, and gesture embodies a significant responsibility. By reinstating the face as the ethical nucleus of culture, humanity may regain moral value—not as an abstract ideal but as a dynamic relationship that revitalizes the world via response.

CONCLUSION — Reclaiming the Ethical Meaning of Culture

In an era dominated by rapidity, representation, and technological mediation, Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes that the foundation of meaning is ethical rather than aesthetic or cognitive. For Levinas, ethics starts with the encounter—specifically, the visage of the Other that compels the self to assume responsibility. This paper reinterprets Levinas's ethics as a basis for cultural regeneration, suggesting that culture achieves authenticity only when it serves as a medium of ethical connection rather than as a reservoir of expression or information. The face, rather than a simple metaphor, exposes the ethical essence of culture: it requires awareness, sensitivity, and consideration for all kinds of otherness—both human and non-human.

The challenge Levinas poses to Western culture is the reversal of the primacy of knowing over responding. He contends that 'ethics precedes ontology' (Levinas, 1969), implying that comprehension precedes accountability. The significance of culture is fundamentally altered by this transition from epistemology to ethics. Education, art, and technology transition from instruments of mastery to expressions of welcome. A culture rooted on responsibility prioritizes caring over control and attentiveness above productivity. Levinas's 'wisdom of love' (1981) serves as a remedy for contemporary nihilism, substituting power with service and certainty with compassion.

This reinterpretation provides a new ethical language for cultural philosophy. According to Levinas, moral value is not found in virtue or law, but rather in responsiveness—the willingness to respond to the Other's quiet call. Culture's importance is consequently relational rather than representational. Digital responsibility shifts from visibility to ethical consideration, whereas environmental ethics arises from a responsiveness to the earth's 'faces'—its delicate ecosystems and the quiet entities inside them. By incorporating Levinas's ethics into the moral framework of culture, we provide a foundation for cohabitation based on caring rather than competitiveness.

Levinas's concept of culture is not rooted in nostalgia but rather oriented towards the future. He presents an ethical cosmopolitanism based on shared accountability. The current crises—ecological collapse, digital alienation, cultural polarization—arise from the reduction of the Other to the Same. To 'see the face' is to fight against this reduction and recognize diversity as what makes us human. The universality that arises from such ethics is experiential, not theoretical: it develops from compassion, not oppression. Levinas asserts, "Ethics does not commence with freedom, but with service" (1969, p. 215).

To discuss the world and the face is to rediscover culture as the intersection of existence and ethics. The face reestablishes significance in areas where power has been dominant, and responsibility replaces possession as the metric for humanity. If the previous century celebrated progress through production, the upcoming one must be defined by relation and caring. Levinas does not provide definitive solutions but rather a call—to assume responsibility towards the Other and to restore the moral essence of culture. To listen to the face's subtle demand, '*You are responsible*,' is to imagine a world where culture becomes the language of compassion again.

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