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HUMANIZING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: ON LANGUAGE IN LEVINAS AND SELLARS

This essay is more of a methodological propaedeutic than it is a contribution to philosophy of religion. It is grounded in a discontent with two orientations to that field: (1) one that claims that the purpose of this field is to ground a certain set of absolute moral norms, and (2) one that claims that the purpose of this field is to assess whether claims inherent in concepts and practices of religious communities, particularly but not exclusively about the nature of the divine, are possibly true. Both of these strands are interested in ahistorical claims. The scholar who takes the former path makes claims about what humans have always owed to those near and far (even if they have not been self-conscious of that responsibility). The scholar who takes the latter path makes claims about the justified or unjustified quality of some way of articulating one's belief in God or in superhuman beings, whether that articulation occurs in word or in ritual, as a way of aiming at getting the issues surrounding such belief right. Such claims are understandable; it is the job of philosophy, one might think, to move from opinion to truth. Nevertheless, the ease of making such a move seems to me to be quite overstated. Part of the problem of philosophy of religion, just like other subfields in philosophy, is that it gets tied up in knots about how it knows what it claims to know, about how a thinking subject can make objectively true claims. The path to untying that knot is to shift one's focus from the allegedly known object to the allegedly knowing subject, and its strategies for developing and justifying its claim to know.

So in what follows, I want to express and justify my desire to pull back from the "religion" in "philosophy of religion," in the interest of showing that one of the thinkers commonly associated with the former path—Emmanuel Levinas—authorizes less in terms of belief than one might think, and in the interest of beginning to show (as a promissory note) how Levinas might be used to explain not anything about the link between religion and ethics, but something about why the norms of communities are necessarily plastic. In other words, the canon of modern philosophy of religion all too rarely takes upon itself the task of explaining why religious concepts change, and this has led to either one-dimensional Whiggish stories in which we learn to approach the true nature of things by letting go of ontotheology (John Caputo), dogmatism (John Hick), religious belief (A. J. Ayer), or one-dimensional otherworldly stories in which we steep in nostalgia for the premodern world (Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor).

To undo such stories, it is helpful to engage in what the editor of this issue calls "mashup philosophy of religion," but others might just call "comparison." The language of "mashup" is a seductive, and therefore dangerous, language. It threatens to promulgate an aesthetic that implies that the beneficial contribution of the "mashup" is simply the act of mashing. Yet can this be true? I hope that I am not the only person in the universe who, as a child, put a variety of foodstuffs in a blender, turned the blender on, and then with some surprise found the

resulting glop singularly unappetizing and shortly put it down the garbage disposal. But even if I am the only person in the universe to have done this, the point that there is an art to the mashup is one that we know from the history of mashup culture in popular music.

When DJ's started mashing songs up with each other in the early 2000s, it quickly became apparent that there was something involved beyond the ability for matching two songs' beat and pitch with each other. The best mashups were ones in which the DJ just showed that she or he had an *ear*, some quasi-genius ability that gave rise to a hunch that two or more tracks would work well together. For example, when Mark Vidler, under the moniker of Go Home Productions, first released in 2004 a track called "Rapture Riders"—a mashup of Blondie's "Rapture" and The Doors' "Riders on the Storm"¹—his listeners could lose sight of the fact that it was a mashup at all. To be sure, the basic parts were sufficiently well-known that it was clear that "Rapture Riders" was a recombination, yet the elegance of the mashup made it easy to imagine a counterfactual universe in which Blondie's Chris Stein was the guitarist in Jim Morrison's band. What Vidler had unearthed was a *possibility* in a song: a rhythm that can unexpectedly mesh with a different melody than that customarily associated with that rhythm, or a melody that can unexpectedly mesh with a different rhythm. A mashup is a report of possibilities, and in that regard, it is faithful to its source material, even as it puts that source material to new uses. A mashup philosophy of religion, when done well, similarly reports on philosophical works *as they are in themselves* (i.e. is constrained by them), finds possibilities in them, and then combines insights from philosophical works in diverse genres to emphasize the power of each individual work. If this is not done, then what results is simply the philosophical equivalent of the cacophony of listening to two random pieces of music at the same time.

As an example of this path *not* to take, one might point to a recent article by Shaun Gallagher on Levinas and cognitive science. This too is a certain kind of mashup of fields. Gallagher turns to empirical studies of face perception and neonate imitation to argue that scientific literature endorses a Levinasian claim that the face is indeed a unique phenomenon for consciousness (we do not react to faces as we do to other objects), but also that scientific literature refutes Levinas' claim that there is an asymmetry between the self and the other person, in which the other is greater than the ego because it generates the ethical command not to kill it.² This mashup of genres, in an article that cites both Merleau-Ponty and articles from journals in child and infant development, produces an allegedly better Levinas, one that values alterity in the context of mutual interaction, so that self and other form one another. However, as soon as Gallagher claims that, for Levinas, ethics "is based on an experience of transcendence encountered in the other's face," he has gone wrong. In ignoring a key element of Levinas' argument, one implicit in the importance that discourse takes in Levinas' writings from 1950 onward, Gallagher elides the important issue of why Levinas might have believed that empirical studies of our perception of others' faces had little to offer his thought. In addition, Gallagher fails to think through how Levinas, as well as other philosophers who take

¹ This track was first released through Vidler's website on the *AllenDean Project EP* in early 2004 (see <http://www.markvidler-gohomeproductions.co.uk/history.html>). It was later included on Blondie's 2005 compilation album *Greatest Hits: Sound & Vision* (EMI 0946 3 45054 2 0).

² Shaun Gallagher, "In Your Face: Transcendence in Embodied Interaction," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (article 495): 1–6.

language as a necessary element in the articulation of what it means to be human, might criticize a certain kind of scientism in which meaning is immediately accessible to an ego, just as they (or scientists) might critique accounts of a private religious experience. For like the philosopher of religion, the scientist too needs to explain the alteration of scientific norms over history, the possibility of skeptical reactions to scientific claims, and the open-ended nature of natural-scientific and social-scientific inquiry that is characteristic of our experience (in which a basic particle of physics escapes scientists' attempt to track it; in which chocolate and wine are good for us, bad for us, and then maybe good again; in which sociological arguments for the cause of an increase in the national crime rate are called into question by correlating crime rates and exposure to high lead levels; etc.).

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As stated in his introduction, Gallagher's claim is that "for Levinas, ethics is not a matter of theory, argumentation or the promulgation of rules, but is based on an experience of transcendence encountered in the other's face." This is a standard account of Levinas, associated with what Robert Bernasconi once called the "empirical" reading of *Totality and Infinity*, which interprets Levinas as pointing to some kind of experience in which we can directly intuit the other person's transcendence over me—which then entails an ethical obligation to that other person and, by extension, to all others—and as arguing that such an experience is possible (if not actual) for all persons.³ At first glance, such an account makes him seem like some kind of spiritualist medium, or a scriptwriter for a bad Hollywood romantic comedy, as if I only needed to look deeply into your eyes to find meaning. Nevertheless, it is the case that the kind of empirical reading that Gallagher wants to give would indeed make Levinas' claims about the importance of other-centered ethics even stronger, as long the argument that I could intuit authority in the other person might be separated from any overtones that I might be intuiting God in or through the other person. As a result, Gallagher goes on to try to save Levinas from a theological reading of his work by defending his ethics while standing "firmly on naturalistic grounds."⁴ On this territory, Gallagher plans to improve upon Levinas, by making Levinasian ethics more compelling, once the divisive issue of religious belief is pushed aside. His strategy involves science, and particularly cognitive-psychological studies of facial perception, which echo some of Levinas's claims by showing that "facial expressions play a large role in intersubjective interaction." Yet as soon as one turns to science to defend Levinasian ethics, one must turn away from Levinas' specific arguments, because, as Gallagher claims, "Levinas associates the notion of transcendence indicated in the other's face with a form of infinity and something beyond the reach of science. It is something that is 'beyond understanding' (*déborde la compréhension*)."⁵ The quotation in that sentence comes from Levinas' essay "Is Ontology Fundamental?", which originally appeared in 1951. It is important to reconstruct the argument of that essay, since the phrase "*déborde la compréhension*" indeed makes Levinas look like someone who is affirming the human ability to immediately intuit transcendence, as if humans were thermostats who divined transcendence by reacting in a

³ Robert Bernasconi, "Rereading *Totality and Infinity*," in *The Question of the Other: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, eds. Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 23–34.

⁴ Gallagher, 1.

⁵ Ibid.

predetermined way whenever others within a certain radius turned towards them.

"Is Ontology Fundamental?" marked an important transition in Levinas's thinking; indeed, it is fair to say that Levinas really only became clear about how to defend ethics there. To demonstrate this point, one might turn to the end of a 1949 essay, "De la description à l'existence," published in a collection of essays entitled *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Most of that essay is a précis of Heideggerean phenomenology, but in the last two paragraphs Levinas began to criticize it. Because this essay remains untranslated into English, I cite the entirety of those two paragraphs here.

Death, which for Heidegger is this absolutely new concept (and, in the end, contradictory to any thought or logos of the future), rests in thought to the measure that it is comprehension, that is to say, power. It is finally in terms of comprehension—its successes and failures—that Heidegger describes existence. The relation of an existent with being is for him ontology, comprehension of being. And in that move, he rejoins classical philosophy, and idealism and realism remain ontologies. To participate in being is to think it, or to comprehend it. Idealism is total comprehension. For realism, being refuses to be comprehended. But no positive signification can come to complete this negative signification. It is uniquely in relation to understanding [*connaissance*] that the realist notion of being affirms its density and weight.

But is the relation of the person to being uniquely that of ontology? Are our only choices [total] comprehension or a comprehension inextricably mixed with incomprehension, being's domination over us at the very heart of our domination over being? In other words, is it in terms of domination accomplishes itself? The relation that is implied, for example, by the idea of creation: is it exhausted in the idea of causality, as medieval philosophy (still dominated by the cosmological preoccupations of antiquity) believed, or in the idea of an incomprehensible origin which deprives humanity of its mastery over the world and itself? Does not the human person, as creature or as a sexed being, maintain another relation with being than that of power over it or slavery to it, than that of activity or passivity?⁶

It is not immediately clear that Levinas' description of Heidegger in these paragraphs is fair. Yet what is important for the purposes of this essay is these sentences' hesitant tone. In 1949, Levinas had not developed a response that could defend the philosophical enterprise against his fear that what Heidegger

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 106–07. My thanks to Diane Perpich for correcting an error in a previous version of my translation. For more on the role that this essay plays in Levinas's intellectual development, see Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, "From Phenomenology through Ontology to Metaphysics: Levinas's Perspective on Husserl and Heidegger from 1927 to 1950," in *Beyond: The Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 38–52.

signaled about philosophy—that all philosophy is inevitably a technique for thinkers to dominate their environments, and the other persons who existed alongside them in those environments—was correct. There are possibilities he raises, related to creation and sexuality, but he does not pursue them. In other words, what “From Description to Existence” expresses is a *desire*, not an *argument*.

But by 1951, Levinas had an argument. It was very brief and not fully developed, but it was there in incipient form. The opening sections of “Is Ontology Fundamental?” repeat and expand some of the complaints about Heidegger that appeared in the 1949 essay. Heidegger appeared to break with theoretical philosophy, but insofar as the account of existence in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* appeared to reduce individuals to mere sites for the occurrence of truth, Levinas thought that Heidegger ended up subordinating particular beings to universal “structures of being.”⁷ Midway through the essay, Levinas develops his own thinking, and announces that it is the other person who discloses how thinking might proceed without reducing beings to instantiations of the larger category of being. But why would the other person have such disclosive power? Levinas’ answer was that “to comprehend a person is already to speak to him.” The key phrase in that sentence is not the “to him” that would suggest that something happens in the encounter; it is “to speak.” It is “the event of language” that moves outside of the “level of comprehension.”⁸ There is nothing in the other person’s physiognomy that is philosophically relevant: nothing about a searching look in the eyes, a raised eyebrow, or the curl of a sly smile. Indeed, the syntax of the sentence “to comprehend a person is already to speak to him”—equivalent to “the attempt to comprehend a person forgets the facts implicit in speaking with that person”—suggests that Levinas was not pointing to some element of the experience of conversation that makes one realize, at that moment, that the other person transcends me. It is only in reflecting on the structure of conversation, on the transcendental conditions for its possibility, that Levinas makes his philosophical contribution. Levinas’ claim is that there is a difference between cognizing something and conversing with someone. Even though we might come to know things as a result of conversing with others, it is also the case that learning something in conversation is different than the solitary expansion of my knowledge. This is what is at stake in Levinas’ statement in “Is Ontology Fundamental?” that “the person with whom I am in relation I call ‘being,’ but in calling him or her ‘being,’ I call that to him or her [*mais en l’appelant être j’en appelle à elle*]. I do not only think that s/he is, I speak to him or her. . . . I have neglected the universal being that s/he incarnates in order to remain with the particular being s/he is.”⁹

Why would these sentences be true? One might restate Levinas’ claim as follows. Why would one speak to someone at all, besides asking someone nearer the saltshaker to pass it to me? There is something *unpredictable* about a

⁷ Levinas, “L’ontologie est-elle fondamentale?,” in *Entre nous: essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 16; Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” in *Entre Nous: Thinking-Of-The-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4–5; Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” trans. Simon Critchley, Peter Atterton, and Graham Noctor in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 5.

⁸ Levinas, *Entre nous*, 18; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 6; Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 6.

⁹ Levinas, *Entre nous*, 19; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 7; Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 7.

conversation. The other person is free to respond to me with any of an infinite number of sentences. (Perhaps he or she will utter an expletive. Perhaps he or she will tell me to watch my sodium levels. Perhaps he or she will relay office gossip. Perhaps he or she will say nothing at all, and I will try a conversational gambit other than a request for condiments.) Discourse is *inherently* an acknowledgment of the infinite possibilities of this very conversation that is (possibly only barely) taking place at this moment. We would not need to speak to others, except to ask them to serve us, if each other were not a singular person who does not fit into a larger structure. Because conversation is unpredictable—and because this is something we all know from our everyday lives in which we have been caught up short in conversations with others—it must be the case that something can be disclosed to me in conversation apart from the advance presuppositions that Heidegger described as “fore-having.”¹⁰ The other only becomes meaningful in the conversation itself, and that fact carries within it a norm that we approach other persons outside of the confines of universal being.

Because Levinas’ argument is one about the conditions for the possibility of conversation, it is important not to misunderstand the phrase “*déborde la comprehension*” as signifying an allergy to all thinking. It is an allergy to any thinking that seeks to grasp a token in terms of a type. But this allergy is justified by thinking through what must be the case for conversation to proceed in a way that is recognizable to all humans. When Levinas wrote, in the sentence from which Gallagher quotes, that “our relation with the other person certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows [déborde] comprehension,” this was not an obviously empirical claim. As he went on to state two paragraphs later, “it is a question of perceiving the function of language not as subordinate to the *consciousness* that one has of the presence of the other person, her neighborliness or our community with her, but rather as the condition of this ‘conscious grasp.’”¹¹ This is, to be sure, a good example of the strange rhetoric that has frustrated commentators on Levinas for years: it contains a mix of empirical language (“perceiving”) and transcendental language (“the condition of”). How does one perceive a transcendental condition? As Steven Galt Crowell has shown, such a question really should not be as vexing to scholars as it is. After all, we use explicit or implicit perception-talk frequently when we see something that is not empirically present: “I see your point,” or “The argument isn’t clear to me yet,” for example.¹² When I see your point, I see that something must be the case, that something is indispensable, if an empirical claim is to be true. When I see a triangle, I can actually *see* (synthetically) that the angles add up to 180 degrees; I see the triangle in a more complete manner as a result of my geometrical knowledge. Similarly, when I see a conversation taking place (whether I am taking part in it or not), I can learn to see the singularity of the other person in that conversation because I have learned that such conversation would not have taken place had I not “seen” her singularity. But the object of this vision is never something immediately sensed; this is something that requires an education in transcendental thinking in order to “see” the other’s alterity as that which my consciousness cannot grasp, and which relativizes the

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1961), 150; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 191.

¹¹ Levinas, *Entre nous*, 18–19; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 5–6; Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 6.

¹² Steven Galt Crowell, “Authentic Thinking and Philosophical Method,” *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Research* 2 (2002): 23–37, quotation at 28.

worth of all graspings I make of other persons.¹³ When Levinas introduces the term “face” in this essay as a term of art to name the way in which a being is given “as such (and not as the incarnation of a universal being),” he introduces the face as that which can only manifest itself when “one speaks to” the other person.¹⁴ Yet no word that the other speaks can incarnate the face. It is the situation of speech that “shows” that the face is implicitly present underneath all the words I do say. And so the face is given as the condition of the possibility of any language-use at all. When I speak to the other person as the person who I truly am—as a language-user, and therefore as someone to whom tokens can be given outside universal types—then I perform concretely what I have intuited abstractly.

This kind of argument was not unique to Levinas’ 1951 essay. In an article published in 1953 entitled “Freedom and Command,” Levinas briefly summed up the face-to-face relationship by giving a brief transcendental argument: “Before placing themselves in the heart of an impersonal reason, is it not necessary that different freedoms be able to freely understand one another without this understanding being here and now present in the midst of that reason?”¹⁵ In other words, concepts become something shared through a social process in which terms and their meanings are worked out together in conversation; they are not naturally common to humans. How concepts become taken to refer in the ways that they do is something that philosophy must explain. Levinas was worried in this essay that meaning became fixed through some kind of power play, in which cultural authorities dictated vocabularies and their proper use to those under their thumbs. But if this were the case, then we would never be free when we spoke. If freedom is to be something that is really characteristic of human beings, then there must be “a discourse before discourse, a relationship between particulars [*de particulier à particulier*] prior to the institution of rational law.”¹⁶ This “discourse before discourse” is not a second language, however. Were it a second language, one would need to explain how the meanings of *its* vocabulary became fixed. And so a “discourse before discourse” must be a discourse only by extension, a nondiscourse that Levinas had earlier in this essay described as the “face-to-face situation”¹⁷ in which discourse takes place. Similarly, in the 1954 essay “The Ego and Totality,” Levinas claimed that the simultaneity of human biological likeness and the distinction of each ego from every other ego—the individual’s “relationship of both participation and separation” in and from humanity at large—is only possible once we think of the elements of society as “beings that speak, that face one another.”¹⁸ Later in that essay, Levinas was clear that “face” was not a sensible or material sense-datum; one finds the “particularity of the other person in language” and nowhere else, although bodies can and do serve as vehicles for

¹³ As Joshua Lupo and Lauren Cosgrove have suggested to me, this education is what makes possible Levinas’s version of the kind of existence to which Heidegger gave the term “authentic Being-towards-death.” For Heidegger, such existence was non-relational; for Levinas, such existence required relation. See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 255–67; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 299–311.

¹⁴ Levinas, *Entre nous*, 21; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 8–9; Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 8.

¹⁵ Levinas, *Liberté et commandement* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994), 36; Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” trans. Alphonso Lingis in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 15–23, quotation at 18.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Liberté et commandement*, 37; Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” 18.

¹⁷ Levinas, *Liberté et commandement*, 36; Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” 18.

¹⁸ Levinas, *Entre nous*, 29; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 17. I have also made use of the translation by Alphonso Lingis in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 28.

linguistic expression.¹⁹ I cannot take someone else as “face” if that person is disembodied, because only bodies have larynxes and can speak. But I do not see the other person’s “face” by gazing at her or his larynx. A face is not essentially body; a body that does not speak cannot ever be a face.

I wrote earlier, in commenting on “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, that I can act on the basis of my taking “face” as the condition of the possibility of any concept-use. I can do this by taking the other person as a face, by welcoming another person, by taking the person as the mark of the limits of my own knowledge-claims. In other words, I can make explicit in action what I have thought only abstractly. I can decide to take the other person as such (and not as an incarnation of a universal category), and then I can fulfill that intention by steering the conversation in a way that performs my earlier “insight” that commonality can (but need not) be *produced* in the conversation; the correct use of language is not something that I already conceptually possessed. In this way, I can make the alterity of the other person visible and *concretely* intuitible. This double valence of alterity in Levinas—the otherness that I acknowledge in thought, and the other person whom I welcome—lies behind the difficulty of separating the empirical and the transcendental registers of his thought. Nevertheless, my observable act of welcome cannot be explained without an insight about the transcendental condition of language.

This is clear from two passages in *Totality and Infinity* in which Levinas mentioned “optics.” One of the most famous quotations from *Totality and Infinity* is “ethics is an optics.” This formula gives the impression that Gallagher has of Levinas, that all I need to do to sense the obligatory force of ethics is to truly and deeply *look* at another person. Gallagher is not alone in reading Levinas this way. Take, for example, this scenario imagined by Alphonso Lingis: “A neighbor knocks on my door; he has suffered a fall and is bleeding. I see that I can drive him to the hospital. I also realize that I ought to. Facing me, he addresses an appeal to me; his wound, his mortality is a demand put on me. His question, his appeal, binds me, his presence, facing me, has imperative force.”²⁰ For me to fail to answer this appeal as I ought is a failure of sight; I have blinded myself to the force of the other. However, the context of “ethics is an optics” suggests something different than the model that Lingis gives. To supply this context is to supply, all of a sudden, Levinas’ dense conceptual map.

The idea of being overflowing history makes possible *existents* both involved in being and personal, called upon to answer at their trial and consequently already adult—but, for that very reason, *existents* that can speak rather than lending their lips to an anonymous utterance of history. Peace is produced as this aptitude for speech. The eschatological vision breaks with the totality of wars and empires in which one does not speak. It does not envisage the end of history within being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality. The first “vision” of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reveals the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a *signification without a*

¹⁹ Levinas, *Entre nous*, 47; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 33; Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 42.

²⁰ Alphonso Lingis, “Bare Humanity,” in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 98–108, quotation at 100.

context. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision—it *consummates* this vision; ethics is an optics. But it is a “vision” without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type—which this work seeks to describe.²¹

The most relevant part of this passage for the topic at hand is to say that optics has to do with nothing empirical, but what with what Levinas here termed “eschatology.” That term is shorthand for what results when beings overflow history, when their actions are truly their own, irreducible to a system of historical causation. If historical causation is one in which force holds sway—as Levinas suggested in *Totality and Infinity*'s opening paragraphs on the permanent possibility of war, and the challenge of that possibility to morality-talk, much less talk of perpetual peace—then an account of human actors who are able to acknowledge each other and produce a world in concert and without resentment is one that is justified in positing a telos of eschatological or messianic peace. As in “Is Ontology Fundamental?” and in other essays from the 1950s, Levinas claimed that the most salient characteristic of beings whose actions are their own (what he earlier would have called “beings as such”) was their speech: “existents that can speak” are the persons who overflow history. An action might be determined by a greater power’s force. Yet speech belongs to a person as no other human artifact does; it is not dictated, and so for Levinas it is evidence of human freedom above and beyond any system of causation.

But if “vision” has to do with eschatology, how does that kind of seeing work? What actually gets seen, if anything? Levinas in this passage claimed that the vision of eschatology grounds the right to posit the eschaton. So, to see others as owners of their speech-acts is already to break the hold of determinism; this is functionally no different than Kant’s naming autonomy the “fact of reason” in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.²² But while Kant needed to persuade the reader that this fact was undeniable (by posing thought-experiments about how we might react in certain circumstances in which we might be shown that we can control our desires²³), Levinas thought he had no such need. Our speech-acts are ours regardless of the circumstances in which we enunciate them. And so the eschatological vision is at first “without image.” However, that vision can be concretized or “consummated” by formulating a practical maxim to treat others as they truly are (as irreducible to universal structures) and acting on that maxim. I can empirically see other persons in their singularity, even though I have learned to do this because of an “insight” I have received from a philosophy of language, from reflecting on what must be the case in order to explain the simple fact that “I do not only think that she [the other person] is, I speak to her,” as Levinas wrote in “Is Ontology Fundamental?”

So if “ethics is an optics” that is without image, we form good practical maxims on the basis of thinking, not on the basis of empirical seeing. Levinas repeated this later in *Totality and Infinity*: “The ‘vision’ of the face is inseparable from this offering that is language. To see the face is to speak of the world. Transcendence

²¹ Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), xi–xii; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 23.

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* 5:42, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 173.

²³ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* 5:30, in *Practical Philosophy*, 163.

is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture.”²⁴ Levinas had earlier defined “transcendence” as getting outside oneself and one’s own realm of possessions, and thus as “the relationship with the other person.”²⁵ If transcendence is the first ethical gesture, and if this is inseparable from language, then ethics for Levinas consists in the work of forming a common system of reference to which partners in a conversation could consent. One speaks words, giving them to another person, and then the other person bears the authority to call into question those concepts and/or their use in a specific context. If one experiences transcendence in such a conversational scene, as Gallagher assumes when he claims that for Levinas ethics is “based on an experience of transcendence encountered in the other’s face,” then this is only because one has already philosophically deduced the right to posit the other person’s exteriority. One could have done that alone, in a mirrorless room with no faces and only words on a page. But had one stayed in that room (refusing to go out and concretize others’ singularity), one would have been a horrible philosopher.

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The problem with Levinas’s account of ethics is not that it veers towards mysticism, or that it posits the other person as always having *prima facie* authority over me by virtue of her right to challenge my use of concepts. The problem with Levinas’s account of ethics is rather a *narrative* problem. Is this really how language works? Is it indeed the case that another person is outside of the universal when she or he speaks? What occurs when that person utters mathematical formulae, or scientific laws, or one of Kant’s formulations of the moral law? Levinas’s arguments hang so much on the dative form of communication (“I speak to him”) that they appear to be very far indeed from any speech-act I or anyone else might utter. In good mash-up lingo, the beats are too minimal and too spaced-out, like the productions of Jamie Smith of the band The xx. They take us out of the stream of life, and create hesitation for the reader as a result, on the fear that the transcendental analysis is an act of prestidigitation that might never become empirically visible. For this reason, it seems to me to be prudent to go to other philosophers of language, in other philosophical traditions, who offer more details about how conversation works (even if the ethical stakes of such details are under-emphasized). Turning to Wilfrid Sellars seems especially apropos if not only because the arguments of his 1956 essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” help to deepen the Levinasian narrative in a way that clears up such worries about the lived import of the abstract nature of Levinas’s philosophy of language.

Halfway through “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” Sellars told a story of John and Jim in a necktie shop. The shop clerk John and his customer Jim argue about the color of a tie when, due to the recent installation of electric lights in the shop, its color seems to change from green to blue when they take the tie outside; John thereby learns the difference between an object that looks green and one that is green.²⁶ This story is a key moment in Sellars’s attempt in this essay to solve a problem in thinking about how language relates to sense experience. One might say that for Sellars, something like Husserl’s notion of “categorical intuition”—in which one sees a factual state of affairs, e.g. that the

²⁴ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 149; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 175.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 148; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 174.

²⁶ Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 37–38 (§14).

turntable is black and square (with implicit intuitions of "is" and "and")—was simply unable to explain how sense-data (the red thing) could be sensed in the form of a statement of knowledge (of the thing's being-red), how the worldly thing transformed itself into a mental sentence.²⁷ A story such as Husserl's ignores the real problem of how "the ability to sense sense contents" was natural for humans at the same time that "knowledge *that something is thus-and-so*" involved "concept formation," a mental activity that is therefore not immediate sensing.²⁸ One might respond to this problem by posing the possibility that immediate sensing is not reflected in the is-talk that is characteristic of knowledge claims, but in looks-talk; it is certain that the tie looks green to John in a way that it is not certain that the tie actually is green. In the paragraphs following the story of the necktie shop, Sellars argued that looks-talk conceptually follows upon is-talk: to say that something looks green requires some facility with knowing what being-green means as well as the standard conditions under which a green object appears as green.²⁹ But in that process, Sellars pointed out that the sentences "the tie looks green" and "the tie is green" are evidence that language does something more than express our awareness of something *as* something ("that something is thus-and-so"). The fact that one can say "the tie looks green" and not "the tie is green" shows that is-talk is not simply something that reports on the nature of an experience. Looks-talk does this too, although in a different manner. Therefore, as Sellars noted, "to say that a certain experience is a *seeing that* something is the case, is to do more than describe the experience. It is to characterize as, so to speak, making an assertion or claim, and—which is the point I wish to stress—to *endorse* that claim."³⁰

Looks-talk, then, both reports and withholds endorsement; is-talk both reports and endorses. The solution to the problem of explaining how concept formation hooks into our sense-impressions of the world was to show that thoughts were "more than merely theoretical entities,"³¹ and to examine them in terms of their social context. To say that "concepts pertaining to such inner episodes as thoughts are primarily and essentially *intersubjective*"³²—a dimension of concept-use shown through Sellars's analysis of the role of endorsement in language—entails that thoughts have an expressive function and so are discovered only within a discursive context, not outside it. By the end of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Sellars had developed a thesis that talk of "thoughts" as private episodes (independent of discourse) arose only as a way for humans to explain the ground of speech-acts. This served not so much to disprove something like Husserl's notion of categorical intuition, so much as to *explain* why we might be invested in something like a Husserlian story that aims to create a seamless gap between mind and world. In effect, Sellars made his

²⁷ Sellars only cited Husserl on a few occasions in his corpus, and did not cite Husserl at all in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," although Sellars is clearly writing about intentionality, and studied Husserl under Marvin Farber as an MA student at the University of Buffalo. For a comparison of Husserl and Sellars on the given, see Gail Soffer, "Revisiting the Myth: Husserl and Sellars on the Given," *Review of Metaphysics* 57 (2003): 301–37. For Sellars's educational history, see Willem A. deVries, *Wilfrid Sellars* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 3–5. For Husserl on categorical intuition, see Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), 2:271–89.

²⁸ Sellars, *Empiricism*, 20–21 (§6).

²⁹ Ibid., 43–44 (§18).

³⁰ Ibid., 39 (§16).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Sellars, *Empiricism*, 107 (§59).

readers self-conscious of what they were doing when they were such a story. As Ray Brassier has helpfully noted, "Sellars is as much of a realist about inner-thought episodes as Descartes. His amendment to Cartesianism insists only that access to 'inner' reality is just as mediated as access to 'outer' reality. . . his claim is that our ability to understand what a thought is is tributary to communally generated and publicly shared conceptual resources."³³

We can boil Sellars's argument down to three claims: (1) thoughts are very little (or very little that is philosophically useful) without the language that expresses them, (2) language is always an expression of something to someone else, (3) language always involves the expression of a state of affairs which the speaker either does or does not endorse. These claims entail an additional claim which is clearest in Sellars's 1954 essay "Some Reflections on Language Games": "everyone would admit that the notion of a language that enables one to state matters of fact, but doesn't permit argument, explanation, in short *reason-giving*, in accordance with the principles of *formal logic* is a chimera."³⁴ Discourse is the site of justification: meaning is nothing without the giving of reasons, and the challenges to that giving of reasons, that makes one's endorsement of one's own claim endorsable (or refusable) by others. All this comes not simply from the fact that we do talk to each other – this was Levinas's basic fact of human existence – but from the fact that a sentence such as "the tie looks green" implies that first-person claims in general only have their authority by virtue of being endorsed by others. Meaning may exist outside of an intersubjective context, but we do not know it to be meaningful unless others recognize and endorse the meanings we ascribe.

In this manner, the thicker description of the texture of conversation in Sellars provides a clearer account of how language is the offering of concepts from one person to another, seeking endorsement of the speaker's sense of how concepts are to be appropriately used. Yet in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Sellars did not mention any broad ethical stakes of his argument (although there are other essays in which Sellars did take up the intersubjective nature of ought-talk).³⁵ In this respect, it may seem that to argue for a mash-up between Levinas and Sellars at all – much less that this mash-up is better than the one that Gallagher has proposed – is foolish. Yet there are three points in Sellars's argument that are relevant for reading Levinas and Sellars together.

First, it is the case that we cannot properly understand what concepts are for when we analyze them outside of their conversational use. In Sellars, concepts are for the sake of expression: "I remain convinced that we approach the ability to have thoughts in the course of approaching the ability to use a language in interpersonal discourse, and that the ability to have thoughts without expressing

³³ Ray Brassier, "Nominalism, Naturalism, and Materialism: Sellars's Critical Ontology," in *Contemporary Philosophical Naturalism and Its Implications*, eds. Bana Bashour and Hans D. Muller (New York: Routledge, 2013), 101–14, quotation at 105.

³⁴ Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language Games," in *In The Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, eds. Kevin Scharp and Robert B. Brandom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 28–56, quotation at 52–53.

³⁵ See the closing section of Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," in Scharp and Brandom, 369–408, as well as "Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of 'Ought,'" in *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, eds. Hector-Neri Castañeda and George Nakhnikian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), 159–214, and "Science and Ethics," in *Philosophical Perspectives* (Reseda, CA: Ridgeview), 2:209–32.

them is a subsequent achievement.”³⁶ Discourse about thoughts is patterned after discourse about verbal performances (made to others), and therefore concepts gain their determinacy in and through discourse.³⁷ This critique of the view that concepts are prior to language finds a parallel in Levinas’s corpus. In Part II of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas analyzed the self in its solitude, arguing that my relationship to objects in the world is not necessarily one in which I represent them conceptually. Levinas’s argument here is not difficult; it is simply the case that we can point to a relation to the world characterized by its immediacy, and this kind of relation is only possible if we think of it as prior to any act of representation. There is also an “intentionality of enjoyment (*jouissance*)” which highlights the affectivity of the self and its being conditioned by its environment: “The earth upon which I find myself and from which I welcome sensible objects or make my way to them suffices for me. The earth which upholds me does so without my troubling myself about knowing what upholds the earth.”³⁸ On the surface, this looks to be a strange argument, as if Levinas had asked his readers to imagine some scene in which they existed outside of a historical context, a moment in their lives when other people just fell away. (There are, of course, no such moments.) Occasionally, Levinas hints that he is describing moments of satisfaction³⁹ in which one could point to a moment of immediacy before it has some kind of sentential structure. Take, for example, going out to a restaurant. I order something—pancakes, let’s say—and as soon as I bite in to them, I experience the joy of eating some kick-ass flapjacks. Yet in that moment of biting, I do not immediately taste “buttermilk,” “buckwheat,” “baking powder,” much less “golden brown.” I do not even taste “pancake.” There is only the joy. In other words, there is something vaguer than that which we usually associate with concepts: I taste *something*, but I do not taste a *specific* flavor that I can name. (Indeed, it is for this reason that I might ask, “What’s in these pancakes, anyway?”) One might fairly criticize Levinas for focusing only on satisfaction. Disgust is, at least on occasion, also something that does not have the clarity of a concept: I taste something dissatisfying before I confirm that the pancakes were burnt.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, even with this cavil, the point remains that for both thinkers, concepts hold sway most basically in communication.⁴¹ I give conceptual form to my sense-impression so that I can communicate that sense-impression to another.

Second, the other person has priority for me. If language-use entails a social world with others—as is the case for Levinas (for whom conversation is the mark

³⁶ Sellars and Chisholm, 528.

³⁷ Ibid., 534.

³⁸ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 110–11; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 137.

³⁹ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 118; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 145. The repetition of the analysis of enjoyment in Levinas’s second magnum opus, *Otherwise than Being*, highlights this point.

Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 91–94; Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1981), 72–74.

⁴⁰ While there is much research that suggests that disgust is often conceptual, it would be incorrect to state that disgust is *always* conceptual. To continue with examples of taste, one would have to reconstruct how an infant who refuses to eat a certain food (and does not show signs of an allergic reaction to it) has conceptually mediated her or his disgust at that food. For a summary of research on disgust, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *From Disgust To Humanity: Sexual Orientation & Constitutional Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13–16.

⁴¹ See Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 112–13; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 139: “Things are fixed due to the word that gives them [*qui les donne*], which communicates and thematizes them.” The radicality of Levinas’s departure from standard phenomenological accounts of givenness here is not to be underestimated.

of the human) and for Sellars (for whom private episodes only make sense when retrospectively posited in discourse)—then the other plays an indispensable role in the construction of a meaningful world. I report my experiences to the other, yet these have no veridical status without her or his freedom to verify my commitments to a certain state of affairs by endorsing them (“You burnt the pancakes! Try them!” “Yes, sorry about that...”), or to deny those commitments (“You burnt the pancakes! Try them!” “No, I don’t taste anything off...”), or even to clarify them by claiming something that I should then endorse myself (“These pancakes taste a little funny, don’t they? Try them.” “They’re a tad burnt.”) In some of these intersubjective scenes, pancake-chef and pancake-taster have a symmetrical status; there is agreement on what a burnt pancake would taste like. However, it remains always possible that the pancake-taster’s expectation that the pancake-chef will agree that the pancakes are burnt (and hence inedible) will not be met, and the conversation will turn to other taste-tests in which the two will come to agree about the nature of the differences between their palates. In Levinasian jargon, the other person is fundamentally “exterior” to me—and it is this exteriority that leads to the production, not the ready-made availability, of shared meaning. In his article, Gallagher states that “there is nothing about the face in itself, *solus ipse*, or on its own, that generates the ethical demand” in Levinas’s work. Certainly there is nothing biological about the other person that does this. Levinas’s point, however, is that if the other person always retains the ability to break apart and remodel the nature of a communal “We” by calling for the rescripting of meanings that might have previously been assumed to be held in common—then to act in a way as if we knew eternal meanings on our own (or as if others had no power to resist our claims) is to act with false consciousness. For meanings to exist, I must be responsible to the other, who transcends representational meanings by being the condition for them. Ethical responsibility, and its link to what Levinas called the other’s “expression”—a self-presentation that allows for discourse and hence meaning to take place—signals an “ethical condition or essence of language.”⁴² Sellars’s account of language as the site of normativity—as the place where our commitments can be sanctioned positively or negatively—similarly implies a fundamental responsibility to the other, without whom I cannot know that I have a right to my commitments.

Third, I learn nothing from another’s actions or expressions without a discourse in which I attempt to justify the commitments I have inferred from those actions or expressions, an attempt in which my justification can be at risk. As an example, when I began teaching at my current institution almost fifteen years ago, I had a senior colleague with a somewhat flat affect who would regularly respond to points I raised in intellectual conversations with “that’s interesting.” When said in person, this was stated without any change in facial expression; when said over email, it was on occasion the entirety of the message. In the past, I had learned to interpret the words “that’s interesting” as expressing the view that the point I had made was not worth engaging; I therefore assumed that my senior colleague was disparaging my points by telling me they were interesting. It was only after I had expressed this anxiety to other untenured colleagues, who had had more experience with the senior professor, that I was told that the senior professor was one of those rare academics who used “interesting” to mean what dictionaries say it means. While nothing in this story denies Gallagher’s point

⁴² Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 175; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200.

that “behavior is meaningful”⁴³, it does deny two implicit claims in his mashup of Levinas’s rhetoric of the face and scientific studies of face recognition, namely that (a) meaning is generated in the mutual gaze of biological faces, and (b) “we see meaning and emotion in the faces of others” in part because of congruence between self and other that is at first apparent in studies of neonate imitation. Gallagher’s story remains overly occult, for two reasons. First, there is no explanation in his model for the *misreadings* of features and gestures that occur with frequency in our lives. If meaning is immediately visible on another’s face, how is it possible for me to get another’s intent wrong, as I did with regularity with my senior colleague? Second, how do we account for the multiple ways in which we might express our emotions, or ways in which a facial expression could signal multiple emotional states? If we perceive grief or anger on others’ faces immediately, as Gallagher asserts (following Merleau-Ponty)⁴⁴, how does this occur both when we perceive the flat affect of someone whom we believe to be grieving and when we perceive the roiling sobs of something whom we believe to be grieving? What leads us to see grief in these two differing facial expressions (say, found on two different people at a memorial service)? What leads us to see grief in one flat affect and intellectual interest in another flat affect? The inability to give an account of such laws for decoding the meaning of expressions was already noted by Hegel in his critique of physiognomy: the inner “can be manifested just as well in another way, just as another inner can be manifested in the same appearance.”⁴⁵

At the opening of Gallagher’s article, he takes pains to let his readers know that it is possible to separate Levinas’s ethics from the religious dimensions of his thinking. Nevertheless, his account of seeing – whether on the part of neonates, on the part of adults who look at each other’s faces – seems to have the same problems that befuddle scholars of mystical experience. How is something nonpropositional – a look, a gesture, another’s presence – given expression in sentential form? How would one verify the genuineness of our propositional understandings of those nonpropositional acts? How would we develop criteria by which we could assess what better and worse interpretations of those experiences could be? These are well-worn problems in the secondary literature on mystical and religious experience,⁴⁶ and they should be equally well-worn problems in the secondary literature on cognitive science and psychology. By pointing to a moment at which Gallagher’s science comes to look remarkably like the religion he rejects, my desire is not to argue that religion is inextirpable from questions of meaning. Instead, I want to point out only that the inextirpable element is conversation, in which we argue about the meanings of looks, gestures, and presences (whether visible or invisible), in which we come to offer answers to the questions raised earlier in this paragraph, and in which we come to challenge the answers that we and others give. Levinas, in his writings, posited a ground of conversation; he called it “God,” but refused to say much

⁴³ Gallagher, 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 239; Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 190–91. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, “Hegel on Faces and Skulls,” in *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. MacIntyre (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1972), 219–36, esp. 222–23.

⁴⁶ See Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Bruce Janz, “Mysticism and Understanding: Steven Katz and His Critics,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 24.1 (1995): 77–94 and the works cited therein.

more about it, abjuring the activity that we typically call “theology.”⁴⁷ Sellars was uninterested in the question of ground. Yet both showed the importance of refusing accounts that minimize or eliminate the role that language plays in fixing meaning. When such a story is invoked by scholars working in the field of philosophy of religion, they reject traditions that imply that scholars, on their own, can come up with true claims about the divine nature or with ahistorical claims about what is required of humans in their practices (even if earlier moments in history did not see the truth of what scholars now claim to know with certainty to be the case). In that rejection, they lay claim to that field as something other than “cryptotheology.”⁴⁸ Philosophy of religion becomes an anthropocentric field of inquiry. It attends to persons in the normative dimensions of their lives; it acknowledges that communities’ give and take about religious norms are acts of human reasoning; it acknowledges that the idiosyncrasies of discourse make certain kinds of religious reasoning possible at some times and places and not others; it hopes that members of those communities (as well as outsiders) become self-conscious about the of arguing that dominant norms might not be as justified as religious authorities claim them to be.⁴⁹

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⁴⁷ See Levinas, *Entre nous*, 20; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 8; Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 8. See also Levinas, *Autrement qu’être*, 190; Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 149.

⁴⁸ See the work of Donald Wiebe, e.g. “On Theology and Religious Studies,” *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 23.1 (1994): 3–6.

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Aaron Simmons for his invitation to contribute to this issue of *JCRT*, to Martin Shuster and Joshua Lupo for their comments on an earlier draft, and to the members of the colloquium in religion, ethics, and philosophy in the Department of Religion at FSU for their contributions to an earlier public discussion of this paper. I have learned much from all of them, but the responsibility for the remaining weaknesses in this essay remains mine alone.