

## VIOLENCE AND EMBODIMENT

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*While the various forms of violence have been the subject of special studies, we lack a paradigm that would allow us to understand the different forms of violence (physical, social, cultural, structural, and so on) as aspects of a unified phenomenon. In this article, I shall take violence as destructive of sense or meaning. The relation of violence to embodiment arises through the role that the body plays in our making sense of the world. My claim is that violence is destructive of this role. It undoes the role of the bodily "I can" in making sense of our surrounding world —be this its physical, cultural, or social significance.*

One need not accept Hegel's view of history as a "slaughter bench" to see violence as a pervasive factor of human experience. As history teaches, a good part of the diplomatic and political activities of humankind have been dedicated to dealing with its collective and individual consequences. The necessity of such action can be read from the statistics. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), around 1.6 million lives are lost each year due to violence. World wide, it is among the leading causes of death for people between the ages of 15 and 44. These statistics concern only the use of physical violence—that is, the violence defined as "the intentional use of physical force or power."<sup>1</sup> They do not include "structural violence." This is the violence that appears in the deprivations of the developing world, such as malnutrition and the corresponding rates of infant mortality. The resulting deaths are understood to be violent, rather than natural, insofar as they arise from the structural inequities characterizing the relations between developing and advanced nations. As part of the same continuum, we also have the cultural and social violence that often follow from such inequities. As reports of dysfunctional aboriginal communities, troubled societies, and "failed states" like Somalia indicate, this violence, though harder to document, is also widespread.

While the various forms of violence have been the subject of special studies, research in this area has been hampered by the lack of a unifying paradigm. Very basic questions, such as those relating to the meaning of violence, remain unanswered. What is lacking is a paradigm that would allow us to understand the different forms of violence (physical, social, cultural, structural,

and so on) as aspects of a unified phenomenon. In what follows, I will use the phenomenological method to develop this paradigm. In its broadest sense, phenomenology is the study of how we make sense of the world. It begins by identifying sense-structures and works backward to investigate the activities and experiences which generate them. As currently practiced, this method does not see the knower as a disembodied “pure” observer.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it begins with the fact that the activities and experiences that underlie all our sense-making activities presuppose the body. Thus, it recognizes that the sense we have of a three-dimensional object in space is generated by the perspectival views we experience as we walk about or handle it. The object’s sense as having weight comes from our lifting it; its sense of having certain tactile qualities arises from our touching it. In other words, the fundamental fact phenomenology begins with is that our bodily abilities are correlated to the basic senses we have of the world. This correlation, I believe, is the key to a unified approach to the different forms of violence. In what follows, I shall take *violence as destructive of sense or meaning*. The relation of violence to embodiment arises through the role that the body plays in our making sense of the world. My claim is that violence is destructive of this role. It undoes the role of the bodily “I can” in making sense of our surrounding world —be this its physical, cultural, or social sense.

**Sense-making:** As Merleau-Ponty noted, “it is literally the same thing to perceive one single marble, and to use two fingers as one single organ.”<sup>3</sup> Our perception of the marble is one with a set of bodily acts, those of reaching over, picking up and bringing close the marble. We also turn our heads, focus our eyes and, if need be, roll the marble between our fingers to see its different colours and gauge its hardness and smoothness. The sense of the marble includes all these qualities. As such, its perception also includes a certain bodily perception. I perceive both the different aspects of the object *and my body* as it plays its role in the perception of the object. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, “External perception and the perception of one’s body vary in conjunction because they are two facets of one and the same act” (*Ibid.*). Thus, the perception of the marble includes that of the grasping fingers. I do not just grasp the sense of the marble, I also grasp the sense of my body as it functions in this perception. The grasp or “constitution” of the marble’s sense, in other words, goes along with a parallel grasp or constitution of my bodily being.<sup>4</sup>

This co-constitution appears on all levels of sense-making. To go beyond the senses of things in their mere physical presence, we have to speak of the uses we put them to as we engage in our projects. Generally speaking,

the pragmatic sense of things is given by their purpose in relation to such projects. We have projects because we are dependent on the world, that is, on the things in it that we need. The goals of our various practical projects are to provide us with them. In accomplishing these projects, we also determine how the world appears to us. Thus, each project, when successful, exhibits those aspects of the world that are required for our purposes. The water of a stream, for example, is seen as water to drive my mill when I use it for this purpose. It can also appear as water to drink or to wash or cook with, depending on my particular needs. This determination of the appearing of the world and, hence, of its sense is also a determination of the way we appear to ourselves. We become the person who has accomplished these projects. The sense of our embodiment as an “I can” is correlative to such projects. The co-constitution of the sense of this “I can” and the sense of the world disclosed through such projects places us within the world. The embodied “I can” always appears within the world it discloses. It is always disclosed as a “being-in-the-world.”

In all this, the role of the embodied “I can” is crucial. Without it, we could not acquire and enact the practical senses we gain from others. Thus, everything from learning to eat at the table to learning how to write presupposes a functioning body. The same holds for our initial learning of our language. We acquired, for example, the meaning of such words as “knife” and “fork” when we learned to eat at the table. They were not taught to us in isolation, but rather as part of a pattern of bodily behaviour, one which disclosed what knives and forks were for. Similarly, in appropriating the projects of others we learned, for example, that paper can be used as a surface to draw and write on or as material to start a fire or to make a paper airplane, and so on. Each new use enriches our sense of what is meant by the word “paper.”<sup>5</sup> Behind this is, in fact, a multiple correlation: The *components of a word's meaning* are correlated to the *ways in which the object it designates can appear*, which are correlated to its *instrumental character, that is, to the purposes* we can put this particular object to. Such purposes themselves are correlated to our specific *projects*. To the point that such projects are common, each of these correlated elements will also be common. The common *meaning* of an expression will point back to the *common usage of an object as means for a given goal*. Thus, for everyone who uses paper to start a fire, the meaning of the word “paper” will include the fact of its being combustible.

These correlations rule out the possibility of a “private language.” For an expression to be irremediably private, the *appearing* it relates to would also have to be private. This would imply the object itself would have to be unique

in its *instrumental character*. Nothing else would be capable of substituting for a particular object in the accomplishment of some particular *project*. To turn this about, we can say that the *commonality of meaning is based on substitutability*. Not just this sheet of paper can be used to start a fire. Other sheets can also have this use and, hence, can bear the common meaning “combustible.”

The above makes clear that the role of the body in generating pragmatic senses is one of enactment. Through a set of bodily activities, we enact senses by putting the objects to the uses that disclose their senses. We do so through our bodily “I can,” which may be anything from “I can eat with a spoon” to “I can drive a car.” Without this “I can,” a person’s words lose their lived sense. The loss of this “I can” is not, then, just the reduction of the body to a nonfunctioning object. It is also the loss of the person’s ability to enact and, hence, uncover for himself the senses that make up the world he shares with his others. Broadly speaking, such senses are ordered according to levels of their enactment. Their constitution, in other words, is a multilevel affair which begins with bare physical presence, continues with the pragmatic senses involved in relatively simple, discrete projects, and continues with collective, cultural projects, where the senses in question can only be generated by groups of individuals working together. Thus, the “I can” that is correlated to the grasp of a violin as a physical presence is required for the “I can” that discloses it as a musical instrument by playing it. This, in turn, is required for the “I can play with others” that discloses the violin’s role in a string quartet.

What we have here is a series of founding and founded levels, which build progressively toward the constitution of the elements making up our cultural world. Take, for example, the constitution of an aboriginal hunting party. The collective activities of its members enact the world of the hunt. Such a world rests on the activities that constitute the pragmatic senses of its individual elements—say, those of the weapons employed. On the basic founding level, we encounter those bodily activities, such as turning one’s head, focusing one’s eyes, and so forth, that are involved in the project of grasping the basic physical presence of the objects surrounding us. In each case, a “world” (or *milieu*) is constituted, one that includes a corresponding constitution of body and its “I can” as present in this world. For example, in disclosing the violin as an ensemble instrument, the “I can” also discloses itself as the “I can play with others,” e.g., as a member of a string quartet. In the movements of the members of the string quartet as they watch and gesture to each other, moving in tempo with the music, the performers exhibit a sense of embodiment that is

founded on but distinct from that which is present when they play alone. Here, as before, we can speak of “two facets of one and the same act,” namely, the correlative constitution of both the body and the objects it employs as it engages in various projects. Both are generated by its activity. When this activity is social, that is, involves shared projects, so is the corresponding embodiment. Viewed as a social structure, it is correlated in its “I can” to a corresponding social world. It becomes an “I can” within this world.

**Cultural and Physical Violence:** The tie just drawn between embodiment and sense-structures allows us to see a common thread in the different forms of violence. In each case, we confront the destruction of sense that occurs through the impairment of the bodily “I can” that is required to generate such sense. Violence, we can say, is always bodily, but the body it violates varies according to the performance of this “I can.” Thus, the many faces of violence that we encounter in our world are differentiated according to the form of embodiment and the corresponding “I can” that they violate. A few examples will make this position clear. Take, for instance, the destruction of aboriginal cultures by Europeans. The result of European colonization was not just a transformation of the land through enclosures and the destruction of habitats—a change that deprived the inhabitants of their original means of supporting themselves. Concomitant with it was a disruption of the contexts of sense by which the natives interpreted their world and themselves within it. Thus, once the land was divided up and enclosed for farming, the aboriginal hunter-gatherer activity became impossible. With this, the worlds such activity disclosed were no longer available. The inhabitants could, consequently, no longer understand themselves within their context. The men, for example, could no longer see themselves as hunters or pastoralists, given that all the suitable land was enclosed by the colonists. Their loss was a loss of their sense of embodiment as hunters or pastoralists. This was not just a loss of a social function along with the recognition and status that this involved. It was also a loss of a bodily “I can,” one correlated to the specific projects that were no longer possible. It vanished along with the world such projects uncovered.

If we broaden the sense of “project” to include the religious practices that disclosed to the natives the “spiritual” senses of their world, we can see a parallel example of cultural violence in the activities of the European missionaries, who often traded medical aid and other material advantages for professions of belief. The transformation of the aboriginal religious self-understanding affected their comprehension of their embodiment. A striking example of this was the reinterpretation of the tropical native’s body as the

“flesh” that was liable to corruption and sin, the flesh, therefore, that had to be covered.

In Canada, the forcible removal of native children to residential schools exacerbated this destruction of sense. These children were forbidden to speak their native language, thus preventing them from transmitting its special senses. The cumulative effect of this imposition of non-native cultural and religious outlooks was not necessarily their adoption. The inappropriateness of the latter—as belonging to a different social context and situation, one correlated to a different “I can”—usually ruled this out. The result was, rather, the collapse of their own interpretative, sense-making categories—including most prominently the ones by which they judged good and evil. At the extreme, native Canadians suffered a breakdown in their ability to make sense of and, hence, function in their new situations. With this came the phenomena of abuse. In the disorders of sexual, spousal, drug and alcohol abuse of some communities, it is possible to see the collapse of their embodiment as a social structure.

Such abuse may, but need not terminate in physical violence. When it does, it attacks our physical embodiment and its “I can.” In the extreme case, it prevents its victim from enacting the basic senses that tie her to her physical and cultural worlds. A horrific example of such violence is provided by the amputations that were carried out by the various militias that ravaged East Africa during its recent civil wars. A normally functioning body allows a person to engage in the projects of her society and thus to possess the understanding that is articulated by the common expressions of her language. But, when she is subjected to the amputation of hand or foot, or otherwise mutilated, her body no longer is that of the norm. What is mutilated is not just her body, but also her body-dependent projects. The mutilation, thus, extends to her pragmatic understanding of her world and her being in it. The interpretations that articulate this understanding are no longer congruent with those of society. The same holds for the linguistic meanings that express these interpretations. Within certain limits—namely those set by the bodily mutilation—she, thus, becomes languageless. Her mutilation is not just “unspeakable” in the sense of being dreadful. It is also such as to place her outside of the context of the common meanings she once shared with her others. Not being able to enact them, they remain “symbolic,” that is, they possess a sense that she cannot fill with intuitive fullness. Here, the result of such violence is a silencing of its victims. It removes them from a living participation in the context that would permit the articulation of their situation. The ultimate violence on the physical

level is, of course, that of murder. Given that the living body is the ultimate foundation of all our projects, this results in the total collapse of sense-making and, hence, in the complete silencing of the individual.

**Trauma:** To understand the effect of bodily violence on this ultimate level, we have to grasp the temporal aspect of sense-making. Sense-making is a matter of engaging in a project, even if this is simply the project of wanting to get a better look at something. In engaging in a project, we project ourselves forward towards what we want to achieve. We let this direct us. There is, as Heidegger noted, a certain temporal distention towards the goal of the project.<sup>6</sup> Given this, to assert that sense-making is a bodily function implies that *the body, in its own functioning, has this temporal distention*. By such a distention, I do not mean something measured by clock-time. The reference, rather, is to the way we are always ahead of ourselves in our projective being in the world. We are in the world through our projects since, as noted, through them we co-constitute the senses of the world and ourselves within it. This sense of ourselves as an “I can” includes a sense of ourselves as ahead of ourselves, there at the goal.

The best way to understand the organic basis of this projective being-in-the world is through the contrast Hans Jonas draws between the inorganic and the organic. He begins by noting that an inorganic entity is identical to the matter composing it. It is just this matter and nothing else. This means that its identity has a certain temporal independence. In Jonas’s words, “its being now is the sufficient reason for its also being later, if perhaps in a different place.” “A proton,” for example, “is simply and fixedly what it is, identical with itself over time, and with no need to maintain that identity by anything it does.” Its conservation is, thus, “a mere remaining . . . . It is there once and for all.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, temporal distinctions do not enter into its essential description. Since it is inherently always the same, its temporality is that of sheer nowness. The case is quite different for the organic. To be, the organic body must reassert its being from moment to moment. It must reach outside of itself if it is to be. This is because it is both totally composed of matter and yet different from it. It must engage in metabolism—in the exchange of material (*Stoffwechsel*) with the world—in order to be. Thus, the matter composing it, Hans Jonas writes, “is forever vanishing downstream.” “[I]ndependent of the sameness of this matter, it is dependent on the exchange of it . . . .”<sup>8</sup> Without this, it would not be alive. Thus, in contrast to the inorganic, its material state cannot be the same for any two instants. It could only be the same if its meta-

bolic functioning were to end. But, this would imply its death since it would now be inorganic.

Since it is organic, it constantly *needs* the influx of new material. In Jonas' words, "This necessity (for exchange) we call 'need,' which has a place only where existence is unassured and its own continual task."<sup>9</sup> Such need expresses its relation to the future. Thus, a living body has a future insofar as its being is its doing, i.e., stretches beyond the now of its organic state to what comes next.<sup>10</sup> Here, its "will be"—the intake of new material—determines the "is," that is, determines the nature of its present activity. Insofar as it exists by directing itself beyond its present condition, the living body is ahead of itself, it "has" a future. In other words, as need, as the necessity for exchange, it is already stretched out in time. Given this, we have to say that the living body, in its very organic functioning, provides the basis for our sense-making. It does so by grounding our being ahead of ourselves that makes projects and, hence, disclosure possible. Thus, we have projects that disclose us as in the world because we have needs. The fundamental basis of such needs is our organic relation to the world. This relation first places us *in* the world by making us *of* the world—i.e., of the materials that the world offers us for our flesh.

Implicit in the above is a point that is crucial to understanding the effects of bodily violence. This is that the organically functioning body, in its grounding sense, is itself beyond sense. Formally, this point follows from Fichte's assertion "by virtue of its mere notion, the ground falls outside of what it grounds."<sup>11</sup> As Fichte explains, if the two were the same, the ground would lose its function, which is that of accounting for the grounded. Like the grounded, the ground would, itself, be in need of the same type of accounting. In a more than formal sense, the senselessness of the body can be understood in terms of what was said about the impossibility of a "private language." The impossibility follows from the fact that the common meanings a language employs point back to the common usages of an object to achieve some goal. This implies that this commonality of meanings is based on the substitutability of objects as means to achieve a goal. The example given was that not just a particular sheet of paper can be used to start a fire. Other sheets can also have this use and, hence, can bear the common meaning "combustible." What is absolutely unique, then, can have no common meaning. It is unspeakable in that it has no communicable sense. Now, the body in its organic functioning does have a uniqueness that defies substitution. No one can eat for me. No one can take a walk or exercise for me. In general, no one can perform any of my bodily functions for me. In their very inalienability, such functions are like



my death. Just as I alone must undergo my own death, that is, my own cessation of organic functioning, so I alone must engage in the elements of this functioning.<sup>12</sup> My organic activities are, therefore, inalienable. They cannot be substituted for. My body, as irretrievably my own, is marked by this inability to have a substitute. It escapes the signification (the expressed sense) that is correlated to the disclosure of substitutable objects.

This, of course, does not mean that there is no disclosable aspect of the body. Like other objects, its disclosure is correlated to its instrumental character. Thus, its various skills and attributes can be exhibited insofar as they show themselves as means to given ends. What is thereby disclosed is the human body as a public object. Insofar as the common meanings of language describe it, this is also the substitutable body. Many different individuals can, for example, tie their shoelaces or walk down the street. The ability to perform such tasks thus enters into the general sense of body. This sense can be expressed in the words that convey this sense. The nondisclosable, nonexpressible aspect of the body comes from the fact that on the most basic level one body is *not* substitutable for another. The fact that someone else eats dinner does not relieve *my need* to eat dinner. My bodily projects, understood in the sense of this example, delimit a sphere of ownness that is radically private. This sphere of what is proper to me is marked by nonsubstitutability. It thus constitutes the sphere of the private that escapes linguistic expression. As such, it falls under Aristotle's assertion that the particular as the particular can be sensed, but cannot be expressed in a language we share with our others.<sup>13</sup> Such sharing involves common meanings, which express the common features of objects. My body *as mine*, however, cannot be common. It is the flesh that incarnates me, making me *this particular person* and not anybody else. Given that the meanings we use always apply to more than one object, this bodily particularity that we sense and daily live is always inexpressible.

This senselessness of the body is crucial to understanding the possibility of violence understood as trauma in the psycho-analytic sense. Such trauma combines a lack of sense with strong emotional affect. The body, as the place of our sensuous passivity to all the degrees of pleasure and pain, is the seat of affect. As the organic functioning that makes possible sense, it is, in its unique singularity, beyond sense. Thus, the strong affect that reduces it to itself, that is, limits its self-presence to the immediate, nonsubstitutable, nonexpressible presence of such an affect, results in trauma. The effect of this trauma is a kind of suffocation similar to that which Levinas described in his work, *Existence and Existents*.<sup>14</sup> It involves feelings of entrapment and panic.

The victim, experiencing it, has a horror of being closed in with no possibility of escape. The reason for this comes from the self-transcendent nature of organic functioning. Such functioning is inherently outside of itself. As the expression of need, it directs itself beyond itself. As expressing our dependence on the world, its basic mode is that of exceeding itself. To cut off such self-transcendence is, thus, to threaten this functioning with extinction. It is to eliminate the “I can” that allows an organic being to live by transcending itself. The experience of such trauma is, thus, that of the collapse of this “I can.” Were the “I can” still possible, disclosure and, hence, sense could be generated. The person exercising it would have a future. By virtue of her projective being, she could escape from the senselessness she had been reduced to—this, by engaging in sense-making and interpreting herself accordingly. In other words, she could disclose a world and herself in it in the ways that she learned from her others. She could be speakable, that is, expressible as a sense structure that is part of the sense of the world.

Ultimate violence is the cutting off of this possibility. I say “ultimate” because with the bodily violence that results in trauma we are at the founding level of constitution. Below this is simply the cessation of all organic functioning. What our analysis of the lowest level makes clear is that violence, taken as a destruction of sense, is an undermining of both embodiment and the sense constituted through such embodiment. Since this sense includes that of embodiment, we confront on the lowest level the senselessness of embodiment, which is passively experienced as pure affect.

Whatever the level of violence, the pattern is the same. In each case, we have the disruption of a constitutive level and, hence, of the senses of selfhood and world that it founds. What remains after the disruption are the lower founding levels. These, too, can be disrupted until we come to the ultimate founding level, which, not having a level of sense-making beneath it, is itself senseless. To illustrate this schematically, we can take the highest levels of constitution to be those of the social and cultural sense-structures that are occasioned by the collective “I can.” Such an “I can” is itself an expression of our social embodiment. Cultural violence destroys such sense-structures by attacking the embodied “I can” that accomplishes them. Founding this “I can,” we have the individual “I can” with the sense-structures it generates. Given that the projects generating such structures were learned from the individual’s others, this founding level is, of course, never pure. No complete abstraction of it from the collective level is possible. In spite of this, however, we can speak of typicalities and patterns of disclosure that characterize individual

lives. We can also speak of the violence that disrupts them, that robs such lives of their lived senses. On the lowest level, we have the bodily functioning that underlies the individual “I can.” Its destruction affects all the higher levels. This is why cultural genocide can always be accomplished through the elimination of a people and, if pursued relentlessly, always includes this as an option. What is crucially important is not to wait till this occurs. This, however, involves being sensitive to the destruction of embodiment and of the embodied sense that characterizes all the faces of violence.

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1 The statistics are from the *World Report on Violence and Health*, WHO, October 3, 2002, 3. The English version of the report can be obtained at:

[http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/world\\_report/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/). I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Michael Staudigl for the correspondence and conversations that contributed so greatly to the development of this article.

2 As Don Welton argues, this Cartesian view of the knower does not even pertain to Husserl’s phenomenology. In Welton’s words, “... Husserl’s Cartesian formulation of his method is a first rather than a final formulation...” See, *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 4.

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Collin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 205.

4 The reason for this, in Husserl’s view, is that the optical (or visual) sensations of the object are entangled with those of my bodily activities as I move to get a better look, handle the object, etc. In such a process, as Husserl writes, “... the running off of the optical and the change of the kinesthetic [data] do not occur alongside each other, but rather proceed in the unity of an intentionality that goes from the optical datum to the kinesthetic and through the kinesthetic leads to the optical, so that every optical [datum] is a *terminus ad quem* and, at the same time, functions as a *terminus a quo*” (Ms. C 16 IV, p. 40b in Edmund Husserl, *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution 1929-1934* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 329, my own translation.

5 Heidegger makes this point by observing that as we gain more and more skill in making our way in the world, we “understand” it in the sense of knowing the purposes of its elements. He defines “interpretation” as the “considering ... of something as something” that articulates this practical understanding. In other words, “interpretation” makes explicit the purposes of the objects we encounter; it expresses “what one does” with them. Such interpretations form the core of a language. They constitute the significance of its descriptive expressions. Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, tr. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1985), 261.

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6 For Heidegger this temporal distension is of ourselves inasmuch as it is through anticipation that we project ourselves forward, placing ourselves at the goal. The future coming towards us is, in this view, a letting ourselves (qua projected) come towards us. In Heidegger's words, "This letting itself come towards itself ... is the primordial phenomenon of the future as coming-towards." (372) It is our closing the gap between the projected self and the present self.

7 Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality—A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Laurence Vogel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 89.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 In Jonas's words, "... organisms are entities whose being is their own doing ... the being that they earn from this doing is not a possession they then own in separation from the activity by which it was generated, but is the continuation of that very activity itself." (*Mortality and Morality*, 86).

11 J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trs. P. Heath and J. Lachs (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 8.

12 According to Heidegger, "death is essentially, in every case, mine" (*Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer 1967, 240). It "lays claim to me as an individual." Because it cannot be shared, "the nonrelational character of death individualizes Dasein down to itself" (*Ibid.*, 263). My point is that all our organic functions have this "nonrelational character." Just as no one can die for me, no one can eat for me.

13 See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII, x, 1036a 2–7.

14 In Levinas' description, "The mind does not find itself faced with an apprehended exterior. The exterior ... is no longer given. It is no longer a world. What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it... Before this obscure invasion, it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one's shell. One is exposed" (*Existence and Existents*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 58–9). For Levinas, this is an experience of the anonymous "there is" of being. Such an experience, I am claiming, is also that of trauma understood as the collapse of the sense-making function that would place the I in the world, thereby distinguishing it from the world and giving it an exterior.