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ON THE ETHICAL BASIS OF LANGUAGE: SOME THEMES IN DAVIDSON, CAVELL, AND LEVINAS[1]

"Even if some language is now purely descriptive,
language was not in origin so, and much of it is still not so."
J.L. Austin[2]

INTRODUCTION

The chief aim of this essay is to inquire whether there is a relationship between being a linguistic agent and an ethical one. In this way, I then see this essay, much like my friend, Martin Kavka's essay in the current issue, as a propaedeutic to the philosophy of religion: determining whether such a relationship exists, and if it does, what its nature might be, allows us either to sever conclusively, or to forge carefully, at least one direct link between philosophy of language on one hand, and, on the other, religion in one of its most elementary forms as the ethical concern for an other. A secondary aim, however, is to show the deep parallels, and in fact, frequent common intuitions, between Donald Davidson, Stanley Cavell, and Emmanuel Levinas, three figures who are generally not put into conversation with each other. In addition to revealing especially the fertile ways in which Levinas and important segments of Anglo-American philosophy can be linked, such a procedure also allows us to register nuances in these traditions that otherwise might remain obscured by their more traditional contexts of inquiry (whether positivism, ordinary language philosophy, structuralism, post-structuralism, pragmatism, or otherwise).[3] At the most fundamental level, all three thinkers present a picture of language as intimately related to the question—indeed, the most primitive experience—of the other. Understanding this connection is as important for ethics as for philosophy of language as for philosophy of religion.

My argument unfolds in three moves. First, I use Davidson and Levinas to present a picture of the fundamental workings of language in order to stress how any understanding of language requires a conceptualization of community. Second, bringing Cavell into the conversation, I show that considering the notion of community in this context invariably introduces fundamental questions about our relation to the other, questions which are not solely epistemological in

[1] This paper has been through many permutations and I want to thank the members of the Philosophy department and the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University for comments on an earlier paper on Davidson and Levinas that I presented there in 2010. I also want to thank Deborah Achtenberg and the members of the Levinas Research Seminar for comments on an earlier version of this paper that I presented at the University of Nevada, Reno in 2012. Thanks also to J. Aaron Simmons for putting together this issue.
[2] J.L. Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 103.
[3] Levinas has been linked to themes in Anglophone philosophy in Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

nature. Indeed, because the skeptical problem about other minds is parasitic on a more fundamental question about our most basic relation to the other, we can say that to use language is already to stand in an ethical relation to the other. [4] In this way, being a language user always already implies a commitment, minimal to be sure, but nonetheless inescapable, to ethics.[5] Third, and in conclusion, I highlight some of the most basic implications for such an understanding of ethics, especially with an eye towards how skeptical concerns play out in this ethical register. My approach throughout is constructive in order to present and analyze the relationship between language and ethics (and thereby, as my conclusion makes clear, implicitly religion).

DAVIDSON AND LEVINAS ON SKEPTICISM AND THE LANGUAGE OF OTHERS

1. Davidson on Language

In "Three Varieties of Knowledge" (1991) and elsewhere, Davidson links three disparate epistemological inquiries: those centering on subjectivity (knowledge of one's own mind), objectivity (knowledge of the external world), and intersubjectivity (knowledge of other minds).[6] The three are allegedly inseparable and equi-primordial, forming a tripod, where no one part can be lost or discarded without losing the rest. In order to have a propositional subjective state (e.g. desires or beliefs about the world), agents must distinguish between the way that things seem and the way things actually are. It is not enough for us to navigate the world or distinguish between things in the world, rather we must also appreciate that there is a distinction between "mere seeming and being."[7] In this sense, "subjective" and "objective" depend on each other: the former cannot exist without some notion of the latter, and the latter cannot exist without the presence of the former.

This point is clear in how Davidson links objectivity to intersubjectivity. In Davidson's words, "unless language is shared, there is no way to distinguish between using…language correctly and incorrectly; only communication with another can supply an objective check."[8] To have my own take on the world, there has to be a world *for* me, but in order for there to be such a world, I need to be able to gauge my take on the world amidst other takes on the world. In Davidson's terminology, there is constant "triangulation" between me, another, and the world. Knowledge of the world already presupposes both my own beliefs about the world and knowledge of other minds (glossed here—for now—

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[4] On such a use of 'ethical,' see Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 1-17. Perpich's response is especially relevant to worries like those of Richard Rorty, who take Levinas's notion to be "gawky, awkward, and unenlightening." See Rorty's comments in Chantal Mouffe, ed. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge,1996), 41.

[5] Cf. Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 12. See also Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Athlone, 1991).

[6] For a broader analysis of Davidson's philosophy of language, see James Pearson, "Distinguishing W.V. Quine and Donald Davidson," *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2011).

[7] Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 209.

[8] Ibid., 209-10.

simply as the acknowledgment of public claims about the world). The procedure can be repeated for any part of the tripod: no one part is primary and all are inseparable and original. Indeed, it is "essential to language that it enables us to make ourselves intelligible to others and to find others, intelligible, that it enables us to make our own minds known to others and to know the minds of others."[9] Interpretation, therefore, is essential. I interpret myself in light of others, and vice versa, and all while interpreting the world in light of claims about it by others; so, Davidson's holism.

Davidson is thereby opposed to any naïve philosophical view that begins with our inner, subjective life and attempts to move outwards from there in order to "build up" concepts like inter-subjectivity and objectivity. In an interview, Davidson stresses his opposition to such a view:

> Now, my own view is that, until we have an idea of what's going on in the minds of other people, it doesn't make sense to say that we have the concept of objectivity, of something existing in the world quite independent of us. The empiricists have it exactly backwards, because they think that first one knows what's in his own mind, then, with luck, he finds out what is in the outside world, and, with even more luck, he finds out what is in somebody else's mind. I think differently. First we find out what is in somebody else's mind, and by then we have got all the rest. Of course, I really think that it all comes at the same time.[10]

In order to have the notion of objectivity (i.e. what Davidson terms "belief-truth contrast"), I must "have the concept of inter-subjective truth."[11] And in order to have the notion of inter-subjective truth, I must already always have some sense of a common, external world (and thereby the possibility of adjudicating between alternate takes on that world).[12] For this to be possible, for me even to be able to understand alternate takes, I need to have my own take, to already have a world.

When talking with someone, I'm not simply checking to see whether other views match up to my own, but rather presupposing that both of us are operating with and responding to an independent, objective standard apart from us.[13] For me to think my take is correct, I need to have the idea of there being a correct take (and an incorrect one). In this way, the problem of skepticism about other minds is allegedly averted. To have any sort of belief about the world, I must ascribe beliefs about the world to an interlocutor. As Davidson points out, "the

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[9] John McDowell, "*Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*," in *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 153.
[10] Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 50.
[11] Davidson, "Rational Animals," 105.
[12] On this point, especially see Bjørn Ramberg, "Post-Ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson," in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 363.
[13] And so views can then come to be revised—cf. Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

identification of the objects of thought rests…on a social basis."[14] Being a solitary agent bars the possibility of misidentification, and thereby prohibits correct identification. Misidentification or error both require the possibility of 'takes on" the world distinct from my own.[15] The alternate take of another and the question of whether it matches up to my own and, thereby, implicitly to a "correct" take on the world is exactly what accounts for the possibility of objectivity. My claims, and the claims of the other, equally necessitate an exposure to the tribunal of objectivity. As Davidson puts it, "communication, and the knowledge of other minds that it presupposes, is the basis of our concept of objectivity, our recognition of a distinction between true and false belief."[16]

2. *Levinas on Language*

A view comparable to Davidson's can be found in Levinas's first magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity* (1961). We can see this in Levinas's account of infinity, which he opposes to the notion of totality.[17] According to Levinas, infinity is excessive, exceeding various saliencies of demarcation. It is not a mere mathematical infinity, able to be manipulated and hierarchically arranged in a calculable discourse of infinities, but rather a singularity distinct from the order in question. Often, Levinas makes the point in the following ways:

> Infinity is not the object of contemplation, that is, is not proportionate to the thought that thinks it. The idea of infinity is a thought which at every moment thinks more than it thinks.[18]
>
> Contrary to the ideas which always remain on the scale of the 'intentional object,' or on that of their *ideatum*, and so exert a hold on it; contrary to the ideas by which thinking progressively grasps the world, the idea of the Infinite would contain more than it was able to do. It would contain more than its capacity as a *cogito*. Thought would think in some manner beyond what it thinks.[19]

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[14] Davidson, "Epistemology Externalized," 202.
[15] We might ask whether it could be accomplished in a solipsistic state—could I, e.g., rely merely on past selves? This idea is suggested in Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, *Donald Davidson: Meaning, truth, language, and reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 402. I think various phenomenological analyses (e.g. Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty) have shown this to be improbable, see Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world: A commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 249-50.
[16] Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 217. Indeed, communication is what allows me to have a mind in the first place. Cf. Davidson, "Rational Animals"; "Thought and Talk," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).
[17] For a discussion of the notion of infinity in Levinas, see Luc A. Anckaert, *A Critique of Infinity: Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Leuven: Peeters Pub & Booksellers, 2006).
[18] Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 56.
[19] Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), xii.

> The idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea.[20]

Levinas hearkens to Descartes's invocation of the notion of infinity in the 3rd meditation as the model for his conception.[21] Formally (no more than formally—Levinas is not presenting any sort of ontological argument), both presentations make recourse to the notion of something existing within our mind that could not have originated there.

For Levinas, this singularity is intimately related to language. Discourse or language is a "category" of the aforementioned idea of infinity.[22] By "category," Levinas means that the singularity of infinity can appear in various domains, whether epistemological, linguistic, or ontological (to name a few). In this context, he highlights the extent to which language as discourse instantiates (again, formally) the notion of infinity: so, the initially cryptic suggestions that "language is perhaps to be defined as the very power to break the continuity of being or of history,"[23] or that "language presupposes interlocutors, a plurality."[24] Levinas's point is that an essential attribute of language is simply the capability for it to instantiate claims and perspectives that are wholly distinct from my own, that, in fact, have the capability of entirely opposing, breaking up, disrupting or wholly overflowing and/or surprising my own.

Furthermore, for Levinas, as for Davidson, perspectives distinct from my own allow for the very possibility of my subjective take on the world.[25] So, Levinas's claim that, "things acquire a rational signification…because an other is associated with my relations with them."[26] When I designate something "to the Other," this act of designating "places the things in the perspective of the Other."[27] A plurality of perspectives makes possible a shared world. In this way, inter-subjectivity—plurality—gives way to, in Levinas's words, commonality, or, in

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[20] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 49.
[21] See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 23-34.
[22] See "Separation and interiority, truth and language, constitute the categories of the idea of infinity (*constituent les catégories de l'idée de l'infini*)" in Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 62.
[23] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.
[24] Ibid., 73.
[25] 'Take' implies a conceptual relationship. I should note here that Levinas acknowledges the possibility of non-conceptual content, what he terms 'living from' and 'enjoyment' (*jouissance*). See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 109-187. Levinas's strategy is to derive non-conceptual content from non-representationalism. Cf. Robert Bernasconi, "Re-reading Totality and Infinity," in *The Question of the Other*, ed. Charles Scott and Arlene Dallery (Buffalo: State University of New York, 1989), 28ff. This is a novel strategy and requires more investigation. So, for example, I am tempted to agree with Christopher Peacocke when he suggests that, "it is a conceptual truth that no-one can have an experience with a given representational content unless he possesses the concepts from which the content is built up." See Christopher R. Peacocke, *Sense and Content: Experience, Thought, and their Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 19. In this case, unlike Levinas, the arguments for non-conceptual content that I am aware of, still maintain that such content is representational. For example, Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
[26] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 209.
[27] Ibid., 209.

Davidson's words, objectivity. A world in common is what Levinas terms a shared theme. Levinas broaches this idea variously as follows:

> To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces.[28]
>
> Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common.[29]
>
> Language makes possible the objectivity of objects and their thematization.[30]

Common language makes possible a common world.

Inter-subjectivity and a common world, in turn, allow for the possibility of objectivity. Levinas suggests that, "to know objectively would…be to constitute my thought in such a way that it already contained a reference to the thought of…others."[31] He begins to unpack this idea by pointing out that in "speaking I do not transmit to the Other what is objective for me," rather "the objective becomes objective only through communication."[32] Similarly, as with Davidson, the possibility of error is intimately linked to a notion of truth. Levinas stress this point when he claims that, "objectivity results from language, which permits the putting into question of possession."[33] 'Possession' here denotes the idea that I can possess something conceptually, i.e., make it conform to, fall under, my concept.[34] With others, I come to realize that my possession can be contested: in other words, I might be wrong. In Levinas's terminology, it is for this reason that, "truth arises where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him."[35] As long as there are two individuals, with distinct perspectives, which may match up, but which need not, then both the notion of error and (and thereby) the notion of truth are possible. This is what Levinas means when he claims that there must be 'distance' between two individuals, and that truth both "spans and does not span" this distance.[36] It spans the distance to the extent that it can unite us in judgment about something, but it doesn't span the distance to the extent that the possibility of reneging or contesting a judgment always exists. This is just what it means to be a user of language, to be someone who has authority in linguistic matters. Levinas puts all of this simply as the idea that the distance between us "rests on language: a relation in which the terms absolve themselves from the relation, remain absolute within the relation."[37] (Absolution here is the possibility for such authority).

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[28] Ibid., 76.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 210.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 209.
[34] This is readily apparent if one thinks of the German philosophical context that defined Levinas's philosophical development; in virtue of the German language, the notion of "grasping" [*greifen*] is intimately related to the notion of "conceptualizing" [*begreifen*] and the idea of a "concept" [*Begriff*].
[35] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62.
[36] Ibid., 64.
[37] Ibid.

3. Reason as Conversation

With such a notion of truth, some implications of the view of language that Davidson and Levinas share can be teased out. Doing so allows us to register some of the ethical consequences for such a view of language, thereby introducing Cavell as an important interlocutor. One conclusion that Levinas presents out of this view of language is that any notion of universal reason must be rejected in favor of a notion of reason as a conversation or task. As Levinas puts it, "Language is not limited to the maieutic awakening of thoughts common to beings. It does not accelerate the inward maturation of a reason common to all; it teaches and introduces the new into a thought."[38] For Levinas, the idea of universal reason represents an idea fundamentally opposed to discourse, individuality, and otherness. As he writes:

> Reason makes human society possible; but a society whose members would be only reasons would vanish as a society. What could a being entirely rational speak of with another entirely rational being? Reason has no plural; how could numerous reasons be distinguished?[39]

The vision of language here requires the possibility of distinct reasons as opposed to a universal reason.[40] This is what Levinas means when he claims that truth is "finite."[41] Levinas's polemic against universal reason, however, is neither addressed towards the existence of such reason, nor against a project seeking such reason. The point is only that universal reason doesn't come pre-made, not that universal reason or universality can't be achieved. Universal reason or universal norms presuppose discourse and language, and in virtue of this fact, cannot be static, but must, if they are to be established, be established time and time again. Language thereby creates reason, not vice versa. Davidson expresses a similar idea when he claims that the "truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is *as objective as can be*."[42]

Now, it might be objected that Levinas and Davidson are further apart here than I've suggested. After all, Davidson might be read as committed exactly to a species of universal reason exactly to the extent that he values and sees as essential to any successful communication, the principle of charity. Davidson points out that, "successful interpretation necessarily invests the person interpreted with basic rationality."[43] One way to unpack this notion of "basic rationality" is to understand it as consisting of two principles: the principle of

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[38] Ibid., 219.
[39] Ibid., 119.
[40] In this sense, Levinas and Rorty share more than Rorty thought. Cf. Rorty's claim that: "Nobody likes either human or divine tyrants. But the specifically Kantian sense of autonomy—having one's moral decisions made by reason rather than by anything capable of being influenced by experience—is quite different matter." See footnote 2 and Richard Rorty, "Kant vs. Dewey: the current situation of moral philosophy," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 187-88.
[41] Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 115ff.
[42] Davidson, "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme," 198. Emphasis added.
[43] Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 211.

coherence and the principle of correspondence (taken together they form the "principle of charity").[44] The former simply requires that we attribute a certain level of internal, logical consistency to the other's set of beliefs, while the latter requires that we take the other to be referring and/or responding to the same features of the world as us. In this way, although the propositions arrived at in virtue of these principles are ultimately revisable; the principle of charity itself is not, for it is essential to any successful interpretation. In response, I note only that the principle of charity is broad enough to allow, in fact, to *require* that our "basic rationality" be something that is not static determined in advance (and *this* idea is all that Levinas rejects with his rejection of universal reason). In fact, the principle of charity is thereby just another way of acknowledging that "there are many ways of assigning our own sentences to the sentences and thoughts of someone else that capture everything of significance."[45] Such indeterminacy of translation,[46] however, is exactly what it means to converse and to understand others.[47] As Davidson puts the point:

> It is also the case that understanding is a matter of degree: others may know things we do not, *or even perhaps cannot*. What is certain is that the clarity and effectiveness of our concepts grows with the growth of our understanding of others. There are no definite limits to how far dialogue can or will take us.[48]

This is all just a way of reiterating that the "truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be."[49] And here, Davidson and Levinas are in agreement.

4. Language and The Emergence of Skepticism

What is suggested about others with this understanding of reason as conversation? Here I introduce Cavell's work. An initial thread which links Cavell to Davidson and Levinas is an idea discussed above: the claim that to be a user of language is to be a *master* of language. Levinas terms this phenomenon "distance" and stresses the extent to which any linguistic agent remains 'absolute' in relation to the other, while Davidson glosses it as the idea that objectivity itself depends on my having a take on the world as much as on there being a world as well as distinct takes on that same world. This is all a way of

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 214.
[46] As Davidson explicitly points out in a footnote on p. 215, he accepts Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation. See Quine's classic 'gavagai' example in W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1960).
[47] It should be noted that Levinas also subscribes to this thesis. See especially Levinas, *Otherwise than Being,* 49-50. For a discussion of Levinas and Quine on this point, see Aryeh Botwinick, "Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*, the Phenomenology Project, and Skepticism," *Telos* 2006, no. 134 (2006): 107-08.
[48] Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 219. Emphasis added. I here only want to suggest that the principle of charity does not require a *pre-established* universal reason that is somehow already out there to be grasped (the position Levinas opposes). I don't believe either thinker is opposed to universal reason as such (say, as an achievement). A relevant idea here is Ian Hacking's notion of "styles of reasoning," see Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 159-99.
[49] Davidson, "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme," 198.

highlighting and beginning to examine the point that *I* am as important to the account here as others and as a world. Cavell's work stresses this point, highlighting that if there is disagreement about something, and "if the disagreement persists, there is no appeal beyond us, or if beyond us two, then not beyond some eventual us."[50] In Levinas's words, language both "announces a society," but also "permits the maintenance of a separated I."[51]

Because we are each masters of language, and because no one more than anyone else (at least not in the sense of having an *inherent* authority), our learning in language is never over. Cavell presents this aspect of language in dramatic terms when he writes:

> If what can be said in a language is not everywhere determined by rules, nor its understanding anywhere secured through universals, and if there are always new contexts to be met, new needs, new relationships, new objects, new perceptions to be recorded and shared, then perhaps it is as true of a master of a language as of his apprentice that though "in a sense" we learn the meaning of words and what objects are, the learning is never over, and we keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed.[52]

Part of having such authority, and part of being a master of language, is possessing the ability to put words to new uses. Cavell terms this ability "word projection."[53] To illustrate the phenomenon, we might think of a simple expression like 'give me the rock.' The range of things this might signify is vast—from the context of the drug trade (crack cocaine) to the context of sports (basketball or football) to the context of romance (engagement ring) to the context of geology (the stone) to other contexts beyond (say, a rock and roll concert or torture or a variety of as yet unimagined contexts). Words can be projected into novel contexts. At the same time these projections are nonetheless generally understood by others, even those exposed to them for the first time (I'll discuss cases where this fails shortly). In this way, "learning is never over, and we keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed."[54]

The possibilities for word projection, however, are not infinite. As Cavell points out, "what will *count* as a legitimate projection is deeply controlled…an object or activity or event onto or into which a concept is projected, must *invite* or *allow* that projection."[55] Projections are possible in virtue of being initiated into a particular form of life: "you cannot use words to do what we do with them until you are initiate of the forms of life which gives those words the point and shape they have in our lives."[56] Initiation is not simply learning the meanings of

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[50] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 19.
[51] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 68.
[52] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 180.
[53] Davidson also spends some time discussing this phenomenon, see Davidson's discussion of malapropism in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs."
[54] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 180.
[55] Ibid., 183.
[56] Ibid., 184.

words,[57] but rather learning the complex "background" that allows for those words.[58] I quote Cavell at length here:

> When you say "I love my love" the child learns the meaning of the word "love" and what love is. *That (what you do)* will *be* love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought *that* will be sought. When you say "I'll take you tomorrow, I promise," the child begins to learn what temporal durations are, and what *trust* is, and what you do will show what trust is worth. When you say "Put on your sweater," the child learns what commands are and what *authority* is, and if giving orders is something that creates anxiety for you, then authorities are anxious, authority itself uncertain. Of course, the person, growing, will learn other things about these concepts and "objects" also. They will grow gradually as the child's world grows. But all he or she knows about them is what he or she has learned and *all* they have learned will be part of what they are. And what will the day be like when the person "realizes" what he "believed" about what love and trust and authority are? And how will he stop believing it? What we learn is not just what we have studied; and what we have been taught is not just what we were intended to learn. What we have in our memories is not just what we have memorized.[59]

What is true of children is true also of adults—learning is never over. Language forms an inheritance, continually subject to interpretation, and thereby re-inheritance and re-interpretation. In this way, it is striking how in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas also frequently frames the encounter with the Other in terms of teaching.[60] Paradigmatically, he points out that, "the relation with the Other, or Conversation…is a teaching (*enseignement*)."[61] For both Levinas and Cavell, being initiated into speech is being initiated into a world (and here we can think of Davidson just as easily: language requires triangulation, which requires a world in common). Levinas puts all of this forcefully as the idea that, "speech is thus the origin of all signification—of tools and all human works—for through it the referential system from which every signification arise received the very principle of its functioning, its key…speech first founds community by *giving*."[62] Neither language nor being initiated into language can be understood merely as the transfer of information. In an early essay, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's

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[57] As in way in which Augustine is presented in the opening of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Upper Sadle: Prentice Hall, 1958).
[58] For a very different reading of the idea of this background than I am about to give, see John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 127-49.
[59] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 177.
[60] Two excellent discussions of Levinas and teaching/education are Anna Strhan, *Levinas, Subjectivity, Education: Towards an Ethics of Radical Responsibility* (London: Blackwell, 2012); Sharon Todd, *Learning from the other: Levinas, psychoanalysis, and ethical possibilities in education* (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 2003). See also Claire Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).
[61] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 51.
[62] Ibid., 98.

Later Philosophy" (1962), Cavell, in a famous and now oft-cited passage, puts the point as follows:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected and expect others, to be able to project them in further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.[63]

Scenes of instruction might end in uncertainty; this just is the nature of language and the human relationship(s) upon which it rests. Always, there is a possible worry about whether teacher and student "will go on together."[64] Ultimately, any "authority in these matters of grounding is based on nothing substantive in me, nothing particular about me…there is no fact about me that constitutes the justification of what I say and do over against what the other, say the child, says and does."[65] Any linguistic *agent*, then, is a master of language,[66] but such mastery, especially its role in both agreement and disagreement, raises fundamental questions about how to understand "community." As Cavell highlights, given that all linguistic agents are masters, and that so frequently

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[63] Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 52.

[64] Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 76.

[65] Ibid. As seen above, this doesn't mean a rejection of the notion of "truth." The point is that what counts or might come to count as true is itself part of the conversation.

[66] Much more can be said here about the compatibility between naturalism of Cavell's Wittgenstein-inspired naturalism and Levinas's broader project. For example, it might be objected that Levinas would oppose any such naturalism, since (1) not only would such naturalism imply a determinism in tension with the account I've sketched here, but also that (2) such a naturalism threatens to undermine the priority of the Other. Mixed in with these concerns are also more complex exegetical concerns about the relationship between teaching, fecundity, paternity, and the relationship between these and the encounter with the Other. On this latter point, an excellent discussion is Claire Katz, "Turning toward the Other: Ethics, Fecundity, and the Primacy of Education," in *Totality and Infinity at 50*, ed. Diane Perpich and Scott Davidson (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012). On the former point, Cavell is clearly opposed to any sort of naturalistic determinism. As he states, "most people do descend from apes into authorities, but it is not inevitable" (*The Claim of Reason*,178). As Cavell's discussion shows, such initiation is natural to the extent that it requires nothing more than the natural, but this doesn't mean that it's inevitable or determined. For an excellent discussion of Levinas and Wittgenstein on the point of naturalism, see Bob Plant, *Wittgenstein and Levinas: Ethical and Religious Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), 148-80.

there is agreement in conversation, there might arise "the feeling that the fact of language is like a miracle."[67]

LEVINAS AND CAVELL ON EXPRESSION AND OTHERS

1. Claims of/to Community

Cavell broaches the relationship between community, reason, and language explicitly when he stresses that our linguistic claims are claims to reason (a familiar point, given the discussion above), and that claims to reason just are claims to community. Cavell writes:

> I do not know in advance how deep my agreement with myself is, how far responsibility for the language may run. But if I am to have my own voice in it, I must be speaking for others and allow others to speak for me. The alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for *someone* else's consent) is not: speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute.[68]

A claim is always my claim for and to another. As in Davidson and Levinas, private language is rejected on the ground that language presupposes publicity.[69] Any claim is a claim to community. We speak for others, but also for ourselves, amidst others.[70] As Cavell puts it, "The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community."[71] In turn, the "wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason."[72]

Language is such that claims do not exist in a vacuum; claims are always interpreted by others, as much as by me, amidst others. In speaking, I might come to speak for others. Similarly, when others speak, their speech is expressive. I cannot but take stock of it (if even only to ignore or reject it). Levinas captures this point when he compares language to a "battering-ram."[73] In this way, Levinas and Cavell both stress that an important element to the rejection of a private language is the fact that language is expressive.[74] Through

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[67] Stanley Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?," in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 139.
[68] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 28.
[69] For Levinas's rejection of the private language argument, see Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 62.
[70] For more on this, see Richard Eldridge, "The Normal and the Normative: Wittgenstein's Legacy, Kripke, and Cavell," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46, no. 4 (1986): 571.
[71] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 20.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 122.
[74] For Cavell, the locus of discussion on this point is Wittgenstein. With Wittgenstein, there is some debate about where the private language argument explicitly occurs. I agree with Kripke that it occurs as early as §202 and as late as §265 in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. On this point, see Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 3. The bulk of Cavell's discussion of the argument occurs at *Claim of Reason,* 343-354. For a discussion of the private language argument in a context similar to mine, see Søren Overgaard, *Wittgenstein and Other Minds:*

words, agents *express* themselves; thereby the difference between subjects and objects is categorical. To speak with Levinas, the face of a subject expresses itself—it has its own "light," whereas "objects have no light of their own; they receive a borrowed light."[75] Objects only gain a signification (gain their powers for expression, we might say), only when we say something about them. Levinas and Cavell, by means of Wittgenstein,[76] both stress this fact of expressivity,[77] and typical formulations include the following:

> The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum*—the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities…it *expresses itself*.[78]
>
> The light in other people's faces. Do you look into *yourself* in order to recognize the fury in *his* face? It is there as clearly as in your own breast.[79]
> In general I do not surmise fear in him—I *see* it. I do not feel that I am deducing the probable existence of something inside from something outside; rather it is as if the human face were in a way translucent and that I were seeing it not in reflected light but rather in its own.[80]
>
> The human body is the best picture of the human soul—not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it.[81]

In a slight modification of Sartre's point about freedom, we might say: we are "doomed" to expressiveness. Furthermore, in understanding someone, we are not discovering some private, already existent inner state, but rather interpreting, from a shared linguistic source, the expression(s) of another subject.

Cavell's suggestion in light of such expressivity is that Wittgenstein's private language argument highlights a common fantasy of inexpressiveness. Such a

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Rethinking Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity with Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Husserl (London: Routledge, 2007), 63-82.

[75] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74. Cf. with Wittgenstein's suggestion of the impossibility of looking at a stone and imagining it as having sensations in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §284.

[76] Throughout, my references to Wittgenstein can be read as shorthand for "Cavell's Wittgenstein."

[77] On this comparison to Wittgenstein, I am indebted to Søren Overgaard, "Rethinking Other Minds: Wittgenstein and Levinas on Expression," *Inquiry* 48, no. 3 (2005); "The Problem of Other Minds: Wittgenstein's Phenomenological Perspective," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2006). He initially drew my attention to the similarities and especially to some of the passages I am about to reference. Although Overgaard makes no reference to Cavell, I think it'll be obvious how Cavell's thought naturally fits here.

[78] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.

[79] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).§220

[80] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 2:§170.

[81] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 356.

fantasy is most apparent in the first person. Conceiving of my inner life as somehow radically private (i.e. forever inaccessible to others) aims to guarantee that my inner life is thereby perpetually available to me. The same is true if I substitute another for myself—in that case, the fantasy is meant to guarantee that the other is forever inaccessible to me (and so the difficult but important task of interpreting the other is impugned from the beginning). A distinction between inner and outer is not, however, instituted in the way this fantasy imagines.[82] My inner life is what it is only in virtue of whether I have or have not taken a particular stance towards it. An inner life is an achievement, not a given.[83] So, Cavell claims that, in proposing the private language argument, the skeptic is not "skeptical *enough*: the other is still left, along with his knowledge of himself: so am I, with mine."[84] Levinas makes this same point about an inner life, when he points out that, "the primordial essence of expression and discourse does not reside in the information they would supply concerning an interior and hidden world."[85] Our agency fuses together our claims and the objects of those claims (including the "objects" of our inner life). Expression requires interpretation. As Cavell puts the point, "the wish underlying this fantasy [of private language] covers a wish…for the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements."[86] And this wish is ultimately "unappeasable."[87]

Any claim, for knowledge or beyond, is always voiced within a language. A language, in turn, is always public. I may have private thoughts, but there is nothing in those thoughts that makes them inaccessible to others, except my refusing the other access (and so for the other). Interpretation (for me, say, to take you as afraid or angry, or you, me) requires that I grant authority for and to such interpretation, and if need be, to myself.[88] The fantasy of inexpressiveness is the fantasy of complete transparency. It is the wish to see everything as determined immediately in spite of me, without me (but also without others, and vice versa).[89] It is an abdication of agency. Such a fantasy trades on the idea that uncertainty in one place exists only in virtue of a putative certainty elsewhere (here the uncertainty about the inner lives of others because of an alleged certainty about my own inner life). In such a fantasy, inner lives would thereby be immediately accessible to an omnipotent observer.[90] Certainty, therefore, is not refused in principle, but only prohibited by an alleged fact about *our* epistemic access.[91]

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[82] Cf. Terry Pinkard, "Innen, Aussen und Lebensformen: Hegel und Wittgenstein," in *Hegels Erbe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).
[83] In Richard Moran's words, I "avow" attitudes, I do not merely discover them. See Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[84] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 353.
[85] Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 200.
[86] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 352.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 383.
[89] In this way, there is here as much an argument against "the given" as in, say, Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1997).
[90] I pursue elements of this story in more detail in Martin Shuster, "Nothing to Know: The Epistemology of Moral Perfectionism in Adorno and Cavell," *Idealistic Studies* 44(1): 1-29.
[91] In opposition to this, I think both Cavell and Levinas propose an "ethics of suspicion." See Robert Bernasconi, "The Ethics of Suspicion," *Research in Phenomenology* 20(1990).

Cavell's gloss on the fantasy of inexpressiveness ought to be compared to Levinas's conceptualization of a totality. Levinas speaks of everything being "reunited under one gaze."[92] The fantasy of inexpressiveness is formally analogous to the position that Levinas sets himself against when he argues against any stance that "would truly come into possession of being when every 'other'…would vanish at the end of history."[93] The isolation that Cavell outlines with the fantasy is described by Levinas as "the isolation which marks the very event of being."[94] It is worth pausing here because it might appear that a stress on expressiveness attributes to Levinas as position that he opposed from his earliest writings, especially, for example, in "The Philosophy of Hitlerism" (1934).[95] There, Levinas is suspicious of any philosophy that accords "a feeling of identity between our bodies and ourselves."[96] In response, it ought to be stressed that the aforementioned focus on expression exemplifies exactly the position Levinas outlines *against* such an identity in the Hitlerism essay. In a move he would repeat time and time again,[97] Levinas suggests that even while starting with this same premise (the identity of "our bodies and ourselves"), we might discover, "in the depths of this unity, the duality of a free spirit that struggles against the body to which it is chained."[98] Where the Hitlerism essay located such an experience in the ordeal of pain and the recognition of a bodily self that "lags" behind, the later Levinas (and also Cavell) locate such an experience in the other, in the fact of expression—a fact that, among other things, implies a perpetual need for interpretation, and thereby always makes any such unity a problem (and all without barring the possibility of such a unity). Interpretation, expression, and the encounter with the other reveal a "rebellion or refusal to remain" within the bounds of such a unity, which is properly understood as the task of interpretation. Interpretation requires the other and the standing possibility of disunity, between ourselves, and our bodies. As Levinas simply puts it: "the social is beyond ontology."[99]

2. Solitude and Community

If the social is beyond ontology, then the social realm is not given nor guaranteed, but rather an achievement. It just is a fact about ourselves as users of

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[92] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 36.
[93] Ibid., 52.
[94] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 58.
[95] A related objection might be that this post-WW2 context is foreign to Cavell's work. For an argument against this point, see Martin Shuster, "Loneliness and Language: Arendt, Cavell, and Modernity," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20, no. 4 (2012); *Autonomy after Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), Chapter 3. In this context, see also Cavell's remark that "we have in some way to miss the particular experience of Nazism in order to go on with our lives" in Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 61.
[96] Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 68.
[97] The problem of this essay is one that Levinas carries well into his mature work. On this point, see Robert Bernasconi, "No Exit: Levinas' Aporetic Account of Transcendence," *Research in Phenomenology* 35, no. 1 (2005).
[98] Levinas and Hand, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," 68.
[99] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 58.

language that we might find ourselves alone, isolated by our claims. My words might never reach anyone, for there is no one to be reached by *these* claims. In such a case, it is not that consensus is not reached, but rather that it is impossible to speak of consensus because there just is no "us" to consent for or amongst. We simply do not speak for each other. Cavell highlights such a possibility when labels the potential persistence of disagreement an "intellectual tragedy." He writes:

> The only source of confirmation here is ourselves. And each of us is fully authoritative in this struggle…But if the disagreement persists, there is no appeal beyond us, or if beyond us two, then not beyond some eventual us. There is such a thing as intellectual tragedy. It is not a matter of saying something false. Nor is it an inability or refusal to say something or to hear something, from which other tragedies may spring.[100]

In some cases, it is not what has been said or not said, but rather that two "takes on" the world just might be irreconcilable, prohibiting an "us" from ever becoming a "we." As Cavell highlights, we might rebuke someone, or be rebuked by her or him. In such a case, matters are not settled by reference to truth or falsity, because the other "hasn't said something false about 'us'; he has learned that there is no us (yet, maybe never) to say anything about. What is wrong with his statement is that he made it to the wrong party."[101] Our interactions can always come to an end; we just might not be able to "go on" together. Following Wittgenstein, this might be described as hitting bedrock, where the gesture is one of turning one's spade and saying: "This is simply what I do." In doing so, I "cannot then say I am right."[102] To do so would be to initiate a "violence" that would seek "to represent a community that does not exist."[103] In short, sharing a notion of truth offers no guarantee of agreement about what's true.

One way to understand the significance of all of this is to return to Davidson's appraisal of the problem of skepticism about other minds (see §1.1 above). For Davidson, through triangulation, we have recourse to knowledge of others. In fact, we must know others to know the world, to know ourselves. Such a solution to the problem of other minds, however, doesn't account for what's emerging here, which is also a problem about other minds, but one in inflected in a different register. The problem emerging here can be termed *ethical*. Here, I might "already know everything skepticism concludes," while realizing that "my ignorance of the existence of others is not the fate of my natural condition as a human knower, but *my way of inhabiting that condition*."[104]

ETHICS IN DAVIDSON, LEVINAS, AND CAVELL

1. Our relationship to others is fundamentally not one of knowing

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[100] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 19-20.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 95-96.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 432, emphasis added.

What is the "ethical" problem of other minds that I claim is emerging here? Imagine a world of automata serving the same function as others do in Davidson's account: these automata are indistinguishable from "real" others and flawlessly allow the process of triangulation to unfold.[105] In such a case, skepticism about other minds might still emerge: if, say, I happen to discover the remains of such an automaton and see its (mechanical) "insides." Such an experience might bring skeptical worries to my mind every time I talk to someone, and the fact that triangulation and successful communication would be occurring would not help with these worries. In this way, triangulation is entirely compatible with a certain sort of skepticism about other minds. What is the significance of the persistence of skepticism here?[106]

One way to frame this question is to focus on a claim Davidson makes in "The Second Person" (1992). He writes that, "before anyone can speak a language, there must be another creature interacting with the speaker. Of course this cannot be enough, since mere interaction *does not show how* the interaction *matters* to the creatures involved."[107] This remark is incredibly suggestive. Interaction must *matter* somehow, and this is the insight that drives the ethical problem of other minds and the insight that Davidson doesn't fully (want to? allow himself to?) explore. The ethical problem of other minds is exactly the idea that it might be possible to interact with others (triangulation is true), while questioning, indeed refusing, their humanity. This possibility, inherent in every interaction, is what the ethical version of skepticism about other minds stresses: we may converse, and yet we may harbor doubts or produce denials about the humanity of the other, taking others as "automata, zombies, androids," and so forth.[108] The skeptical recital about other minds is a rationalization both of our metaphysical condition (the fact of our separation) and of the "practical difficulty…of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another's gaze, or bear of it."[109] A passage of Wittgenstein's is apt here. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein imagines a situation where we take nearby children as automata. He points out that such an example produces in us "some kind of uncanny feeling."[110] Cavell's point, following Wittgenstein, is that life often just *is* uncanny, and this is our condition, our fate. In contrast, Davidson sees the issue of how or why others matter or fail to matter merely as an empirical or psychological issue, not essentially a philosophical one.[111]

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[105] Cf. Robert Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 230.

[106] Some suggest that Davidson's picture also necessitates an analysis of a 'conceptual problem' about other minds, of how we might come to conceive of attributing mental states to others in the first place. See the third part of Anita Avramides, *Other Minds* (London: Routledge, 2001). The discussion here about language and being initiated into a form of life does a lot of work to answer this question.

[107] Davidson, "The Second Person," 120.Emphasis added.

[108] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 425.

[109] Ibid., 90.

[110] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ¶420.

[111] Davidson views the question in *purely* biological terms. In the way in which others come to matter for us, we are no different than animals—the process of triangulation unfolds to the extent that we react to stimuli with another (and this without thereby suggesting that Davidson thinks that there is a causal or deterministic relationship vis-à-vis stimuli and triangulation). My claim, following Cavell and Levinas, will be that someone coming to matter is not fully captured by the proto-linguistic situation Davidson

For Cavell, and for Levinas, how interactions come to "matter" or fail to do so is itself a properly philosophical issue (indeed, perhaps *the* philosophical issue *par excellence*—so, Levinas's claim that ethics is "first philosophy"). In understanding the possibility of isolation as a basic fact of being a user of language,[112] we ought also to understand that the failure(s) that generate such isolation are not faults of knowledge, but rather failures of what Cavell calls acknowledgment. This is the import of Cavell's claim that, "skepticism concerning other minds is not a skepticism but a tragedy."[113] While this point receives its sharpest elaboration in Cavell's Shakespeare writings,[114] it can provisionally be developed here as a point about our relations to ourselves and to others. Skepticism occurs with "the insinuation of absence, of a line, or limitation."[115] Such limits do not, however, reveal the absence of something, a lack of knowledge, but rather the presence of something, a particular way we have comported ourselves towards the other. In the remainder of the essay, I draw on Levinas and Cavell to bring out this point.

2. *Acknowledgment in Cavell and Levinas*

In suggesting that the other might fail to matter (or register) due to the limits of acknowledgment as opposed to knowledge, Cavell's suggestion is that the question of our relationship to others is not to be solved through additional knowledge. It is in this sense that we should understand his various analyses of Shakespearean tragedy: it is not that characters such as Othello or Lear illustrate a failure to recognize certain cognitive limits, perhaps demanding knowledge where none can be had, but rather they fail to acknowledge *particular individuals*, justifying the actions that go with such a failure in intellectual terms. It is also for this reason that neither Cavell nor Levinas engages in any serious fashion with the more traditional problem of other minds. To speak of minds, as opposed to others, i.e., other people, is already to reveal a particular orientation towards the other. As Cavell puts the point:

> If one says that this is a *failure* to acknowledge another's suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to *know* that he is suffering? It may or it may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given

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describes in, e.g., Donald Davidson, "Responses to Barry Stroud, John McDowell, and Tyler Burge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67, no. 3 (2003): 693-94. McDowell, it should be noted, agrees on the basic situation in the piece to which Davidson is responding, see McDowell, "*Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*," 154.

[112] For Levinas's notion of 'separation,' see footnote 22 and the surrounding discussion, and also Elif Çirakman, "Levinas' Disruptive Imagination: Time, Self and the Other," *Analecta Husserliana* 83(2004): 100. Probably the most forceful argument for the importance of separation for Levinas is Leora Batnitzky, "Encountering the Modern Subject in Levinas," *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004).

[113] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), xxiii.

[114] See Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge Univ Press, 2003).

[115] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 51.

> response is evaluated. (It is the sort of concept Heidegger calls *existentiale*.) A 'failure to know' might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A 'failure to acknowledge' is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.[116]

In another context, Cavell makes the same point by suggesting that, "if something separates us, comes between us, that can only be a particular aspect or stance of the mind itself, a particular *way* in which we relate, or are related (by birth, by law, by force, in love) to one another—our positions, our attitudes, with reference to one another. Call this our history. It is our present."[117]

In framing Cavell's views in this way, we can draw an analogy to Levinas's famous claim in *Totality and Infinity,* that, "the expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my power, but my power for power [*mon pouvoir de pouvoir*]."[118] What Cavell and Levinas both highlight is that we cannot explain our relation to the other through reference to our knowledge of the other, for as we saw earlier (see §1 above), the other can *always* contest our knowledge, indeed can contest the existence of any "us." This is how to understand Levinas's suggestion that the other disrupts my "power for power." Even if the other is unable to resist the force of my might, the other can cancel my power entirely by denying any justification for that might. The other is never "grasped" conceptually (understood) without allowing herself or himself to be grasped (i.e., playing a part in that understanding). Any account of and with the other is always *relational,* not entirely up to me (all again, with allusion to the German word '*greifen,*' as in '*begreifen*' i.e., known).[119] So, the ethical problem of other minds is not one of knowledge; the question of my relation to the other (of how I take the other) could never thereby be settled by more knowledge (Cavell) or more power (Levinas).

Levinas makes this point in a variety of places, but one of the most suggestive occurs in a late essay for the Belgian philosopher and psychoanalyst, Alphonse de Waelhens, called simply, "In Memory of Alphonse de Waelhens" (1984).[120]

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[116] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263-64. I take Marie McGinn's otherwise excellent article to misrepresent Cavell on this point. McGinn seems to miss the ethical as opposed to metaphysical nature of Cavell's claims. See Marie McGinn, "The Real Problem of Others: Cavell, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein on Scepticism about Other Minds," *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1998).

[117] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 369.

[118] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198, translation modified. In a different context, both Gerald Bruns and James Conant have drawn such a connection. See G.L. Bruns, "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 3 (1990): 620; James Conant, "On Bruns, on Cavell," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 3 (1991): 629.

[119] See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198. Cf., Shuster, "Nothing to Know: The Epistemology of Moral Perfectionism in Adorno and Cavell."

[120] There is much more that can be said about de Waelhens and Levinas (and Cavell, for that matter). Levinas also invokes de Waelhens at Levinas, *Otherwise than Being,* 120, where he speaks of the ethical relationship being a "non-philosophical experience." In de Waelhens's own, *La philosophie et les expériences naturelles* (1961), there is a demarcation between philosophy and non-philosophical experience that may profitably be put into conversation with the distinction between the ordinary/everyday and philosophy in Cavell. So much so that, de Waelhens often writes things like "The world, as constitutive of the non-philosophical experience which philosophy must define, achieves its meaning

There, discussing the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas suggests that Merleau-Ponty remains wed to a model of inter-subjectivity conceived as a species of knowledge. This leads Levinas to ask whether inter-subjectivity is based simply on "a 'taking cognizance,' and a sort of coinciding of two thoughts in the mutual knowledge of one by the other."[121] Answering negatively, Levinas instead claims that what is crucial is "proximity to one's neighbor."[122] In the course of discussion, he suggests that any relation to the other is "*attuning* oneself to the other," and stresses that we must "conceive of the cognitive accession to the objectivity of the other person on the basis of his or her proximity as neighbor."[123] Talk of proximity here should be understood in light of an earlier Levinas essay, "Language and Proximity" (1967), where Levinas proposes a striking picture of language best understood as akin to touch, modeled on direct contact, i.e., on proximity.[124] He writes that, "language is the possibility of entering into relationship independently of every system of signs common to the interlocutors. Like a battering-ram, it is the power to break through the limits of culture, body, and race."[125] Such a formulation might sound peculiar, especially if language is frequently seen *exactly as* the manifestation culture. Levinas's point, however, is that (the transmission and maintenance of) "culture" is not the sole or even main function of language. Instead, in conceiving language on the model of contact, we should understand language as something we *do*, and thereby something we *feel* (in fact, it ultimately determines how and what we touch and feel). In this way, language is ultimately revelatory and determinative of *who* we are, and therefore literally brings individuals together, and not solely cognitively.[126] In the rich, phenomenological sense of the word (as involving saliencies, affordances, and ready, as opposed to present, to-hand objects), language instantiates, maintains, and sometimes disrupts a common world. And this is exactly the idea that Cavell has in mind when he stresses that, "our relation to the world as a whole, or to others…is not one of knowing."[127] So, when Levinas speaks of proximity, he does not mean "spatial contiguity,"[128] but rather aims to highlight the experience of being drawn together with an other, of an other *mattering*, i.e., entirely an "approach which contrasts with knowledge."[129] In this way, when Levinas stresses that with the other, we have "a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something

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in language—not explicitly philosophical—but from which philosophical language is inseparable, because man is inseparable from such language, since man *is* language" (117), and also, "Philosophy is reflection on a non-philosophical experience (2). See Alphonse de Waelhens, *La philosophie et les expériences naturelles* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961). For a thought about Levinas as a philosopher of the ordinary (without reference to de Waelhens), see Michael Morgan, "Emmanuel Levinas as a Philosopher of the Ordinary," in *Totality and Infinity at 50*, ed. Diane Perpich and Scott Davidson (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012).

[121] Emmanuel Levinas, "In Memory of Alphonse de Walhens," in *Outside the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 111.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid., 112. The analogy to the idea of attunement (*Übereinstimmung*) in Wittgenstein should not be overlooked. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 32.

[124] For a discussion of the evolution of this concept for Levinas, see Craig R. Vasey, "Emmanuel Levinas: From Intentionality to Proximity," *Philosophy Today* 25, no. 3 (1981).

[125] Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 122.

[126] On this point of language being contact, see ibid., 116, 23.

[127] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 45.

[128] Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 116.

[129] Ibid., 124. Compare also with the Austin epigraph to this study.

absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance," he is highlighting that the relation to the other is fundamentally not one where we might resist or discover something *about* the other (although these too are derivative possibilities), but rather that in speaking to, with, or even against the other we are already always related, close, *in proximity*.[130] Such is the power of language; Levinas's metaphor of a "battering-ram" suggests that language enters anywhere (everywhere). In Cavell's words, any such relation within language—acknowledgment—is "evidenced equally by its failure as by its success."[131]

Knowledge and acknowledgment, grasping and neighboring, might be said to reveal two distinct planes or axes. As Levinas puts the point, "the movement of separation [of the I as a distinct Ego that knows, enjoys, grasps the world] is not on the same plane as the movement of transcendence [i.e. the face to face relationship with the Other]."[132] I take Cavell to be trading on an analogous point when he writes that:

> We are endlessly separate, for *no* reason. But then we are answerable for everything that comes between us; if not for causing it then for continuing it; if not for denying it then for affirming it; if not for it then to it. The idea of privacy expressed in the fantasy of a private language fails to express how private we are, metaphysically and practically.[133]

It is not knowledge that separates me from the other, but something else. Nor is it the case that more knowledge could bring us together. In language, I am already always "beset" by others.[134] In being beset, however, there are no guarantees of togetherness—our relations are fragile (and that, in fact, is how they are relations at all). In Cavell's words, "we may mistake someone's cares and commitments, or they may suddenly deny us. But what then breaks down is not moral argument but moral *relationship*."[135] And I want to stress, in breaking down, it does not disappear, no more than a marriage or friendship disappears in the face of an argument, or a deep hatred in the face of momentary cooperation. Proximity and acknowledgment make communication, relationship, and language possible;[136] in short, they make a world. Notions like "proximity" and "acknowledgment" ought to thereby be seen as important explorations of a topic that Davidson takes for granted: how it is that others come to "matter."

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[130] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
[131] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263. For a different suggestion that links Cavell on acknowledgment with Levinas, see Simon Critchley, "Cavell's "Romanticism" and Cavell's Romanticism," in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russel B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.
[132] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 148.
[133] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 369-70.
[134] Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 123.
[135] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 326, emphasis added.
[136] This is the answer to the questions raised in Barry Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67. Stroud seems to misunderstand the level at which such explanations are pitched. As Cavell suggests, using a distinction of Heidegger's, it is an *existentiale*, as opposed to *existentiell* (the level at which Stroud's questions seem to operate). For more on this distinction, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), ¶12.

Knowing one another depends on being comported towards the other in a particular way (and not solely intellectually). Part of such comportment is the standing possibility of refusal (Cavell) or murder (Levinas), and such possibilities show the extent to which the other already always matters.

3. Codetta: Skepticism in Cavell and Levinas

For both Levinas and Cavell, skepticism emerges as an important exploration of this point. In *Otherwise than Being* (1974), Levinas writes that, "language is already skepticism,"[137] while in a variety of places Cavell speaks of the "truth of skepticism."[138] Drawing out points of connection between Levinas and Cavell on skepticism gives more substance to the analogies vis-à-vis ethics that I've sketched between them. Cavell's position might be quickly glossed as the idea that "skepticism with respect to the other is not a generalized *intellectual* lack, but a stance I take in the face of the other's opacity and the demand the other's expression places upon me; I call skepticism my denial or *annihilation* of the other."[139] In this way, "I am the scandal" of skepticism "with respect to the existence of others."[140]

To understand Levinas's invocation of skepticism, we need to register how Levinas's thinking shifts from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. Much can be said about this shift,[141] to the point even of asking whether there is any shift.[142] Indisputable, however, is that Levinas's vocabulary becomes more

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[137] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 170.

[138] For discussions of Levinas and skepticism, see Scott F. Aikin and J. Aaron Simmons, "Levinasian Otherism, Skepticism, and the Problem of Self-Refutation," *The Philosophical Forum* 40, no. 1 (2009); Robert Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Athlone, 1991); Paul Davies, "Asymmetry and Transcendence: On Scepticism and First Philosophy," *Research in Phenomenology* 35, no. 1 (2005); Jan de Greef, "Skepticism and Reason," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Buffalo: Sate University of New York, 1986). My approach, in broad strokes, is akin to Bernasconi and de Greef, but agrees with Aikin and Simmons on the crucial point that skepticism is not self-refuting. While disagreeing with them on a particular point (see footnote 149 below), I take Aikin and Simmons's move of introducing a "trust operator" (50), exactly to parallel the way that I've tried to draw Levinas close to Cavell on the point of acknowledgment. For Cavell on skepticism, see Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 30-59.

[139] Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?," 150. Emphasis added. This essay is also the only place that Cavell discusses Levinas's work. As far as I know, only one piece has focused on this essay in depth: Hent de Vries, "From "ghost in the machine" to "spiritual automaton": Philosophical meditation in Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Levinas," *Self and Other: Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* 60(2007). A shorter discussion also occurs in Paul Standish, "Education for grown-ups, a religion for adults: scepticism and alterity in Cavell and Levinas," *Ethics and Education* 2, no. 1 (2007).

[140] Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?," 151. Cavell also explicitly cites Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 8.

[141] Invariably, the story must begin with Derrida's lengthy essay about Levinas and *Totality and Infinity*, see Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978).

[142] For an argument that there is no shift, see Batnitzky, "Encountering the Modern Subject in Levinas." For other discussions on the nature of the shift, I've found useful Robert Bernasconi, "The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien," in *In The Face of*

forceful, invoking, at its most dramatic points, images of "being hostage" to the Other. This shift is likely occasioned by Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics," where amongst many other points, Derrida stresses the inherent tension in using language to describe something that is pre-linguistic (i.e. the face to face relationship, or, equally, as I've suggested, acknowledgment). As Derrida puts it, "by making the origin of language, meaning, and difference the relation to the…other, Levinas is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse."[143]

In response, it ought to be stressed that simply because any relationship with the other is fundamentally not based on knowledge, it does not follow that one cannot thereby describe this relationship using the *modus operandi* of language. This point is one Levinas makes explicit in *Otherwise than Being*, with the distinction between saying (*le dire*) and said (*le dit*).[144] The former designates the (primordial) encounter with the other, while the latter describes or thematizes that encounter after the fact. The two are forever separate. "The saying" is outside the realm of thematization, representation, knowledge—outside of everything we might term "the said." In other words, the encounter with the other always remains distinct from the description of that encounter. Levinas in fact stresses that:

> Proximity is a difference, a non-coinciding, an arrhythmia in time, a diachrony refractory to thematization, refractory to the reminiscence that synchronizes the phases of a past. The unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable in the literal sense of the term, unconvertible into a history, irreducible to the simultaneousness of writing, the eternal present of a writing that records or presents results.[145]

"The saying" and "the said," then might also be conceived as two alternate planes or axes (and one cannot even say planes of existence or non-existence, since "the saying" exactly is "otherwise than being," i.e., other than thematization, representation, knowledge, and so forth).

With this distinction, Levinas's invocation of skepticism comes into focus. He claims that

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the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); "What is the question to which 'Substitution' is the answer?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 4-13, 156-69, 225-37; Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 209-35; "Beyond Being," *Research in Phenomenology* 8, no. 1 (1978); Vasey, "Emmanuel Levinas: From Intentionality to Proximity."

[143] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 151. In a sense, Stroud's objection to Cavell (see footnote 136 above) trades on a very similar point: the question of how can we *know* about a relationship that fundamentally is not one of knowledge.

[144] For an concise discussion of these terms, see Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 7-9.

[145] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 166.

> to conceive the *other than being* requires, perhaps, as much audacity as skepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to *realize* that impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility…skepticism has the gall to return (and it always returns as philosophy's legitimate child), it is because in the contradiction which logic sees in it the "at the same time" of the contradictories is missing…because in general signification signifies beyond synchrony, beyond essence.[146]

Later, Levinas will say that, "it is as though skepticism were sensitive to the difference between any exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition or statement of the said."[147] Levinas's point is then quite similar to Cavell's: skepticism is true to the extent that it captures something about being human, it represents the experience of alterity *within* language,[148] much in the same way that the fantasy of private language attempts to rationalize the fact of my relation to the other. As Levinas puts it, "the permanent return of skepticism does not so much signify the possible breakup of structures *as the fact that they are not the ultimate framework of meaning*, that for their accord repression can already be necessary."[149] Both Levinas and Cavell therefore highlight the extent to which skepticism just is a standing possibility for any user of language.

CONCLUSION

A pre-linguistic plane thereby remains necessary for the existence of any linguistic plane. Such a plane is established, "slips in" (to speak with Levinas) "like a thief."[150] This plane is not thereby incapable of conceptualization, and at its most basic it reveals the simple fact that language is *inherited.* Levinas points out, with language, "it is the possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am author."[151] Simply put: at some point, we learn to speak, with words that are and are not our own (ours, because we speak them, but not solely ours, neither *causally,* because learned, nor *conceptually*, because forever open to contestation and interpretation). In language, we are both master and servant to others. Yet, any inheritance of language cannot be located in time—it doesn't

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[146] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 7, translation modified. Cf. Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," 5.
[147] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 168.
[148] Thus, the significance of Levinas's claim that "the skeptical discourse…*would be* self-contradictory *if* the saying and the said were only correlative" (*Otherwise than Being,* 168, emphasis added). Contrary to most interpreters, I do not believe that Levinas thinks skepticism is *self*-contradictory or *self*-refuting (this does not mean, however, that it cannot be refuted).
[149] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 171, emphasis added. In this sense, the analogy between skepticism and Levinas's project is not as weak as in Aikin and Simmons, and this is so, exactly because I agree with them, that the skeptic need not concede that skepticism is self-refuting. See Aikin and Simmons, "Levinasian Otherism, Skepticism, and the Problem of Self-Refutation," 46.
[150] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 148.
[151] Ibid., 148-49.

correspond to a first word or sentence; this is because it is not a word or collection of words, it is an entire form of life, "all the whirl of organism,"[152] an 'attuning' of ourselves,[153] irreducible to a collection of words or facts. Furthermore, such an inheritance is, once we are amidst others, not something we might avoid or exempt ourselves from (although we might ultimately refuse the others who bestow it upon us). This inescapability of the inheritance of language is what Levinas highlights when he points out that the space of what he terms 'proximity' is "impassive." As he puts it, "the impassiveness of space refers to the absolute coexistence, to the conjunction of all the points, being together at all points without any privilege, characteristic of the words of a language before the mouth opens."[154] As in Cavell, this position rejects any "fantasy of [a] voice that precedes language, that as it were gives itself language."[155] Our relationship within and to language is such that language is always "a resignation (prior to any decision, in passivity) at the risk of misunderstanding (like in love, where, unless one does not love with love, one has to resign oneself to not being loved), at the risk of lack of and refusal of communication."[156] Or, as Cavell puts it:

> Language puts us in bonds, that with each word we utter we emit stipulation, agreements we do not know and do not want to know we have entered, agreements we were always in, that were in effect before our participation in them. Our relation to our language—to the fact that we are subject to expression, victims of meaning—is accordingly a key to our sense of our distance from our lives, of our sense of the alien, of ourselves as alien to ourselves, thus alienated.[157]

To be a language user is to be subject to others, incapable of stability—forever exposed. At the same time it is to *be*—to make claims, to exist, to substitute oneself as an authority—a speaker—for all others (others who collectively maintain the forever flowing boundaries of language). My linguistic existence is a fact of and within a language, and language only is because of others apart from me. Words depend on their standing for me, but never solely on me. I am responsible for them, but in doing so, I am also responsible for and to the other, ultimately hostage in meaning to the other. My words originate from the other and are spoken to and for the other, and in fact, they gain any existence only because of the other.[158] With language, then, we bear witness to the dual planes of knowing and acknowledging, saying and said, and thereby understand the very fact of language as itself already suggesting a commitment to ethics, indeed perhaps religion, even if just in the barest proscription: "you shall not kill."

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[152] Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," 52.
[153] For Levinas's use of this Wittgenstein-ian locution, see Levinas, "In Memory of Alphonse de Walhens," 112. See also footnote 123 above.
[154] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 81.
[155] Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 69.
[156] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 120.
[157] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), 40.
[158] It is in this sense that I think Cavell's worries about Levinas's "infinite responsibility" are misplaced. What Levinas terms "infinite responsibility for myself" and what Levinas terms "infinite responsibility for the other" are just two sides of the same coin: language. See Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?," 144.

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