The "Veiling" Question: On the Demand for Visibility in Communicative Encounters in Education

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> The educated man sees with both heart and mind: the ignoramus sees only with his eyes.
> —Ali ibn Abi Talib, "Maxims of Ali"

Across Europe there have been growing tensions surrounding the Muslim practice of wearing *hijab*, *niqab*, and *jilbab* in schools. In France, heated debate on this issue has resulted in the passing of the law banning all religious symbols in public institutions; in England, an individual case involving the wearing of *jilbab* has been tried before human rights courts; and in Sweden schools now have the right to expel students who wear *burqa* (and possibly *niqab*). Even in those countries where *hijab* and other religious symbols are permitted in schools, there nonetheless has been much discussion over those sartorial practices that involve covering the face in whole (*burqa*) or in part (*niqab*). For example, women and girls have been asked to remove their veils in order to prove their identities when sitting for state examinations and student teachers have been asked to leave their placement schools unless they comply with the request to unveil.

One of the reasons frequently given in supporting the rejection of such practices in schools is that hiding the face hinders communication. On this account, the visibility of the face is seen to be necessary on the grounds that "reading" the facial expressions of others is central to sound communicative practices. This view is compounded with the perception of these "veiling" practices as symbols of profound sexual inequality and as being inconsistent with ostensibly "European" cultural conventions. Muslim girls and women who veil, therefore, bear a double stigmatization within western liberal democratic states, and especially in public institutions such as schools: they are perceived to be both oppressed females and resistant Muslims.

This essay explores the assumptions that underlie the claim that veiling hinders communication. I particularly focus on the theme of visibility and relate this to specific examples drawn from the Swedish and United Kingdom contexts. The aim of the essay is to analyze critically, through the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray, the fixation with vision as a western epistemological trope that seeks to master the other. It further discusses the idea of the face in Levinas's ethics in relation to the limits of "reading" facial expression, and draws on Irigaray's feminist approach to elaborate on the specifically sexed nature of the demand for visibility.

First Example

In the fall of 2006, a girl in Buckinghamshire was expelled from her school for wearing a *niqab* in defiance of school dress codes. As reported by the BBC, the school argued that "the veil made communication between teachers and pupils difficult and thus hampered learning."[1] Additionally, the school put on the table the importance of teachers needing to be able to read the reactions of students, and

asserted that the *niqab* prevented this. The girl's three older sisters had attended the school previously and had worn the *niqab* without any problems. The parents requested a judicial review and while pending decision, schooled their daughter at home. It was eventually decided not to grant the review and the judge, like the school authorities, cited as one of his reasons, which also addressed security and gender equality issues, that "the veil prevented teachers from seeing facial expressions — a key element in effective classroom interaction."[2]

Second Example

At an adult education centre in Stockholm in January 2009, Alia Khalifa was asked to remove her *niqab* or she would be expelled from her child-care education program. As a compromise, she agreed to sit at the front of the class and remove her veil during class time and stated that she had spoken to others in order to ensure that they were not bothered by her decision.[3] The principal claimed, however, that the *niqab* prevented proper communication — both in Alia's studies and with the children she will be caring for — since her face could not be seen fully. She cited the Swedish National Agency for Education's decision that anyone wearing a *burqa* could be expelled from school.[4] Alia decided to make a formal complaint to the Equality Ombudsman, which has the responsibility for upholding Sweden's anti-discrimination legislation. Her claim was that the National Agency's decision did not cover the *niqab* but only the *burqa*, which prevents any direct eye contact.[5] Nonetheless, a major claim of the Agency's published decision is that both prevent communication: "The teacher must be able to see a student's face in order to know if the student has understood what the teacher says."[6]

There are significant differences in some of the reasons offered publicly for why *niqab* is inappropriate to school settings in these two examples — for example, the UK judge cited security, which can be seen, perhaps, in relation both to the UK's surveillance society and to the aftermath of the 2005 London attacks, whereas the Swedish school's response deferred in a characteristic bureaucratic fashion to a previously published document condemning the *burqa*. Although such examples are made possible through specific historical and political climates in which wearing the *niqab* is seen to be antithetical to "western" forms of public display, what is nonetheless so clear from these two examples is the way in which the visibility of the face — if not the eyes — functions in the reasoning of the authorities. Without wishing to oversimplify the issues at stake (obviously further analyses of the political, historical, and social contexts in which these examples have taken place is very much needed), I do want to spend some time here investigating what these claims for the possibilities of communication mean in relation to what is being demanded: that the face — not just the eyes — be visible so that one can better "read" it and thereby form "proper" communicative relations. To what extent, in other words, do we need to see the face in order to acknowledge the other's presence in a communicative encounter?

Levinas: The Face Beyond Vision

Levinas has been described as the philosopher of the face-to-face relation — a supposedly "communicative" relation that serves as the condition for ethics. At first

glance, it would seem, then, that Levinas's emphasis on the face would be quite in line with the argument that one needs to perceive a face in order indeed to have communication. However, he is adamant that perception — and vision in particular — has little to do with an encounter with the face. In response to a question as to whether his philosophy is depicting a phenomenology of the face, Levinas replies:

> I do not know if one can speak of a "phenomenology" of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears.…I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in a social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.[7]

With this said, how does one meet the face of the other, if not through vision? Or, perhaps, to put it another way first, why is vision problematic for Levinas?

Levinas primarily bases his critique of western philosophy — ontology — as one centered on the attempt to "capture" phenomena or objects through abstraction, that is, through bringing existents into what he calls the "light of generality." "As Plato noted, besides the eye and the thing, vision presupposes the light. The eye does not see the light, but the object in the light. Vision is therefore a relation with a "something" established within a relation with what is not a 'something'."[8] Light thus makes objects appear, but the light itself not a something that can be seen; it is a void. Although it cannot be reduced to objects, existents, or phenomena, this condition on which appearance is based is not simply a nothingness; instead we find what Levinas calls the "there is" (*il y a*) of the void itself — a "there is" which nonetheless cannot be perceived, captured, or understood, but remains outside and other to the object.

It is this forgotten element in vision that Levinas takes to be its main limitation and he notes that it is precisely this forgetting that has enabled vision to become privileged in philosophy. "Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them. A thing is *given*, offers itself to me. In gaining access to it I maintain myself within the same" (*TI*, 194). That is, for Levinas, philosophy has been construed not simply through metaphors of vision (seeing, viewing, and so on), but it has fundamentally been structured through vision, through its treatment of ontology as a question of access. Vision has had an explicatory effect on its philosophical objects, treating them as perceived givens. Levinas contrasts this preoccupation with vision with another relation: a face-to-face relation. A relation in which the whole point is not to treat the being of others as perceived givens, but to introduce into philosophy a "there is" which can never be perceived through sight even as it forms the condition of appearance. Thus, Levinas's idea of the face cannot be broached through vision, it instead must be seen as a response to the very limitations of vision itself.

In this sense, the face therefore resists containment by the activity of vision. It, rather, stands outside our perceptive faculties, exists beyond being itself. But this does not mean for Levinas, that it communicates nothing. What is key here is that

Levinas renders the face as a presence that conditions the possibility for communication: "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched — for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (*TI*, 194). What this means is that the face is that very presence which prevents me from reducing the Other to his or her plastic dimensions — it prevents me from turning the Other into an image or a representation.

> The way that the other presents himself, exceeding the *idea of the Other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me.…*It expresses itself.* (*TI*, 50–51)

So my experience of the face is therefore not dependent on my being able to see it, but instead on my susceptibility to its presence, to its closeness, to its "there is" as an expression — an expression which has no plastic content, which cannot be contained in any representation or idea I have of it. The encounter of which Levinas speaks is one "endowed with a dynamism other than that of perception" (*TI*, 187). This dynamism is not then simply associated with the pleasure of perceiving an object, but is something that exceeds our perception, transcends it. Thus, Levinas speaks of the "epiphany" of the face which signals a "relationship different from that which characterizes all our sensible experiences" (*TI*, 187). This epiphany belongs to the "proper" *ethical* order of encountering another's face, which resists "possession, resists my powers" (*TI*, 197). Standing on the other side of my comprehension, my grasp, indeed my sensory perception, the face nonetheless *communicates* — it reveals its presence to me.

This revelation of presence through the face is what, for Levinas, makes speech between us possible. I do not respond merely to the words the other speaks, but to the presence of the other in his or her proximity to me. The "appearance" of the face is then no longer concerned with vision, but with "speech and audition."[9] Thus, communication requires a face, not in order to "read" it, to "see" if it has understood, but because it is the face as a revealed, ungraspable presence, to which I respond as the very condition of communication. The face is not to be illuminated as an object for my contemplation, for my grasping, but exists beyond all those ways we usually have (even with our sophisticated philosophical tools) of determining existence. The Other's face as neither an object nor subject of our perception presents to me something that I simply cannot comprehend.

With this said, then, the Muslim practice of veiling the face is really neither here nor there in Levinas's scheme of things. First, because the face is not an object merely for perception, the veiling of it is not of prime importance. What Levinas calls the face is actually a presence that escapes representation. The proximity to the other — be this a veiled Muslim woman — reveals instead a presence to me that is invisible, that in fact cannot be seen. Secondly, because communication, for Levinas, is structured around this invisible presence — that the I enters into language because of this presence and not because we can "see", "read", or "interpret" another's face beforehand — (ethical) communication is first and foremost a

response to presence itself. By placing the face as an invisible condition of speech — what Levinas calls the signifyingness of signification — the Muslim veil does not hinder communication in this sense. Instead, communication depends upon a relation with mystery, not mastery — a nontangible yet audible otherness that announces itself through speech: "here I am." That is, as soon as someone speaks, I do not respond merely to the words she utters, but to the very act of signification itself through which her otherness is announced. Whether or not I "see" her face, it is to her presence that I respond.

What Levinas's work opens up is the question of how my approach to the other can remain open to otherness beyond the control of vision. Although Irigaray largely agrees with this direction taken by Levinas, her specifically feminist analysis gives us yet another dimension through which we might reflect on visibility and its relation to women.

Irigaray: Women Beyond Vision

Like Levinas, Irigaray's work has taken up the themes of light and vision and how they have traditionally functioned within western philosophy as tropes for metaphysical claims. Yet, her work has focused on how such themes have aligned themselves quite neatly with an inherent phallocentrism (and phallomorphism). Thus, although quite in sympathy with Levinas's assertion that vision is a form of mastery that masks alterity, Irigaray pushes his insights further along the lines of sexual difference.

In her reading of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," Irigaray interrogates the very grounding of epistemology as a coming into light, conceiving this as a photologic that has lost its sensitivity to the invisible. Reading the cave as symbolic of the womb (the imagery is powerful and is not something I can go into detail here), it is a place where men, chained together, are confined, made to only "look at whatever presents itself before their eyes."[10] Their vision, and what they take to be the truth (*alethes*), is thereby confined to a host of shadows. If they could only turn around and face the light, and begin their ascent from the cave/womb, to see the truth of objects, they would rid themselves of the fallacies that currently constitute their reality. Irigaray here claims that it is only by leaving the feminine figure of the womb of darkness and shadows, by denying their origins, that men can think themselves as enlightened. Photology functions as an erasure of the maternal.

For Irigaray, this text is exemplary of the role light and darkness plays in the masculine philosophical gaze — including the gaze of Levinas as well as a host of others. Analyzing texts that construct metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical claims through the metaphor of light, Irigaray shows how the feminine is continually relegated to darkness, to the night, and thus to nonexistence. She cannot be seen. But more than that, she reads the paradox that this entails, for is not the representation of woman as invisible still not a representation? Still not an image?[11] Irigaray reveals how phallocentrism in philosophical discourse creates a reflection of woman in order to recognize its own masculine self-image. Thus, the darkness — in which the object of woman should not be able to be seen, since it is not in light — nonetheless

functions as a representation of woman that subtends male self-understanding as enlightened. She becomes *his* image. In this sense she is invisible only because a certain vision of her makes her such. Thus, the patriarchal view of the feminine is double: it is rendered invisible yet is created as the necessary support of patriarchy itself.

Irigaray's point, however, is not perhaps the usual, expected one — that woman is simply othered by masculine representation, *is* simply the negative image patriarchy has created for her — but that women actually exist, "behind the screen of representation," even if they remain, largely, invisible — even to themselves.[12] There is an unaccounted for materiality within the vision of the masculine. Thus, woman is a projection created through the masculine gaze, but behind this reflection, beyond this representation of her, lies an existence that has not been (and never will be) captured through the mastery of vision. Irigaray thus complicates the doubling effect of patriarchal representations of the feminine even further. Woman functions not only as the reflection in the mirror but exists also as its tain. "Thus I have become your image in this nothingness that I am, and you gaze upon [*mires-tu*] mine in your absence of being. This silvering at the back of the mirror might, at least, retain *the being* — which we have been perhaps and which perhaps we will be again."[13] Women's existence and their becoming, are not dependent upon being visible as we now know it — for to date, the visibility that has most often been allowed us is as an object of darkness perceived through masculine eyes. Instead, Irigaray seeks to bring to light, to re-tain, without repeating the violence of vision, a new form of becoming for women. A form of becoming that has not yet arrived.

Thus for Irigaray, visibility has often been used against women, a demand for them to provide a clear reflection of projected male fantasy — like the smooth surface of a looking glass. The call for visibility, then, must be met with circumspection, a healthy dose of resistance even, if new forms of becoming are to be made possible for women.

Irigaray therefore stresses new forms of communication that move beyond the visibility that the masculine gaze has constructed for women. For her, this is both an ethical and political project, one that both seeks to challenge the power of patriarchal vision while illuminating new forms of relationship, other ways of encountering each other across the sexual divide.[14] For her, this requires a touch that does not grasp, a sight that does not dominate, but one that respects the invisibility — indeed the mystery — to be found in the other. Communication with the other, then, demands bringing into light these relationships without objectifying them. In this way, Irigaray seeks to reconstruct the meaning of vision and light by making them attentive and responsive to the necessary invisible element in otherness. Thus, unlike Levinas in this regard, rather than repudiating light entirely, Irigaray seeks to construct a "photosensitivity," as Catheryn Vasseleu puts it, whereby the light does not have to rest on the erasure of the maternal, the feminine, embodied women.[15]

Irigaray's critique of the phallocentric view of vision and light gives us yet another set of considerations for thinking about the demand for visibility being made

on Muslim women who wear *niqab*. On the one hand, one can make the claim that the veil itself is "hiding" a woman's face, and that she, by complying, remains caught up in male fantasies of her invisibility — an invisibility which must nonetheless be "seen" in order to avoid undesirable sexual situations. This, I would say, however, is not the whole story. For western eyes, such direct invisibility is perceived as problematic, I suggest, the veil actually gives content to — embodies — an image of woman that patriarchy does not want to confront directly. The projected image of woman as invisible, which has served patriarchy so well, must itself remain hidden in order for the fantasy to function. Thus the request to remove the veil can be seen as a request for removing the obstacle to masculine desire and self-image. A veil curtains off access to the masculine projections of woman, she no longer reflects back to patriarchy what it expects to see. With Irigaray, wearing a veil does not necessarily mean covering up womanness, but only the specular image of womanness as defined through a masculine gaze. That is, if we are going to insist on "seeing" the face of women, what kind of seeing are we encouraging? We might instead consider that there is something insistent about a femininity that exceeds this gaze. Given that communication, according to Irigaray, needs to take on new forms of relationality beyond the mastery of vision, perhaps confronting the limits that vision has placed upon women can begin to bring into the light other expressions of femininity that require new sensitivities, new sensibilities, that recognize the sexed character of becoming. Otherwise, is there not a risk that the only expressions allowed are those already sanctioned by dominating visions of women?

Conclusion

Of course, reframing our attention to vision will not resolve the conflicts between European societies' institutions and the minority of European Muslim women who wear *niqab*. Issues around discomfort, religious freedoms, democratic participation, feelings of belonging, integration, and so on are obviously complex and deserve detailed examination. Histories of oppression, colonialism and conflict, cultural variances in Muslim dress, Islamic militantism, and questions of national and European identity all play their role, of course, in how the girl in Buckinghamshire and Alia in Stockholm are perceived to be posing a problem to the nature of schooling. However, I have sought here to open up the grounds on which we can begin to ask more complex questions concerning the demand for visibility in pedagogical communication.

What Levinas and Irigaray offer are new frameworks for developing a sensitivity to the issues that are at stake for Muslim women and girls that question our desire for sight. Responding to the presence of the other (Levinas) and responding to that presence as a specifically sexed presence (Irigaray), leads us, in my view, to reflect upon — at the very least — the element of mystery and invisibility that frames our excursions into discourse with the other. For Levinas, it is precisely this unknowable, unseeable presence that prevents our exchanges from becoming a mere exchange of words, a mere exercise in control. Seeing the face does not aid us in responding to the presence that it reveals. For Irigaray, it is the constant projection

of images onto Muslim women that is at stake — images of who they are that are created for — not by — them, which reduces them to props of the masculine gaze — whether they are veiled or not. What is required here is attentiveness to the ways in which the feminine could be acting out claims of refusal to such a vision. Thus, the communicative move circles around the possibility for creating new forms of becoming that are not reduced to "oppressed females" and "resistant Muslims." It seems to be that what is required is another way of approaching and talking about communication, one that recognizes the presence of the other and one that contextualizes this presence within sexed relationships. Veiling perhaps — just perhaps — might not be the insurmountable hindrance it is often thought to be if, to echo the quote that began this essay, we are going to create spaces so that all of us — not only men — can approach students with our hearts and minds, not simply with our eyes.

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1. "Schoolgirl loses Legal Case," *BBC News*, February 21, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/6382247.stm.

2. Ibid.

3. Kristina Jogestrand, "Spångaskola hotade stänga av elever med slöja" ["School in Spånga Threatened to Expel Students Who wear the Veil"], *STHLM*, February 12, 2009, http://www.dn.se/sthlm/spangaskola-hotade-stanga-av-elever-med-sloja-1.797840.

4. Skolverket, "Flickor med burqa/niqab i skolan," PM 2003-10-23. [Swedish National Agency for Education, "Girls with Burqa/Niqab in School"].

5. That the two parties interpret this decision differently is in no way strange. In fact, the formal inquiry into the issue on which the decision was made uses the term *burqa*, but its authors erroneously insist that *burqa* and *niqab* can be treated as if they were the same.

6. Skolverket, "Flickor med burqa/niqab i skolan," 10.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 85–86.

8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 189. This work will be cited as *TI* in the text for all subsequent references.

9. Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 10.

10. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 245.

11. Irigaray, *Speculum*, see part 2 entitled "Speculum."

12. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 9.

13. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 197.

14. Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

15. Catheryn Vasseleu, "Illuminating Passion: Irigaray's Transfiguration of Night," in *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, ed. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York: Routledge, 1996), 133.