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Dialogales — IV.

JUSTICE AND THE FACE

Embodied Political Ethics

"The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation."
Emmanuel Levinas

"The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance."
John Rawls

"Emotions are judgments about what matters to us."
Martha Nussbaum

DIALOGALES
COLLECTION

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PRELUDE

A Room, a Question, a Photograph

Professor Verne entered that morning and placed on the table, at its center, not a book this time — a photograph.

Large format. Black and white. A woman. Her age indeterminate — somewhere between forty and sixty. She was looking into the lens. No smile, no visible sadness. Just a presence — dense, direct, asking nothing and withdrawing nothing.

He did not explain where the photograph came from. He sat down. Watched his students watching the photograph.

> — I would like to ask you a question. Not a philosophical question — a moral one. Direct.

He placed his hand beside the photograph — not on it, beside it. The way one approaches something without wishing to possess it.

> — This woman lives in a refugee camp. In Greece. She fled a country at war. She lost family members during the crossing. She has been waiting eighteen months for an administrative decision. She does not speak the language of the country. She is not allowed to work. She is not allowed to move freely. She waits.
>
> — What do you owe her? You — personally. Not the State. Not Europe. Not the institutions. You.

Silence.

A different kind of silence — more uncomfortable. The silence of those who feel a question reaching them where they had not expected to be reached.

> **— Thomas:** I don't know her.
>
> — No.
>
> **— Thomas:** I am not responsible for what happened to her.
>
> — No.
>
> **— Thomas:** Then why do I feel — right now — as though I owe her something?

Professor Verne nodded slowly.

> — There. That is precisely where the philosophy of justice begins. Not in treatises, not in theories, not in constitutions. In that feeling — that strange, uncomfortable, inexplicable feeling — that someone you do not know concerns you. That their fate obliges you.
>
> — This seminar will try to understand why. And what it really means — when we say that justice obliges us.

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I. Levinas, Rawls, Nussbaum — Three Approaches to Justice

> — We have already encountered Levinas. In the first seminar — the face of the other as interpellation, as what obliges us before any choice. But today I want to go further. Where Levinas himself went when he pushed his thinking toward the political question. The question of the third party.

He went to the board. He wrote with deliberate emphasis:

> *LEVINAS — Justice as a response to the face.*

— Levinas's originary situation is this: I am face to face with the other. Their face interpellates me. I am responsible for them — infinitely, asymmetrically, without necessary reciprocity. But here is the problem. I am not face to face with a single other. I am face to face with millions of others. And each one interpellates me with the same force, the same urgency.

He wrote:

The third party — the one who is present when I stand before the other. The third party who makes justice necessary.

— The moment the third party appears — the moment I realize that my responsibility toward the other coexists with my responsibility toward all others — something new becomes necessary. Justice. Not as a feeling — as an institution. As a system of rules that makes it possible to respond to the plurality of faces.

— And here is the fundamental tension that Levinas has the courage to name. Justice betrays ethics. Because justice compares. And to compare is to reduce each person to what they share with others.

He wrote on the board:

Justice is necessary — and it always betrays something. That is its tragedy. And its greatness.

— Iris: But then — if justice always betrays something of the ethics of the face — how do we prevent justice institutions from becoming cold machines that entirely forget the faces they are supposed to serve?

— That is the very question Levinas poses himself. And his answer is that justice must always remain haunted by ethics. That justice institutions must always remain open to being called into question by the face of those they exclude.

— This woman — in the refugee camp — is precisely someone whom justice institutions have calculated, categorized, placed in a procedure. She is a file. A number. Formal justice has given her a status. And in giving her that status — it has perhaps taken away her face. Levinas would say: justice that forgets the face is no longer justice. It is administration.

He went to the board. He wrote:

RAWLS — How to build a justice that no one could refuse?

— Rawls starts from a different intuition. He starts from reason. He asks: what principles of justice would rational persons choose if they did not know what position they would occupy in society?

— Imagine that you must choose the rules of the society in which you will live — but without knowing who you will be in that society. Rich or poor. Man or woman. In the majority or in the minority. Born in a stable country or in a conflict zone.

He wrote:

The veil of ignorance — choosing the rules without knowing who one will be.

— Behind this veil of ignorance — knowing that I could be this woman in this camp — would I accept the rules that currently govern the reception of refugees in Europe?

The silence that followed had the density of answers that need not be spoken aloud.

He went to the board. He wrote:

NUSSBAUM — Emotions are forms of knowledge. Without them, justice remains blind.

— Nussbaum begins with a conviction that the philosophical tradition long resisted. She says: emotions are not disturbances of reason. They are judgments — evaluations of what matters. And certain emotions — compassion, indignation, shame — are indispensable to justice.

— Authentic compassion rests on three simultaneous judgments. First judgment: the other's suffering is real and serious. Second judgment: the other does not deserve what is happening to them. Third judgment — the most important: what is happening to the other could happen to me.

He wrote:

Compassion says: what is happening to you could happen to me. It is the recognition of our shared vulnerability.

— Noa: It is not only a face that interpellates me, nor an abstract position behind a veil. It is someone who suffers. And that suffering — that emotional reality — is it philosophically relevant to justice?

— That is precisely the question Nussbaum has spent her life asking. And her answer is decisive. All three thinkers — Levinas, Rawls, Nussbaum — say the same thing from different angles. Abstract justice is not enough. It needs something that constantly brings it back to faces. To real sufferings. To the concrete beings it is supposed to serve.

He looked at the photograph.

— This woman in this camp — she is a test. Not a theoretical test. A real one. Is our sense of justice equal to her face?

— The honest answer is no. Not yet. Not sufficiently. And that is why the philosophy of justice is not an academic exercise. It is an urgency.

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II. Indignation and Its Limits — From Anger to Justice

— I would like to begin with an observation.

He did not go to the board. He remained standing in that posture they knew — the posture of someone about to say something difficult, who takes the time to hold it whole before releasing it.

— We live in the age of indignation. Never in human history have so many people been aware of so many injustices simultaneously. Refugees in camps. Children dying of preventable diseases. Widening inequalities. All of this is visible — documented, photographed, shared.

— And yet. And yet the injustices persist. As though visibility were not enough. As though indignation — even massive, even sincere — did not automatically translate into justice.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Indignation is necessary. It is not sufficient. The question is: what does it lack?

— I want to distinguish two types of indignation. Authentic indignation — a response to objective injustice. Someone suffers unjustly, and this injustice reaches us because it violates something we recognize as fundamental. Resentment, by contrast, is self-

centered. It says: I have been wronged. I have been humiliated. Its reference point is not the dignity of the other — it is my own wound.

He wrote side by side:

Indignation — a response to injustice done to another. Resentment — a response to injustice done to oneself.

— Thomas: But in practice — how do we distinguish the two? When someone is indignant about an injustice that also affects them personally — is it indignation or resentment?

— A good question. And Nussbaum acknowledges that the boundary is porous. The problem arises when resentment takes over. When the demand for justice transforms into a desire for revenge. And Nietzsche — who is not often invoked in discussions of justice but who should be more so — analyzed this drift with merciless lucidity.

He went to the board. He wrote:

The demand for justice — to repair what is broken. The demand for vengeance — to make someone pay for what was taken. These are not the same projects.

— Malia: But there is something difficult in what you are saying. Those who suffer real injustices are often asked to moderate their anger. To purify it. And this demand frequently comes from those who do not suffer from those injustices.

Professor Verne looked at her for a long moment.

— You are absolutely right. There is an American philosopher — Audre Lorde — who wrote a magnificent text entitled The Uses of Anger. She says that the anger of the oppressed is not a problem to be corrected. It is an appropriate response to an unjust reality. It is information about what is wrong in the world.

He wrote on the board:

Anger is information. Not a policy. Policy begins when we ask: what can be done with this anger so that it serves justice?

— Iris: My indignation at the situation of this woman — is it genuine indignation? Or am I telling myself I am indignant because it gives me a clear conscience without my actually doing anything?

— You have just named what Bernard Williams called comfortable bad conscience. This way of using moral indignation as a substitute for action. I am indignant — therefore I am on the right side.

— Nussbaum has a concept for what must be added to indignation for it to become productive. She calls it the transition — the movement that goes from anger to the concrete question: what can be done? By whom? How?

He wrote:

Mature indignation — the kind that asks the next question: what can be done, now, concretely, to repair?

— This passage requires something that indignation alone cannot provide. It requires practical wisdom. What the Greeks called phronesis — that intelligence of the particular case that knows how to apply general principles to concrete situations.

He wrote:

Literature as a school of justice. It teaches us to inhabit lives we have not lived.

— Sonia: Then this seminar itself — this philosophical novel we are living through — is a form of justice?

Professor Verne paused. Looked at her.

— Perhaps. If we deserve it. If we do not content ourselves with thinking justice within these walls. If something of what we go through here changes something in the way we look at the faces we encounter outside.

* * *

III. Global Justice — What We Owe Strangers

— I would like to begin with a number.

He went to the board. He wrote — not a philosophical formula this time, but a number:

17,000.

— That is the approximate number of people who have died attempting to cross the Mediterranean since the year 2000. I am not telling you this to provoke an emotional reaction. I am telling you this because it is a fact. A philosophically unbearable fact, if we take seriously what we have said about the face, about responsibility, about the shared vulnerability of human beings.

— Are national borders morally justifiable? Does a state have the right to decide who enters and who stays out — including when those kept out are risking their lives?

He wrote three positions on the board:

I. The cosmopolitan position — borders are morally arbitrary. II. The liberal-nationalist position — borders are legitimate but limited. III. The communitarian position — borders are constitutive of justice.

— The cosmopolitan position says: the place where one is born is morally arbitrary. Just like the color of one's skin, the sex one belongs to. One did not choose it. One does not deserve it. And a justice that distributes rights based on this accident is not justice. It is a lottery.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Nationality is a moral lottery. Our rights should not depend on the accident of birth.

— Sonia: But the cosmopolitan position has an obvious practical limitation. If we abolish borders, nation-states disappear as units of governance. And with them, all the social, democratic, and institutional achievements built within those borders.

— Exactly. And that is the argument of the liberal-nationalist position. It says: nation-states are not merely arbitrary administrative structures. They are communities of meaning. And these communities create special obligations among their members — obligations stronger than those we have toward strangers. But these special obligations do not cancel obligations toward strangers. They order them in terms of priority.

— Thomas: And the third position — the communitarian one? It frightens me. Because it resembles a philosophical justification of national selfishness.

— It can be. But in its philosophically serious form — represented by Walzer — that is not what it says. Walzer says: communities have the right to define themselves — but they also have obligations toward those they exclude. And particularly toward refugees — those fleeing persecution, war, certain death. Walzer states explicitly that refusing asylum to those fleeing death is morally indefensible in any serious tradition of justice.

He returned to the center of the room.

— All three positions — despite their profound differences — converge on something. All three say that allowing seventeen thousand people to die in the Mediterranean is unacceptable.

He went to the board. He wrote:

The philosophy of justice cannot replace politics. It can illuminate it. Orient it. Judge it. But justice is made — or not made — in the political arena.

— Malia: But precisely — what do we do next? Because since the beginning of this seminar, we have been describing injustices, analyzing them. And in the meantime the woman in the photograph is still waiting.

— Philosophy can shift the terrain of debate. Render certain arguments indefensible. Create the intellectual conditions in which a different political choice becomes thinkable. Rawls did this. Nussbaum did this with her capabilities theory.

— Philosophy works slowly. Much more slowly than the urgency of injustices. That is its limitation and its mode of being. And that is why it too has a debt to the defeated. To those who are suffering now from the injustice that philosophy has not yet managed to change.

He picked up his coat.

— Next time — the most personal question. Not global justice — everyday justice. What each of us can do, in our ordinary lives, to avoid being complicit in injustice through our passivity.

— Look at your life — your consumption choices, your habits, the way you vote. And ask yourself honestly: in which injustices am I implicated, even without wanting to be?

* * *

IV. Everyday Justice — What I Can Do, Now, Here

— I would like to begin with a confession.

He did not go to the board. He sat down — directly, among them, without distance.

— This week — while preparing this course — I did something I had not done in a long time. I looked at my own life. Really looked at it. With the question I had given you: in which injustices am I implicated, even without wanting to be?

— And I found uncomfortable things. My phone — manufactured with cobalt extracted by children in Congolese mines. The clothes I wear — produced under conditions I prefer not to imagine. The fruit I eat in winter — picked by seasonal workers in conditions close to serfdom.

— I am not telling you this to flagellate myself. I am telling you this because this list — ordinary, banal, one that each of us could draw up — says something important about the nature of contemporary injustice. It is no longer simply the work of visible tyrants. It is diffuse. It is systemic. It is embedded in the most everyday gestures of our lives.

He went to the board and wrote:

Contemporary injustice is structural. It does not require ill will. It thrives in good conscience.

— Thomas: But if injustice is structural — what can my individual choices change? It's a luxury for those who can afford it. And it doesn't change the structures.

— Yes and no. Individual choices do not change structures directly. But they change the people who make them. They maintain a coherence between what one thinks and what one does. They create communities of practice that make visible that another way of living is possible.

He wrote:

Individual action does not replace collective action. It anticipates it. Prepares it. Gives it flesh.

— Malia: You speak of coherence. But perfect coherence is impossible. If I had to renounce everything produced unjustly — I would be paralyzed.

— Yes. What is needed — what everyday justice asks — is not perfection. It is direction.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Everyday justice does not demand perfection. It demands direction — and honesty about where one stands.

— Simone Weil had a way of thinking about justice that started not from rights but from obligation. And she said something decisive: the obligation toward the human being as such is an obligation toward something that can never be satisfied by institutions alone. Because what we owe each human being — is attention. A real, personal, irreplaceable attention.

He wrote:

Attention — the rarest and most necessary form of justice.

— Iris: But attention has limits. We cannot pay attention to everyone. We cannot bear all sufferings.

— No. It is not cowardice. It is even philosophically important to name it. Everyday justice is not an unlimited obligation. It is a reasoned obligation. Here is how I would formulate it. First — do not look away.

He wrote on the board:

1. Do not look away. 2. Act within one's real sphere of influence. 3. Maintain the tension — between what is and what ought to be.

— This tension — this refusal of easy resolution in either direction — is perhaps the deepest mark of mature ethical thinking. It is what Camus called revolt — not the revolution that claims to solve everything at once, but the permanent, modest, stubborn insurrection against what is unacceptable.

He went to the board. He wrote beneath the three points:

Everyday justice — stubborn, imperfect, necessary.

— Noa: There is something you have not yet named. Something simpler than all of this. More immediate. Recognition. What every human being most deeply expects from others — not abstract rights, not perfect institutions. To be seen. To exist in someone else's eyes as someone who matters.

— Yes. And it is the phrase of Malia's that we had kept from another seminar — deciding to see them. That is always where everything begins. Before the laws, before the theories — this first decision to consent to letting the existence of the other matter to me.

— Axel Honneth — a German philosopher, heir to the Frankfurt School — has built an entire theory of justice around recognition. He says that struggles for justice are not primarily struggles for resources or rights. They are struggles for recognition.

He wrote:

> *Recognition — the foundation of all justice. To be seen as someone who matters.*
>
> — Justice begins there. In these minute, daily, renewable gestures. And if these gestures are absent — if recognition is absent — then all the institutions in the world will not produce true justice. They will produce legality. That is not the same thing.
>
> — Until then — one last instruction. The simplest and the most difficult of all those I have given you. Recognize someone you would tend not to see. And really see them — not as a problem, not as a category. As someone.

And he left.

The photograph was still there.

Thomas said — very softly, almost to himself, but loudly enough for everyone to hear:

> **— Thomas:** Her name might be Fatima. Like the woman who cleans Sonia's offices.

Sonia looked at him. And smiled — that rare smile of moments when two distinct truths meet and reveal that they have been speaking of the same thing from the beginning.

* * *

CLOSURE

What the Face Has Taught Us

There was no photograph on the table that morning.

Professor Verne had removed it. In its place — nothing. The bare table. Ordinary wood.

But something remained. Something in the way their gazes moved toward the center of the table — as though the photograph were still there, invisible, continuing to exist in the space it had occupied for weeks.

> — I would like to ask you something. Not a philosophical question. A personal one. What did you do? This week. The instruction I had given you — to recognize someone you would tend not to see.
>
> **— Sonia:** I learned her name. Fatima. But you already know that. This week — I did something else. I asked her how she was. Really asked — not the polite formula, the real question. And she answered. She spoke for ten minutes. About her children. About her country. About how she calculates each month so that ends meet.
>
> **— Sonia:** I realized I have worked in this department for three years. And I knew none of this. Not because it was a secret. Because I had never asked.
>
> **— Thomas:** I had a conversation I had been avoiding for months with a colleague. A colleague I knew was being treated unjustly in our department. Paid less than others for the same work. And I had been looking away. Not out of malice — out of comfort.
>
> **— Thomas:** This week, I did not look away. I told him what I saw. I asked him if he wanted me to accompany him in taking action. He said yes. I don't know what will come of it. But something has changed — in the fact that he knows someone sees.
>
> **— Malia:** I looked differently. On the metro, in the street, in queues. Those faces I used to pass through as though they were scenery — I tried to see them as people. And every time I truly managed it — the world became slightly denser. More real.

— **Iris:** I reread my thesis. The section on distributive justice. And I realized I had not gone far enough. That I had added the concrete case but too quickly reabsorbed it into abstraction. So I started again. I let the face resist my theory. And my theory came out less elegant. But more honest.

— **Noa:** I spoke with my father. About injustice — the real kind, the kind he lived through. He immigrated here thirty years ago. He experienced things I knew only in abstract terms. And at a certain moment — I saw him differently. Not as my father — as someone. Someone who had been through things I had not been through and who had been carrying that in silence for thirty years because no one had truly asked.

— **Léo:** I looked at the photograph. The one you removed this morning. I had photographed it with my phone in the first week. And I have looked at it every day since. Not for long. Thirty seconds perhaps. Just so as not to forget that she exists. That somewhere, someone is waiting.

Professor Verne listened to them all. Then he rose — slowly, with that particular weight of gestures that know they mark something.

He went to the board. And wrote — not a philosophical formula, not a thinker's name. Just a few words, simple, in ordinary letters:

What the face teaches us — that the other truly exists. Not as a concept. As someone.

— The philosophy of justice can become very sophisticated. It can build remarkable theories. And all of this is precious. All of this is necessary. But behind all the sophistication — there is something very simple. That the other truly exists. That their suffering is real. That their dignity counts as much as ours.

— Levinas saw it. Rawls built it differently. Nussbaum felt it differently. But at bottom — they were all saying the same thing. Justice is not first and foremost a matter of institutions or calculations. It is first and foremost a matter of gaze. A gaze that consents to see.

He went to the board one last time. Beneath everything that preceded, he wrote two words:

Permeability.

— Permeability to the face of the other. This capacity — which one can cultivate or allow to atrophy — to let the existence of the other truly reach us. To remain porous — vulnerable — to what their life contains of the real.

— It is not comfortable. Permeability is not. It costs something. But that is precisely why it is just. Because justice — real justice, not legality — has never been comfortable. It has always demanded something from the one who practices it.

— One last thing. I want to speak about the photograph.

He looked at the empty space at the center of the table.

— I had not told you where it came from. I will tell you now. It is not a stock image. It is a photograph of a real woman — whom I met two years ago, during a visit to a camp in Greece. Her name is Amara. She is fifty-three years old. She comes from Eritrea.

— When I asked her if I could use her photograph — in a philosophy course, to talk about justice — she said yes. And she added something I will never forget. She said: if it can make people really think, not just talk.

He looked at them.

— Amara asks you to really think. Not just talk.

He paused on the threshold.

— I believe you have begun.

And he left.

* * *

In the room, no one spoke immediately.

Amara.

She had a name now. She was no longer the woman in the photograph — an image, a metaphor, a pedagogical device. She was someone. Someone who had said yes to having her face used so that others might truly think.

It was Thomas who was the last to rise.

He looked at the empty space at the center of the table. The space where the photograph had been. Then he took out his phone — that phone about which he now knew something more about how it had been made — and searched for something.

He placed the phone at the center of the table.

On the screen — Amara's photograph. The one he had taken a picture of in the first week.

Not to keep her at a distance. So as not to forget her.

So that the face would remain there, at the center, where it had been from the beginning.

Where it had always needed to be.

* * *

Somewhere in Greece, a woman was waiting.

Her name was Amara.

She had said yes so that people might really think.

And in the room on the top floor, someone had placed her photograph at the center of the table.

Simply.

Stubbornly.

As an act of justice.

The only one that was possible.

Now.

Here.

* * *

END

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"The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation."
Emmanuel Levinas

"The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance."
John Rawls

"Emotions are judgments about what matters to us."
Martha Nussbaum