14 Emmanuel Levinas

Contact and Interruption

AMIT PINCHEVSKI

Emmanuel Levinas was one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, yet has only been recently acknowledged as such. He proposed a radically different way to approach ethical questions—in fact, to approach the question of ethics itself. An heir to the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, his thought came to problematize the foundations upon which lies the work of his teachers. While his presence among French academic circles remained relatively marginal for most of his career, his work nevertheless informed some of the key debates in continental philosophy of the latter half of the century, and had a decisive impact on a generation of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Luc Marion, Enrique Dussel, and Luce Irigaray. For the better part of his life, Levinas studied and taught the Talmud, whose wisdom he attempted to introduce to various philosophical and contemporary questions. Indeed, one way to describe his philosophy is as a consistent effort to implicate "Greek" with "Hebrew," that is, to translate the ethical message of Judaism into the Western philosophical discourse. Looming over Levinas was the dark shadow of the Holocaust, which claimed most of his family and in many respects dominated the development of his work.

Born in 1906 in Lithuania to a Jewish Orthodox family, Levinas became acquainted with the Hebrew Bible from a young age. During the First World War, his family fled to the Ukraine, where he witnessed the first stages of the Russian Revolution. His initial preparation to philosophy, he would later at-

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test, was the great literature of Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. At the age of 18, Levinas left to study philosophy at the University Strasburg with such teachers as Charles Blondel, Maurice Halbwachs, Maurice Pradines, and Martial Guéroult. During that time he began a lifelong friendship with Maurice Blanchot. In the summer and winter of 1928–29, he spent two semesters at Freiburg University, arriving amid the transition between the two great philosophers who were to occupy his thinking, Husserl and Heidegger. He attended the famous debate between Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer at Davos, which marked the break from the neo-Kantian tradition in continental philosophy. In 1930, Levinas published his thesis, "The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology," and collaborated in the French translation of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (twenty years before it was published in its original German). These two texts introduced phenomenology to the French intellectual scene, and were for many (Jean Paul Sartre, for one) the first encounter with the method.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Levinas was drafted as a translator; before long he was captured and imprisoned in a German prisoner-of-war camp, where he was held until the end of the war. As a French soldier, he was protected by the Geneva Convention, which meant a harsh but relatively safe existence; as a Jew, he was allocated to a separate Jewish section within the camp. During that time, his wife and daughter found refuge in a French monastery through the help of his friend Maurice Blanchot, thus saving them from deportation. Upon release, Levinas discovered that most of his family—father, mother, two brothers, and his wife's parents—had been killed during the war. Returning to Paris, he took up an appointment at the École Normale Israèlite Orientale in Paris, later becoming the director of the institute, a position he held for more than two decades. Between 1947 and 1952 he dedicated his time to studying the Talmud and other Jewish exegeses under the tutelage of a mysterious master by the name of Chouchani. He would continue to publish essays and books on the Talmud for the rest of his life, insisting on doing so through outlets other than his philosophical writings. It was only in 1961 that Levinas landed his first academic professorship at the University of Poitiers, following the completion of his dissertation and its publication under the title *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et infini*). From 1967 he taught at the University of Paris-Nanterre and then from 1973 at the Sorbonne, from which he retired in 1976. His second major philosophical work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence*) was published in 1974, and from the mid-1980s he was finally able to see his work gaining widespread recognition. Levinas died in Paris on December 25, 1995, the eighth day of Hanukkah.[1]

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Ethics as First Philosophy

Levinas's thought can be described as an elaborate phenomenology of the everyday with a single underlying theme: Ethics is first philosophy, ethics of the Other person. According to Levinas, there is something in the Other person that forever remains ungraspable, inaccessible, beyond reach—the Other's alterity. This fundamental and irrecusable difference of the Other demands acceptance and recognition prior to any comprehension or explanation. Denying the Other's alterity is therefore an act of violence against the integrity of the Other, an act that marks the beginning of every aggression and calamity. Put positively, ethics as first philosophy comes to pass through one's infinite responsibility towards the Other. This responsibility is not the product of laws or norms, nor is it the result of conditioning or calculation; rather, responsibility is the fundamental experience of subjectivity vis-à-vis the Other. Furthermore, according to Levinas, responsibility introduces asymmetry into the relation: I am responsible to and for the Other regardless of whether the Other responds in kind; responsibility is my affair, reciprocity is the Other's. The Other calls me to my responsibility, summoning me to respond responsibly. It is important to note that for Levinas the Other (the *autrui*, the absolutely Other) is not the other of the same, its opposite or reversed reflection, but that which resists categorization and unsettles the same: "The Other is not a particular case, a species of otherness, but the original exception to order."[2] Responsibility to the Other is coextensive with the exception instituted by the Other.

In giving precedence to ethics, Levinas effects a radical critique against Western philosophy from Aristotle to Heidegger, which he regards as marked by an "allergy" to alterity.[3] The two main targets of his critique are the primacy of ontology and the priority of the self. What defines ontological discourse is the effort to capture the nature of being and the essence of existence; as such, the most fundamental question of this discourse is, "What is…?" This question already approaches the world as something to be comprehended, grasped within the essentializing structures of ontology. Comprehension, as Levinas notes, always involves the fact of making one's own, "the fact of taking [*prendre*] and of comprehending [*comprendre*], that is, the fact of englobing, of appropriating."[4] Thus, in reducing experience to knowledge, ontology gives rise to a philosophy of power—what Levinas calls totality. Under this philosophical doctrine, ethics is rendered secondary to ontology: the "what is" precedes and conditions the "what ought." Socrates's teaching, "To know the good is to do the good," is exemplary in this respect: Knowing comes before doing, comprehension antecedes obligation. However far Western philosophy seems to have progressed since Socrates, its

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basic ethical tenets, argues Levinas, remain essentially unchanged. In giving precedence to ontology, Western philosophical discourse—and all that follow from it in law, politics, and science—participates in the reduction of the Other to the Same and in the subjugation of alterity to the regime of totality.

The second target of Levinas's critique is the social relation and the priority given to the self therein. Ontologically understood, subjectivity is identity in the strong sense, self-identity, the coincidence of self and same, the presence of the self to itself. This self is first and foremost an ego, a subjectivity whose relation with exteriority is mediated through its interiority. This is true to the Cartesian rational self as much as to Husserl's intentional self; in both cases the outside is derivative of the inside. Levinas likens this self to the figure of Ulysses, who leaves Ithaca only to finally return to it—the self goes out to the world only to reinstate itself. Conversely, Levinas's idea of subjectivity inverts the privilege traditionally granted to the self: Subjectivity is ethically heteronomous, susceptible to exteriority and penetrable by alterity. Rather than Ulysses's homecoming, Levinas invokes the biblical figure of Abraham, who is compelled to leave his homeland and never to return. This outward motion is conjured every time the self loses its consistency with itself, every time it is called to responsibility towards the Other. In this respect, Cain's retort to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" prefigures the ontological self of Western philosophy: I am here, the Other is there, why should I be responsible? However, this question, Levinas notes, has meaning only if one "has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself."[5] Responsibility to the Other bifurcates the self from the same, liberating subjectivity from ontology.

What is therefore Levinas's conception of ethics? This question, as above, already betrays an ontological disposition, inquiring into the essence and the nature of ethics. To answer this question somewhat obliquely, ethics does not have an essence. Its "essence," as it were, is precisely not to have essence, to unsettle essences; its "nature" is precisely to exceed nature, to put into question the so-called natural.[6] Ethics is the possibility to transcend ontology: "Ethics is not a moment of being; it is otherwise and better than being, the very possibility of the beyond."[7] It therefore follows that ethics does not proceed from knowledge: Doing the good has nothing to do with knowing the good, or for that matter, with knowing altogether—ethics is a scandal to reason. Ethics predates the ontological structure of being and reason; doing preempts knowing, the "what ought" comes before the "what is." Importantly, for Levinas the responsibility towards the Other comes to pass through language but is not reducible to the contents conveyed by means of language. In this sense, responsibility should be understood etymologically

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as response-ability, that is, as the possibility of being addressable and answerable, called upon to respond. Thus for Levinas the relation with the Other is communication, yet communication otherwise conceived, one which bears profound insights, as well as radical implications, for the philosophy of communication and the relation between communication and ethics.

Precursory Thoughts on Communication

The postwar French intellectual scene saw an unprecedented preoccupation with the concept of communication. For existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, social coexistence was a drama of friction and conflict that left little hope for transcending the split between regarding the Other-as-subject and the Other-as-object. Communication under these conditions can hardly escape isolation and desperation, with the Other inhabiting "another world which is *the same* world yet lacks all communication with it."[8] For the structuralist circle, on the other hand, communication was a concept that neatly combined the synchronic and diachronic, the exchange of signs and the system of signs.[9] In the 1950s and '60s scholars such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Roman Jakobson, Jean Hyppolite, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan adapted the term to the study of hugely diverse phenomena—from tribal exchange patterns; through the analysis of speech, poetry, and literature; to the inner workings of the unconscious. Commonly missing from histories of this milieu are Levinas and his unique conception of communication, which is evident as early as 1947, shortly before the term became prevalent in France and around the same time when American social scientists were breaking ground in this new field of inquiry.[10] To be sure, his thinking on the subject at that time was very much cursory, leaving little effect on his contemporaries as well as on many of the subsequent generation. Yet even from these early speculations it is possible to glean a sense of the radical alternative posed by Levinas with respect to what was then—and in many respects still is—the prevailing understanding of communication, its meaning, practice, and ethical significance.

In *Time and the Other*, published in 1948 and based on a series of lectures given two years prior, Levinas offers an insight that continued to inform his idea of communication throughout his work: "What one presents as the failure of communication in love precisely constitutes the positivity of the relationship; this absence of the other is precisely its presence as other."[11] The phrase repeats almost verbatim in *Existence and Existents* (published in 1947), a study written in part during Levinas's captivity in a German Stalag.[12] These two early works feature Levinas's initial attempts at thinking

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beyond Husserl and Heidegger by sketching a phenomenological trajectory that moves away from subjectivity and its emergence into existence while progressively proceeding towards what remains irredeemably exterior to subjectivity. It is only fitting that, in both texts, communication is invoked at the very end of the trajectory, as a gesture towards the Other. A more elaborate variation of the idea appears in the essay "The Other in Proust," also published in 1947:

> The theme of solitude, of the basic incommunicability of the person, appears in modern thought and literature as the fundamental obstacle to universal brotherhood. […] The despair of the impossible communication […] marks the limit of all pity, all generosity, all love. […] But if communication thus bears the signs of failure or inauthenticity, it is because it is sought in fusion. One sets out from the idea that duality should be transformed into unity—that the social relation should end in communion. […] The failure of communication is the failure of knowledge. One does not see that the success of knowledge would in fact destroy the nearness, the proximity, of the other.[13]

This passage presents a precursory thought that finds further elaboration in Levinas's later works: Communication is not about the fusion of minds or the accomplishment of knowledge. It has more to do with love than with reason; it is more about compassion than comprehension. The failure of communication as a way of knowing another is therefore the failure of the ego's superiority over another; it does not signify the end of care for the Other but rather its very beginning.

Clearly, this formulation has practically nothing to do with the "sciences" of communication emerging at that time in various fields in Europe and the United States. If anything, it reads more like a polemic with the Sartrean brand of existentialism. But it could also be read in juxtaposition to Heidegger, particularly with reference to his discussion on language and communication (*Mitteilung*) in *Being and Time*: "*Communication* must be understood in a sense which is ontologically broad. […] Through it a co-state-of-mind [*Mitbefindlichleit*] gets 'shared', and so does understanding of Being-with. Communication is never anything like a conveying of experiences, such as opinions or wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another."[14] The essence of communication, according to Heidegger, is an expression shared with another, an intersubjective world sharing; it is first and foremost an affirmation of the social context in which it takes place: "[Language] is not a mere tool but that which affords the very possibility of standing in the openness of the existent."[15] The understanding that communication is not simply information exchange would certainly be acceptable to Levinas. He would also follow Heidegger in regarding language

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as a mode of addressability, of calling and being called upon, a property that precedes speech and escapes articulation in speech.

The point where Levinas departs from Heidegger's conception of communication concerns the relation to the Other. Whereas for Heidegger communication (*Mitteilung*, literally sharing or dividing together) is of the order of *being-with* the Other (*Mitsein*), for Levinas it is of a more fundamental order, that of *being-for* the Other (*pour-l'autre*). If according to Heidegger the basic structure of communication is of mutual world sharing, the disclosure of Being through language, then according to Levinas communication is the disclosure of the self before the Other—the Other rather than the "world" is the constituent of communication. Levinas reserves the concept of communication to describe a relation with the Other that undercuts the ontology of *being-with*, a relation that precedes and exceeds co-existence and co-temporality of world sharing. The Other is primordial in Levinas's conception of communication, always already before the constitutive "we" of the intersubjective contact and prior to the reciprocity of message exchange.

Signification and the Face

By the early 1960s, Levinas was able to put forward a detailed phenomenological discussion that was considerably divergent from Heidegger's. His first major book, *Totality and Infinity* (published in 1961), proposes a comprehensive ethical treatise on the relation between the Same and the Other. Here subjectivity is presented in terms of enjoyment, labor, habitation—all that nourishes the self with the "joy of living."[16] But that very subjectivity is also cast as fundamentally predisposed to alterity, a site of hospitality, an interiority welcoming exteriority. Despite being a separate being, the self is irrecusably open to the outside, containing within itself the constant possibility of being taken by the Other: "The subject is a host" (299). Thus the self is not to be understood as subjectivity closed upon itself, as *causa sui* selfsame, but as susceptibility to alterity, openness irredeemably exposed to the Other. This conceptualization already bears the gist of the critique leveled by Levinas against the most basic, self-evident premises of Western philosophy—the primacy of the self as the agent of being, reason, and freedom. What he offers instead is a radical revision of the ethical relation: the relation with the Other, rather than the self, as the primary locus of sociality; ethics, rather than ontology, as first philosophy.

A key idea introduced by Levinas is that of the face (*visage*). Rather than the mere physical portrait, the face is the surface of the Other's alterity, the Other as encountered point-blank, face-to-face. "The way in which the other

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presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. […] The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me" (50–1). The face faces: emerging in the "curvature of the intersubjective space" (291), it calls into question any preconception about the Other. Defying conceptualization, representation, and incorporation, the face introduces into the relation a horizon of infinity, of transcendence, surpassing any attempt at subjecting the face to the order of reason—to totality. Yet the face is not encountered as an oppositional force to be reckoned with; its power comes, paradoxically, from its powerlessness. Exposing the Other as vulnerable and defenseless, the face expresses the most primal ethical edict: "Thou shall not kill." The face issues an ethical interpellation, awakening me to my responsibility to and for the Other.

In the present context, however, it is important to note that for Levinas the face is not simply a corporeal presence but essentially a form of communication, an inextricable combination of face and address. As he writes, "The face is a living presence; it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimilated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse" (66). Levinas's formulation deems language as facial as much as it regards the face as lingual. The distinction is nominal but not phenomenal, as the way the face manifests itself is never properly visual—as something to be seen—but inherently entails an approach, calling forth and speaking towards—as something to be heard. Hence, "to see the face is to speak of the world" (174). Rather than Heidegger's faceless and speechless "call of conscience," Levinas considers the call as a concrete expression, facial inasmuch as vocal.

The conjunction of face and address reveals what Levinas believes to be the primary mode of language: signification. According to Levinas, language is to be thought beyond its traditional parameters: not simply as a system of signs, existing before and beyond its speakers; nor merely as an instrument of knowledge by which the thoughts of one interiority might be represented and shared with another interiority; even less as a means for effecting another through language (as in flattery, persuasion, negotiation—what Levinas designates broadly as "rhetoric"). Certainly language may include all that but for Levinas the very reality of language, its reality as an event of communication, is fundamentally predicated on signification—the modality of approach and address, the exigency of giving signs to another and receiving in turn, speaking that is always by and for a face. "That 'something' we call signification," says Levinas, "arises in being with language because the essence of language is the relation with the Other" (207). Signification infuses

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language with the potential of being called upon, that is to say, the potential of being put into question by the Other.

This emphasis on the relation with the Other within language suggests a theme often approached in dialogical philosophy, specifically by Martin Buber. Indeed, while acknowledging a certain affinity with Buber, Levinas underscores three main points of disagreement with Buber's I-Thou: its reciprocity, its equivalence, and its exclusiveness.[17] First, rather than the reciprocity that characterizes, according to Levinas, the I-Thou, his speculations opt for a nonreciprocal relation where one is obliged to the Other but not the other way around. It is a relationship in which the I's responsibility is unconditional and unidirectional. Second, rather than what he perceives as the equivalence of the I-Thou, Levinas stresses the asymmetrical nature of the relation, insisting that the Other is not encountered on equal grounds but as coming from a dimension of height: "The interlocutor is not a Thou, he is a You [*pas un Toi, il est un Vous*]; he reveals himself in his lordship."[18] The Other commands rather than converses, is a teacher rather than a partner. Finally, Levinas is critical of what he deems the exclusiveness of the relation with the Thou, its clandestine nature, "the self-sufficient I-Thou forgetful of the universe" (213), which for him spells the privileging of the immediate Other over other Others. "The third party," states Levinas, "looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice" (213). What Levinas introduces here is a key question, the question of justice, which deserves some elaboration.

Levinas's counterpoints to Buber can be read as pointing to that which transcends the logic of dialogue proper, the duality of speech, exposing thereby the relation with the Other to what is potentially excluded by the face-to-face, to another other that also demands to be reckoned as an Other. Levinas insists that the encounter with the face does not contradict the generality of the social, or what he calls "the third" (*le tiers*); rather the contrary, the social is already implied in the face: "The revelation of the third party, ineluctable in the face, is produced only through a face" (305).[19] The third is announced in the encounter with the second; the face of the Other is inherently the face of humanity. Hence the face-to-face as unfolded through language is never a private language, oblivious to the world and other interlocutors. Indeed in such a case the relation with the Other could have dispensed with language altogether in favor of pure relation, which is essentially the fault Levinas finds in the Buberian I-Thou. For Levinas, language, while originally emanating from the face, nevertheless speaks the language of the social—the discourse of generality and universality—that is, the lan-

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guage of justice. I return to the question of justice and the way it relates to communication ethics in the concluding section.

Proximity and the Saying

Levinas's second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (originally published in 1974), presents a more radical attempt to account for the relation with the Other in terms of language. The emphasis on language, as Levinas later admits, was following the critique leveled against his formulation in *Totality and Infinity* by the young Jacques Derrida in his 1964 essay "Violence and Metaphysics." Derrida argued that Levinas's effort to move beyond the constraints of ontological discourse was doomed since his language was still contaminated by ontological categories.[20] In this respect, it is possible to read Levinas's writings culminating with *Otherwise than Being* as a comprehensive revision of the way language is involved in the relation with alterity. This revision also occasions revisiting Levinas's use of the term "communication," which figures more prominently in his later work.

The development is already evident in a 1967 essay titled "Language and Proximity," which marks a departure from the language of ontology to a more affective, even visceral, account of language. In it, the concept of proximity comes to gradually replace the earlier emphasis on the face. Neither nearness in terms of space nor closeness in terms of similitude, proximity signifies a realm of sensibility and exposure, of being touched and affected by the Other—a realm wherein responsibility commands. Significantly, the proximity of the Other grows in reverse proportion to my consciousness of the Other: the more I rely on knowledge, reason, and experience, the less I am in proximity with the Other: "Consciousness is always late to the rendezvous with the neighbor [*prochain*, the Other in proximity]."[21] Language itself is then disclosed as a form of contact—an event of proximity—that precedes and is presupposed by any exchange of information: "Whatever be the message transmitted by speech, the speaking is contact" (115). Language constitutes communication with the Other insofar as it makes contact before it makes sense: "To approach is to touch the *neighbor*, beyond the data apprehended at a distance in cognition" (125). To understand language merely as a system of signs for transmitting messages, as a means for exchanging knowledge, is to rid it of its "primal scene" as a mode of touch: "Language is a battering ram—a sign that says the very fact of saying" (ibid.). Hence the possibility of being taken by the Other is internal to language; it is an event of proximity taking place independent of and antecedent to the meanings thereby conveyed.

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Levinas's rethinking of language in his later work is set forth through the key distinction between the Said (*le dit*) and the Saying (*le dire*). The Said refers to language in its modality to represent and designate; it consists in the propositions given from one to another, in the content or information conveyed. The Said establishes the correlation between words and things, presenting and representing the world in language: "The said is not simply a sign or an expression of a meaning; it proclaims and establishes this as that."[22] In correlating signs and essences—in thematization—the Said bespeaks ontology; indeed, as Levinas states, "The birthplace of ontology is in the said" (42). The Saying, by contradistinction, introduces a different modality of language, that of signification, the event of giving and receiving signs, which presupposes exposure and openness to the Other's call. The Saying signifies signification itself: it bespeaks the pre-ontological concern with the Other that inspires the Said but can never be thematized by it. "The saying extended toward the said is a being obsessed by the other, a sensibility which the other by vocation calls upon and where no escaping is possible" (77). If the Said, which consists in the statements conveyed, is comparable to what J. L. Austin designates as the constative, then the Saying would be a radical kind of performative. Irreducible to the statements conveyed, it performs the undergoing of disclosure and exposure before the Other: "Here I am"—the performative of the ethical.[23] Signifying otherwise than the Said, the Saying proceeds in the accusative that precedes and exceeds the nominative, bearing out the potential of being called upon and touched by the Other, the modality of language as an ethical event of proximity.

Notwithstanding the distinction, the Said and the Saying are inextricably linked, forming a precarious correlation. Emerging from the pre-linguistic, pre-ontological origin of language, the Saying is not synchronous with the Said, cannot be captured or thematized by it, and is not properly representable. The Saying must remain before and beyond the Said; otherwise it would be reduced to ontology. Yet the Saying cannot be heard independently of the Said and may come to pass only through what is said. Expression comes with a price, the price of betraying the pure Saying, betraying it precisely for it to be heard. Yet the Said does not entirely subsume the primordial Saying: While proceeding as the exchange of signs, the Said nevertheless echoes the originating Saying that inspired it, the modality of approach and exposure to the Other. "The plot of the saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted in the manifestation. It imprints its trace on the thematization itself."[24] Hence to regard language only as the Said is to deny its original ethical import, to reduce ethics to ontology, the Other to the

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Same. This is what Levinas charges the Western philosophical tradition with: the exclusion of the language of alterity, the Saying, by the language of ontology, the Said.[25]

Nowhere is more critical to what is at stake in accounting for the relation with alterity through language than Levinas's own attempts to communicate that very relation. As said before, Levinas's later work is marked by the preoccupation with making language signify otherwise, exposing it to the alterity from which it originates but can never grasp. Thus if *Totality and Infinity* articulates the non-ontological experience of the face-to-face in the language of ontology, *Otherwise than Being* is a "performative disruption of the language of ontology," which maintains the interruption of the ethical Saying within the ontological Said.[26] Indeed, Levinas's text bears many hyperbolic fragments of breaks and ruptures that keep fracturing the philosophical logos he presents. Consider the performative effected by the following passage: "And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside all it includes. That is true of the discussion I am elaborating at this very moment."[27] Here is a philosophical statement (the Said) concerned with the interruptive force of addressing (the Saying) that performs that very interruption by puncturing the statement with a reflexive deictic utterance.[28]

Yet beyond the textual performance of interruption, Levinas's text also bears a critical edge: If the ethical comes to signify through the Saying's interruption of the Said, then the absence of such interruptions would signal the obliteration of the Saying and hence the elimination of the potential to be called and put into question by the Other. It would therefore be possible to show that what holds discourse together, what makes it a consistent and coherent logos—indeed what makes a communicative act successful—is in fact the reduction of the Other to the same and of infinity to totality. Levinas mentions three such hegemonic discourses of the Said: State, Medicine, and Philosophy. Of the three he elaborates mainly on the latter, but on the remaining two he nevertheless speculates: "Does not the coherent discourse, wholly absorbed in the said, owe its coherence to the State, which, violently excludes subversive discourse? […] The interlocutor that does not yield to logic is threatened with prison or the asylum or undergoes the prestige of the master and the mediation of the doctor."[29] While Levinas does not pursue this critical vein, his conceptualization can nevertheless serve to establish an ethical critique of the hegemony of the Said, as I show elsewhere.[30]

Finally, let us take up again Levinas's concept of communication, which receives an extended discussion in *Otherwise than Being*:

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> Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure. Communication is not reducible to the phenomenon of truth and the manifestation of truth conceived as a combination of psychological elements: thought in an ego—will or intention to make this thought pass into another ego—message by a sign designating this thought—perception of the sign by another ego—deciphering the sign. […] The plot of proximity and communication is not a modality of cognition. The unblocking of communication, irreducible to the circulation of information which presupposes it, is accomplished in the saying. It is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding done by the other. It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability.[31]

Levinas's explication of communication unfolds through nondialectical oppositions of claims and counterclaims, contrasting phenomenality with transcendence, the Said with the Saying, and ontology with ethics. The idea of communication arising from this passage is of the interruptive relation of the Said and the Saying, the signification that anticipates representation, the welcoming that prefigures the incoming of signs.

While often appearing in conjunction with the distinction between the Said and the Saying, Levinas's concept of communication, I would argue, carries an independent significance within the overall discussion. Indeed, a section entitled "Communication" is situated in the middle of the chapter Levinas designates as "the germ of the present work."[32] In it, he stakes out the following contention: "Paradoxically enough, thinkers claim to derive communication out of self-coinciding. […] They seek for communication a full coverage insurance […] The problem of communication reduced to the problem of truth of this communication for him that receives it amounts to the problem of certainty" (118–19). Levinas dislocates communication from the context of coincidence and certainty, from the question of successful completion, and rearticulates it in the context of proximity and responsibility, where communication is revealed as a precarious contact, "at the risk of lack of and refusal of communication" (120). The radical effect of this rearticulation is evident in the following: "Communication is an adventure of a subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself, different from that of coinciding in consciousness; it will involve uncertainty. […] Communication with the other can be transcendent only as a dangerous life, a fine risk to be run" (ibid.). Levinas's use of the concept of communication, I suggest, is reserved to a radical instance of proximity: to the way the ethical is signified through the distinction—and the interruption—between the Said and the Saying.

The importance of Levinas's insights on communication can hardly be overestimated. Communication truly worth the name is an experience of the

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limit of communication; rather than a problem, the limit of communication introduces the opportunity of encountering the Other. It is precisely in moments of uncertainly and in instances of misunderstanding, lack, or even refusal that I find myself facing the Other. The limits of communication are not the end of the ethical relation but rather its very beginning. On this view, ethical communication has nothing to do with the successful completion of communication: While understanding and sharing may well be the result, they do not necessarily signify an ethical triumph; to regard like-mindedness as intrinsically "good" is to confuse the functional with the ethical. Insofar as communication ethics is concerned, Levinas's thought marks a decisive break with the longstanding tradition that regards the completion of communication as ethically favorable. A Levinasian ethics of communication would therefore embrace the risk of failure as an integral and positive condition—indeed, as its condition of possibility. For the ethical import of communication lies not in expanding knowledge but in striking contact, not in the prospect of stretching one mind to another but in the potential of being approached and affected, summoned to respond. If ethics is first philosophy, as Levinas repeatedly said, interruption is first communication.

Levinas in Communication and Media Studies

The engagement with Levinas's work within communication and media studies can be divided between these two areas of interest in a way that roughly corresponds to Levinas's idea of language as empathic contact, on the one hand, and to his speculations on proximity and the face, on the other. In the following I do not intend to provide a comprehensive survey of the various works that refer to Levinas or to Levinasian concepts. I confine myself to those who have undertaken a more extensive engagement with his philosophy in bringing it to bear on key issues in communication thought and media theory. With a few notable contributions and some promising developments underway, I believe the full potential of this philosopher's work is yet to be realized.

The reception of Levinas within communication studies has been dominated, by and large, by the philosophy of dialogue framework and so remained mostly tied to the intersubjective sphere. This is certainly for a good reason, as Levinas's thought does indeed lend itself most straightforwardly along these lines. A favorite topic in this context has been a comparative study of Buber and Levinas, with various issues taken up in several studies and recently even in an edited collection devoted to the subject.[33] The juxtaposition is almost inevitable given the Jewish roots of both philosophers,

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their critique of traditional Western philosophy, their emphasis on ethics, and their preoccupation with alterity. A compelling theme in this discussion is Levinas's (mis)reading of Buber in several of his texts and Buber's single response to Levinas, which are taken altogether as a reflexive tool to illustrate the similarities and divergences between the two philosophers' understating of empathic contact. Another bunch of comparative studies pair Levinas with Mikhail Bakhtin, and in so doing highlight issues of answerability and addressability in both thinkers.[34]

Among the best guides to Levinas's ethics of communication are Ronald C. Arnett and Jeffrey Murray, who, in a series of publications, lay down the necessary groundwork from which to develop further.[35] A landmark study in introducing Levinas to communication and rhetorical studies is Michael J. Hyde's *The Call of Conscience*, which examines the interruptive voice of conscience summoning us to respond to its claims of responsibly and, hence, to engage with this call rhetorically. In this sense, "Levinas' discourse is *a* call of conscience about *the* call of conscience."[36] Drawing on Levinas to supplement Heidegger, Hyde proceeds to explore the relationship between the call of conscience and the everyday practice of rhetoric as they emerge within the euthanasia debate in the United States. In my own work, I have ventured another way of introducing Levinas to communication thought, which unlike most accounts above, owes more to deconstruction than to phenomenology. Reading Levinas together with his two great commentators, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, I posit interruption as the correlative between communication and ethics, privileging thereby instances of failure (in terms of the Said) as ethical opportunities (in terms of the Saying).[37]

In media studies, Levinas has been inspirational in some recent discussions on media ethics that extend his ideas of proximity and the face to questions of responsibility with respect to distant others as seen on the media. Most noteworthy here is the work of Roger Silverstone, who has captured the challenge most sharply: "How do I represent the Other in what I write or film without, on the one hand, exoticizing him or her? How do I represent the Other in what I write or film without, on the other hand, absorbing him or her into my own sense of myself?"[38] Inspired by Levinas's notion of proximity, Silverstone offers the notion of "proper distance" as a cautionary measure for mediated communication: "The problem that mediated space creates for us as moral beings is that of the creation and defence of proper distance—that of making contact, ensuring proximity, and of establishing the moral duty of disinterested care."[39] His final book develops a framework for media ethics, which is importantly informed by this notion of proper distance.[40]

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Another important contribution is Judith Butler's discussion on the image of the face as produced and circulated by the media.[41] The media, argues Butler, tend to employ the face as a marker of either good or evil (the faces of Colin Powell and "liberated" Afghan women, on the one hand; the faces of Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, on the other), thereby robbing the face from its alterity. Such representations eclipse rather than expose the human in the face. It follows that granting visibility could sometimes be as dehumanizing as denying it, for when the face is so put on display, it loses its capacity to issue an ethical claim. Since the human is not properly represented in the face, Butler affirms following Levinas, perhaps failing to capture the face—and the performance of that failure—is the only way for representation to convey the human. It remains doubtful, however, whether the crucial tie between the face and address, so central to Levinas's thinking, would survive this reduction of the face to failed representation—and its signification to a kind of performative iconoclasm.

More recent discussions have moved deeper into the question of technology and ethics, using the Levinasian concern with alterity to problematize the humanist bias prevalent in most ethical accounts, including Levinas's. Thus, "one needs to be aware of and to work against the persistent and irreducible humanism that has been shown to pervade and underlie the work of Levinas, and those others who, following his example, endeavor to address themselves to otherness."[42] What is at issue is broadening the ethical spectrum to include various kinds of alterities (human and nonhuman). Hence the for-the-Other structure of subjectivity needs to be expanded, since "under the conditions of digitality we cannot ascertain any longer whether the other who is 'assigned to me' and for whom I am responsible is human or machinic."[43] Likewise, Levinas's emphasis on ethical contact is said to apply beyond mere embodiment "to any other possible affective materiality or 'haptic medium' which might become a primary site of exposedness and vulnerability."[44] While not entirely consistent with Levinasian inclinations, this recent line of thought nevertheless finds inspiration in Levinas's critique of the totalitizing and exclusionary structures of Western philosophy.

Conclusion: Communication and Justice

In conclusion, I would like to identify where I think the potential of Levinas's thought remains unfulfilled insofar as the philosophy of communication is concerned. In his celebrated book *Speaking into the Air*, John Durham Peters declares, "Today the most influential thinkers about communication are probably Jürgen Habermas and Emmanuel Levinas."[45] I read this statement

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more as wishful thinking than actual assessment, given the unparalleled moral authority Habermas has enjoyed within communication studies. It is however my belief that Levinas's ethics can and should serve as a corrective to the dominance of Habermas's ethics of communicative rationality.[46] Despite first appearances, there are some important parallels between these two ostensibly opposite thinkers: Both are highly invested in language, particularly in speech, as the basis for ethical signification; both regard intersubjectivity as the primal scene of sociality; and both are deeply concerned with the question of social justice.[47] Both philosophers are also not easily accessible to the uninitiated and so require the work of capable interpreters and commentators to mediate the ideas to the larger academic public. This has proven effective in the case of Habermas and it is time to undertake the same task with respect to Levinas. Yet drawing on Levinas to implicate communication ethics is not expected to, nor should it, produce models and standards (*pace* Habermas's); its power lies rather in heeding to the underside of model thinking and standard setting.

With this task in mind, I want to adduce one example for a Levinasian corrective to Habermas and focus on the question of justice. While for Habermas, reason is the basis of communicative action from intersubjectivity all the way through the public sphere, for Levinas, reason is secondary to the proximity of the face and is derivative of the disjunction between the Other's claim and those of other Others. Reason, as a tool of justice, is called upon to manage the discrepancy between the conflicting demands, and the Said, as a tool of reason, is called upon to thematize the "contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction."[48] Here it is possible to find a fundamental problem with Habermas's reason-based discourse ethics. As Steven Hendley notes, there is nothing in Habermas to account for my concern with another: The question "Why be moral?" never finds an adequate answer within the procedures of discourse ethics.[49] When turning to Levinas, however, it is clear that the reason for "why be moral" cannot be located within reason—my concern with the Other precedes reason, and my exposure to the Other is pre-rational.

It is upon this exposure that Levinas founds justice. While proceeding by means of reason and in terms of the Said, justice is constitutive upon the pre-ontological responsibility and the primordial Saying. It is for the third that the language of justice arises in the Said; yet it is for the Other that language as signification, as the Saying, arises in the first place. Justice begins with the signification of the Saying and culminates with the thematization of the Said—without the latter obliterating the former. As such, justice upholds the paradox of objectivity and proximity: "Justice remains justice only, in a soci-

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ety where there is no distinction between the close and the far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest."[50] While blind to all faces, justice must remain ever-so-mindful of the face; as a discourse of the Said, justice must remain ever-so-vigilant over the trace of the Saying. Justice is served through the tension between the procedure of justice and the possibility of undoing this procedure precisely for the sake of justice. Justice interrupts justice in the name of justice.

It is now possible to catch a glimpse into what a Levinasian corrective to Habermas's discourse ethics might look like. As a veritable discourse of the Said, discourse ethics would have to be made exposed to the interruptive force of the Saying. Having its justification in freedom, equality, sincerity, universality, and rational argument, it would have to be harked back to the justification most primordial: the signification of the face. Hence, in order to be just, the procedure of this discourse would have to affirm their foundation in a nonprocedural and pre-procedural moment—the inaugural gesture of justice, which gives rise to the procedure of justice but can never be articulated within that procedure: The obligation to freedom at the base of freedom, the asymmetrical appeal to equality at the root of equality, the "irrational" recourse to rationality at the origin of rationality. This non- and pre-procedural moment must not only be affirmed but also allowed to haunt and interrupt the procedure; otherwise the discourse proceeds by virtue of its own momentum and consequently loses sight of the face. As Enrique Dussel proposes in his Levinas-inspired ethics of liberation, discourse ethics gains its consistency by privileging the formal over the material, the procedure over those excluded by the procedure.[51] Thus the inaugural gesture of justice is invoked every time the procedure is challenged by those who are excluded by it. This critique does not invalidate reason or formal argumentation altogether but insists on reassigning their motivation. Such communication would maintain the discourse of the Said only insofar as it is liable to the Saying and, hence, to the possibility of its own collapse. A non-teleological communication, its goal would not be consensus (although this might occasionally happen), but a truly liberative, interruptive contact. The fundamental precept of such discourse ethics would therefore be this: First communication is an interruption.

Notes

1 For a biographical account, see Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas*.

2 Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 245.

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[3] In his 1951 essay "Is Ontology Fundamental?" Levinas states, "The first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 'All men by nature aspire to knowledge,' remains true for a philosophy that has too easily been believed to be disdainful of the intellect." See Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 4. The allusion is to Heidegger's fundamental ontology, which Levinas regards as the most radical attempt to rethink the underpinning of Western philosophy, but one that is, ultimately, not radical enough. While discarding the mediation of the intellect for total immersion in the world through a variety of existential registers (emotional, theoretical, practical), Heidegger nevertheless reinstates a different kind of knowing: the comprehension of Being as fundamental to the experience of Being. In other words, according to Levinas, Heidegger's radical ontology is still mortgaged to knowledge, however intricately conceived.

[4] Wright, Hughes, and Ainsley, "Paradox of Morality," 170.

[5] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.

[6] Cohen, "Translator's Introduction," 10.

[7] Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 165.

[8] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 360.

[9] See Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 92–103. A rarely acknowledged influence on French structuralism came from the United States in the form of cybernetics and information theory—another post-war theoretical development that located communication at the center of its epistemology. See Peters, "Institutional Opportunities," 151–3; van de Walle, "Roman Jakobson," 87–123; Liu, "Cybernetic Unconscious," 288–320. It should be noted that Levinas's later speculations on language and communication contain critical allusions to technical concepts such as information, transmission, message, reception and circulation. See note 34.

[10] Cmiel, "On Cynicism, Evil, and the Discovery," 88–107.

[11] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 94.

[12] Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, 95.

[13] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 103–4.

[14] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 205.

[15] Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, 301. See also Wyschogrod, "From Ethics to Language," 163–76; Peperzak, *Beyond*, 60–5.

[16] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 145.

[17] The accuracy of Levinas's reading of Buber is beyond my scope here. The question, however, was already raised in Derrida's 1964 seminal essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics," where he footnotes, "Others will determine, perhaps, whether Buber would recognize himself in this interpretation" (315). For an extensive discussion, see Lawton, "Love and Justice," 77–83; Tallon, "Intentionality, Intersubjectivity and the Between," 292–309; Bernosconi, "'Failure of Communication," 100–35; Friedman, "Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas," 337–52. Some of the above as well as additional discussions appear in Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman, *Buber and Levinas*.

[18] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 101.

[19] As Derrida explicates in one of his last readings of Levinas, "The third does not wait; it is there, from the 'first' epiphany of the face in the face to face." See *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 31.

[20] Indeed, in a short biographical note titled "Signature" from 1976, Levinas states, "The ontological language which *Totality and Infinity* still uses in order to exclude the purely psychological significance of the proposed analysis is henceforth avoided." See *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 295.

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[21] Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 119.
[22] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 35.
[23] This performative, however, is nothing like what Austin designates as the "smooth or happy functioning of a performative." See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 14. Rather than the successful execution of what is said, the Saying removes the utterance from the speaker's felicities or infelicities, submitting the interlocutionary to the primordial and asymmetrical responsibility towards the Other. The Saying performs the relation with, rather than upon, the interlocutor. Thus the performative "doing" of the Saying is the undoing of the constative Said, an illocution that unsettles and goes beyond the locution. Moreover, if Austin's performative presupposes social conventions as conditions for its uptake, the Levinasian Saying antecedes and transcends any social convention, having the illocutionary force of a demand, regardless of the locution. This raises the interesting question of the relation between locution and illocution in Levinas's own writing. See note 31 below.
[24] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 46–7.
[25] If the Said is the language of totality and of the Greek logos, the Saying is the language of infinity and of the Jewish teaching. That the two are interconnected yet mutually exclusive is suggestive of the way Levinas regards the relation between the two discourses he occupied, the Greek and the Hebrew.
[26] See Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 8.
[27] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 170.
[28] The performativity of Levinas's text in *Otherwise than Being* was pursued at length by Derrida in his second major engagement with Levinas. See "At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am," 11–48. The title is comprised of three recurring phrases in *Otherwise than Being* where Levinas is said to perform the interruption of the Said by the Saying.
[29] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 170.
[30] Pinchevski, *By Way of Interruption*.
[31] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 48. This passage is reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's verbal model of communication:

> This is an entirely *psychological* phenomenon, followed in turn by a *physiological* process: the brain transmits to the organs of phonotation an impulse corresponding to the pattern. Then sound waves are sent from A's mouth to B's ear: a purely *physical* process. Next, the circuit continues in B in the opposite order: from ear to brain, the physiological transmission of the sound pattern; in the brain, the psychological association of this pattern with the corresponding concept. (*Course in General Linguistics*, 11–12)

Some concepts may also reverberate with the more recent information theory vocabulary; see note 9 above.
[32] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 193.
[33] See for instance Arnett, "Dialogic Ethic"; Lipari, "Listening for the Other"; Murray, "Face in Dialogue, Part II." See also note 17 above.
[34] See for instance Ponzio, "Relation to Otherness"; Nealon, "Ethics of Dialogue"; Murray, "Bakhtinian Answerability"; Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue*.
[35] Arnett, "Responsive 'I'" and "Provinciality and the Face of the Other"; Murray, *Face to Face in Dialogue*. Also of note are edifying essays by Smith, "Lyotard and Levinas on Otherness," and Jovanovic and Wood, "Speaking from the Bedrock of Ethics."
[36] Hyde, *Call of Conscience*, 100.
[37] Pinchevski, *By Way of Interruption*.

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[38] Silverstone, *Why Study the Media?* 135.
[39] Silverstone, "Proper Distance," 481.
[40] Silverstone, *Media and Morality*.
[41] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 128–51.
[42] Gunkel, "Thinking Otherwise," 175.
[43] Zylinska, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, 60. See also her Levinasian-inspired account on cultural studies in *Ethics of Cultural Studies*.
[44] Boothroyd, "Touch, Time and Technics," 343–4.
[45] Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 21.
[46] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*. See also *Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* and *Theory of Communication Action: Lifeworld and System*.
[47] For an extensive discussion, see Vetlesen, "Worlds Apart?"; Gibbs, "Asymmetry and Mutuality"; Hendley, *From Communicative Action*.
[48] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 157.
[49] Hendley, *From Communicative Action*, 56–7.
[50] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 159.
[51] Dussel, "Architectonic of the Ethics of Liberation."

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