



Trees are reflected in a pond where the ashes of thousands of Holocaust victims were scattered at the Auschwitz II-Birkenau extermination camp in Oswiecim, Poland. Christopher Furlong, Getty Images

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

We must see each other, face-to-face



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"The Drama of Living," the title of David Ford's latest book (and discussed in last week's Interfaith Insight), includes a chapter titled "Face-to-Face."

Through film, plays and literature, we see that "stories are the heart of the matter, and the most important meanings are conveyed through characters and their interactions, not through general statements." It is in the face-to-face encounters that we are presented with a basic ethical reality. "The face of the other is not just another element in my world," Ford writes. "It interrupts my world with an appeal for justice and compassion."

As a graduate student at Yale University, Ford was introduced to the writings of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas was born in Lithuania, educated and lived in France, and was eventually captured by the Germans and imprisoned during World War II. As a prisoner of war from France, he was spared being sent to the death camps but did lose many family members during the Shoah, or Holocaust. In his philosophy, it is the face of the other that "cries out to me to be responsible ... in facing another we are summoned to welcome him or her and above all to welcome the stranger, the outsider, the one in most need."

"We rely on each other interacting — speaking, gesturing, or acting. Even less does a third person have a privileged vantage point; on the contrary, what happens between you and me, as we look into each other's eyes, is unique, a dynamic of summons and response that cannot be fitted into any system or ... grasped through a third party's gaze."

"We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. ... We have to touch people."

Jacob Bronowski

For Levinas, ethics is the basis of all philosophy, and ethics is derived from the encounter with the other. Only then does one's own subjectivity emerge, and only then can one pursue philosophy as the pursuit of knowledge.

Reading Ford's chapter and his introduction to the ideas of Levinas brought to mind a video segment that I still consider the most moving hour of television that I have ever seen. It was an episode in the 1973 BBC series of Jacob Bronowski's "The Ascent of Man." Bronowski was born in Poland and moved to Germany with his family. Later, he studied mathematics at Cambridge University where he received his doctorate in that field. He was also a poet, scientist and literary scholar, having published in all these areas.

The episode that moved me was "Knowledge or Certainty," dealing with the limits of knowledge. The opening scene is a blind woman feeling the face of an elderly man and describing it: "I would say that he is elderly, I think, obviously, he is not English ... probably Continental, if not Eastern-Continental. The lines in his face would be lines of possible agony. ... It is not a happy face."

Bronowski identifies the man as Stephan Borgrajewicz, also from Poland and a death-camp survivor. In the video, he then examines the face using scientific equipment, noting that what one views is dependent on what part of the spectrum of electromagnetic wavelength is used (for example, radio, ultraviolet, x-ray). There is no absolute "scientific" view of the face, or for that matter, anything else that one studies.

The point was to demonstrate that all perception, including that provided by scientific investigation, is necessarily imperfect

See it

"Knowledge or Certainty," an episode of "The Ascent of Man," is available at bit.ly/Certainty-video

and limited. Some aspects of our knowledge of this man cannot be conveyed by scientific instruments, but might rather be seen by an artist, or a poem, or by a blind woman actually touching the man's face.

In the video, Bronowski says, "There is no absolute knowledge. And those who claim it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy. All information is imperfect. We have to treat it with humility."

He goes on to discuss how this was given scientific precision even at the atomic level by the German physicist Werner Heisenberg in his Principle of Uncertainty. Bronowski prefers to call it the Principle of Tolerance — no knowledge can be absolutely certain; there is always a range of precision that even theoretically cannot be eliminated.

He continues: "All knowledge, all information between human beings, can be exchanged only within a play of tolerance. And that is true whether the exchange is in science, or in literature, or in religion, or in politics, or even in any form of thought that aspires to dogma."

Bronowski explains that while this scientific principle was being formulated, in the same country the Nazis were pursuing their own "absolute certainty" of who

would be considered worthy of life. "It is a major tragedy that ... scientists were refining to the most exquisite precision the Principle of Tolerance and turning their backs on the fact that all around them tolerance was crashing to the ground beyond repair."

He calls it an "irony of history that at the very time when this was being worked out there should rise, under Hitler in Germany and other tyrants elsewhere, a counter conception: a principle of monstrous certainty ... the despots' belief that they had absolute certainty."

"Consider the concentration camp and crematorium at Auschwitz, where people were turned into numbers. Into its pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people. And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. ... When people believe that they have absolute knowledge ... this is how they behave."

The episode concludes with Bronowski wading out into the ash pond at Auschwitz, and, as he scoops out the ashes with his hand, he says: "I owe it as a human being to the many members of my family who died at Auschwitz, to stand by the pond as a survivor and a witness. We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. ... We have to touch people."

As we address the "other," face-to-face, let it be with humility. Science can discover much, but so can the artist and even the blind person who discovers through touch. The desire for absolute knowledge can lead to disastrous results and ignore the basic ethics that should be fundamental in all of our human endeavors.

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