"Like a Battering-Ram":
The Place of Language in Levinas's Thought[1]

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The writings of Levinas address several existential questions, which relate to the primacy of ethics as "first philosophy," [2] and set up language as a system that enable ethical behavior in a concrete manner. However, there is no separate discussion of language, so it might seem that it derives from the transcendent intentionality that precedes it. As a result, there is a blurring of the connections between the ways in which language functions as a point of departure, at whose basis lies the freedom of choice between a commitment to the "I" and responsibility towards the "Other." This article extracts from Levinas's writings examples of the turning point and shows how language makes it possible to formulate possibilities, and select among them. Levinas's talmudic readings are a special and central example of this process.

Introduction: The Double Function of the Linguistic Medium

To thematize is to offer the world to the Other in speech.[3]

In this article I will show that, for Levinas, language constitutes the foundation on which ethical action is possible, based on a choice in a meaningful world. Hence, according to Levinas, Language is an objective platform, a set of signs that makes it possible to replace indirect relations with direct relations and even to liberate the subject from the use of words, to distinguish among individuals, and to serve as the medium that reflects the ethical perspective towards the Other and provides it with meaning. Language makes it possible for the Other to appear before us even before we are able to express its appearance; it enables us to take note of alterity, and, in the end, to choose to relate to it in an

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1. Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," in: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987): 109–27, 122.

2. "It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty [...] that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification. This first philosophy shows through the ambiguity of the identical, an identical which declares itself to be I at the height of its unconditional and even logically indiscernable identity, an autonomy above all criteria" (Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 85.)

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 209.

ethical manner.

Levinas scholars have discussed the aspects of ethics and metaphysics at length; in practice, though, language is the basis for the conceptual discussion of these two fields. Levinas presents language as a self-evident foundation for both perceptions that goes "beyond what is given" and the ethical tie to the Other, who remains in his alterity, and which cannot be narrowed to identity or identification. Inherent in this perspective is a tension between the description of language as a technical and universal system that supports every conceptual discussion, including of the ethical, and language as a system that constructs the possibilities of choice. A salient example of this can be seen in his meeting with philosophy students at the University of Warwick in 1986, in which Levinas was asked whether the link between the use of language and the "face" is necessary:

> *Is it necessary to have the potential for language in order to be a 'face' in the ethical sense?*
> I think that the beginning of language is in the face. In a certain way, in its silence, it calls you. Your reaction to the face is a response. Not just a response, but a responsibility. […] Language does not begin with the signs that one gives, with words. Language is above all the fact of being addressed, … which means the saying much more than the said. […] But there is something which remains outside, and that is alterity. Alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference, that facing me there is someone who has a different nose than mine, different color eyes, another character. It is not difference, but alterity. It is alterity, the unencompassable, the transcendent. […] Men can easily be treated as objects. We speak to the other who is not encompassed, who, on the contrary, is the one who offers his face to you.

Levinas' ambivalent answer exemplifies the problematic that leads me to propose an additional discussion about the place of language in Levinas' ethics in general, and the place of the talmudic text in this mechanism in particular. In the first part of his response, Levinas uses language to say that the beginning of language is in the face, or in the intention of the speech that expresses responsibility towards the Other. My main assertion is that the Warwick students did not raise the question of the necessary connection between ethics and language by chance; rather, they were expressing the tension between an intuitive certainty about the necessity of language in Levinas' ethical discourse and the fact that he never discusses that necessity directly.

Levinas refers to many different aspects of the language act, such as signification and sense (in *Humanism of the Other*), dialogue and manner of speaking (in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*), and language as opposed to discourse (in *Totality and Infinity*). Megan Craig asserts that there is a correspondence between Levinas's ethics and the way he states it, because both demand an effort

by readers, starting with the trivial activity of using everyday language.[4] Levinas's language forces readers to slow down and reinterpret the relations between words. According to Craig, Levinas creates two types of defamiliarization. In the first type, he forces readers to rethink simple and everyday words like "face," "understanding" and "experience," which in his discourse become opaque and strange. Levinas shows the meaninglessness of meaning, or how language deconstructs itself, as in the language of poetry.[5] In the second type of defamiliarization, he revives forgotten forms of thought. However, the fusion of the discussion of language with discussions of other topics makes it more difficult to extract the actual nature of the concept of language.

This difficulty creates a major interpretative challenge in many contexts, two of which will be discussed below. The first context is the relationship between ethics and freedom. The initial assumption is that for voluntary ethical choice to be possible, it is necessary to articulate the state of mind that precedes it, which includes at least two possibilities: concern for oneself and concern for the Other. Hence the state of mind that precedes the ethical choice must include the possibility of various meanings, including the meaning of seeing the face of the Other and concern for the Other. Below I will linger over several passages in which Levinas addresses the junction at which the choice takes place. I will suggest broadening them, inspired by the philosophers of the linguistic turn, Ferdinand de Saussure (on whom Levinas drew extensively), Wittgenstein and Peirce.

The second context relates to clarifying the role of the linguistic system in interpreting talmudic texts. Levinas approached these texts from a universalist philosophical perspective, supplementing the value he placed on studying the Torah as a sacred religious text.[6] The common denominator of these two contexts is that awareness of the function of language makes it possible for us to grasp the contingency of Levinas's religious and ethical positions, which is hidden and blurred in many discussions, by means of the heteronomic voice that calls for the (supposedly) necessary recognition of the "face" and the ethical obligation towards it. This article's main assertion is that in order to ground freedom of choice on the responsibility and obligation to the Other, one must try to separate the characteristics of language as a neutral and contingent system from its embodiment in ethical concepts like the face.

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4. Megan Craig, *Levinas and James, Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 8.

5. Ibid., 153.

6. Elisabeth Goldwyn summarizes the state of the research on the link between Levinas's philosophy and his talmudic readings and proposes an integrated description of the unique characteristics of his hermeneutic midrashic approach. See Elisabeth Goldwyn, *Reading between the Lines: Form and Content in Levinas's Talmudic Readings* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011), 154-207. Although she refers to language, she does not consider it in its own right but only as a dependent part of the hermeneutic approach.

The Face as a Denotated Imperative

> The face orders and ordains me. Its signification is an order signified. […] If the face signifies an order in my regard, this is not in the manner in which an ordinary sign signifies its signified; this order is the very signifyingness of the face.[7]

The importance of the distinction between the neutral characteristics of language and their function in the ethical processes that Levinas formulates is evident, for example, in the preceding quotation, taken from a dialogue between Levinas and Philippe Nemo (1982). The meaning of the face can be understood by means of two linguistic elements: the command and the existence of the denotated. If we fail to understand the meaning of these two we will not be able to understand the plain sense of Levinas's assertion. Levinas goes on to clarify the nature of the command he means: "[The face] orders me as one orders someone one commands, as when one says: 'Someone's asking for you.'"[8] The face, as a grammatical and ethical subject, orders and commands; that is, it performs two speech acts whose purpose is to arouse recognition of it and the responsibility towards it. Language makes it possible to command and order, to understand the denotated, that is, the content of the order as "being asked for," and to produce an active response, a speech act that expresses response:

> When in the presence of the other I say "Here I am!" This "Here I am!" is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen. Since it is not thematized, in any case originally, it does not appear. […] The subject who says "Here I am!" *testifies* to the Infinite.[9]

Before the transition to the infinite, the transcendent, the addressee performs a double speech act: He responds to the call by the addresser, the Other, and in his response references Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah:[10] Abraham

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7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity,* trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 98.

8. Ibid.

9 . Ibid., p. 106 [emphasis in original].

10. "Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, 'Abraham,' and he answered, '*Here I am*'" (Gen. 22:1); "And in the dream an angel of God said to me, 'Jacob!' '*Here,*' I answered" (Gen. 31:11); "When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: 'Moses! Moses!' He answered, 'Here I am'"(Ex. 3:4); "The Lord called out to Samuel, and he answered, 'I'm coming.'" (1 Sam. 3:4). In the prophecy of consolation in Isaiah 52:6, it is God who responds to His people's call; "Assuredly, My people shall learn My name, Assuredly [they shall learn] on that day That I, the One who promised, Am now at hand." (All NJPS; in each case the Hebrew word translated as "Here I am" or similarly is הנני, *hineni*).

before the Binding of Isaac, Jacob in the dream-revelation when the angel enjoins him to return to Canaan, Moses at the Burning Bush, Samuel when called to take the place of Eli, the priest as the leader of the people, and the prophecy of consolation in Isaiah in which God is called upon by the people to return them from their exile. Levinas's response, enclosed in quotation marks, as a quoted speech act, bears with it the most miraculous passages of response in the Bible. Thanks to language's ability to allude to previous contexts, the passages alluded to by the response *hineni* ("here I am") indicate that a concrete response is not only a personal and individual decision, but also a link to a long series of previous symbolic responses by the greatest prophets and by God Himself.

The biblical passages that contain the response word *hineni* prove an assertion that is important for our discussion. Seeing and responding to the face of the Other can take place concretely or metaphorically. Abraham hears a voice, Jacob sees an angel in his dream, Moses encounters a burning bush, Samuel hears a voice, and Isaiah reports God's words in the language of prophecy. All these testimonies are transcribed in the biblical language. For Levinas, as quoted above, the face of the Other demands response and responsibility. To reach this understanding, a person must recognize himself as an addressee, must choose to respond to the call for responsibility, and must internalize the fact that the Other always remains beyond his grasp.

The connection between the face and language is discussed in John Llewelyn's "Levinas and Language." [11] In his presentation of Levinas's ideas, Llewelyn describes the face as a statement and as responsibility—as the essence of language—and opposes the "totality of language" that he attributes to structuralism. For Levinas, structuralists see language as constituting the person; in its totality it is the first and last thing that speaks. According to Llewelyn, ethics produces the possibility and potential of responsibility towards the Other, going beyond rational knowledge and doubt. [12]

Following Llewelyn, what is important for our purposes is to show that Levinas bases himself on Saussure's comparative method and takes it as a given when he describes the constitution of the awareness of justice:

> Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice [13]

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11. John Llewelyn, "Levinas and Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas,* ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 119–138.

12. Llewelyn, ibid., 132.

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 157.

Edith Wyschogrod describes the entire process of the statement and the stated as a process intended to constitute a system of justice for all human beings, not only between one particular person and another.[14] At this stage, however, this paper aims to emphasize that the features of the linguistic system and the method for investigating it, are the concepts that Levinas uses to describe the process of recognition that constitutes justice.

Levinas defines the self-constitution of freedom and justice as the final meaning of knowledge: "The subject is "for itself" […] [but] The Other imposes himself as an exigency that dominates this freedom, and hence as more primordial than everything that takes place in me."[15]

The subject is "for itself" and seeks to continue to live as such. This is the essence of freedom, according to Levinas. But the Other "imposes himself"; that is, it forces the subject, by aggressive action, to respond to his demand. As a result, many scholars have thought that the mere existence of language is an ethical event.[16] However, we need to demonstrate the relativity of this conclusion in Levinas's writings, as described by Ephraim Meir.[17]

This leads to two questions. First, how is it possible to distinguish in language the three stages that Levinas describes (being for myself; the Other's imposition of himself and the face's demand; and the ethical choice)? Second, how is the subject's freedom maintained in Levinas's thought, when in practice Levinas denigrates its existence?

The method of the present article is to extract from Levinas's writings expressions of these three stages of consciousness that constitute the ethical choice, in order to show the chronological process and to emphasize the speaker's freedom, as a factual aspect of human consciousness.

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14. Edith Wyschogrod, "From Ethics to Language, the Imperative of the Other," *Semiotica* 97(1/2) (1993): 163–76.

15. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 87.

16. "The existence of language is an ethical event that reflects the possibility of closeness between people and the possibilities of giving and acting on behalf of another person" (Hanoch Ben-Pazi, *Interpretation as Ethical Act: The Hermeneutics of Emmanuel Levinas* [Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012], 76 [Heb.]).

17. Ephraim Meir, "Teaching Levinas on Revelation," in *Paradigms in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Raphael Jospe (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), pp. 257–79, 261.

Peirce and Levinas—States of Consciousness:
Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness

According to Levinas, the chronological process of the development of meaning, including ethical choice, is made possible by language and its attributes. However, it is difficult to extract this from Levinas's work, because of his circular mode of presentation. Hence, I will turn to Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and his definition of the three stages of the creation of meaning, and show how these three stages appear in Levinas's writings.

Peirce, the founder of modern American Pragmatism, distinguished pragmatism that includes the categories of consciousness from the normative sciences—logic, ethics, and aesthetics. [18] He asserted that the main goal of philosophy should be to analyze individual experience; the categories of knowledge provide the method for analysis of any individual experience. By contrast, the normative sciences are needed to direct human behavior, but their principles can change because they do not reflect any human experience per se, but rather a causal and practical choice.[19] It is clear, then, that for Peirce ethics cannot be first philosophy, in the sense of an experience that precedes its linguistic representation. To understand this better, we must refer to the three categories of thought that Peirce proposed—firstness, secondness, and thirdness—and show their correspondence with Levinas's approach.

Firstness is feeling, a state of consciousness that cannot be analyzed or compared, neither in itself or as part of another process. [20] This state of consciousness has a quality (a key concept for Peirce) that does not depend on anything else but is but is there instead as a whole. This quality is the possibility that depends on what a person can imagine in isolation from any set of rules.[21] Peirce explains that this is not a concrete feeling or emotional experience, but a monadic element that is complex, heterogeneous, and sui generis, because it includes the possibility of sensation, of what our senses take as their ground when they react to something.

Secondness is a state of consciousness that represents an encounter between the internal world of fancy and the external world of fact:[22] the "rudimentary fragment of experience" that can be observed, which results from struggle and

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18. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958): 1:281.

19. Ibid..

20. "By a feeling, I mean an instance of that kind of consciousness which involves no analysis, comparison or any process whatsoever, nor consists in whole or in part of any act by which one stretch of consciousness is distinguished from another, which has its own positive quality which consists in nothing else, and which is of itself all that it is" (ibid., 1:306).

21. "A feeling, then, is not an event, a happening, a coming to pass" (ibid., 1:307).

22. Ibid., 1:321.

the resistance to something external. When we experience objects that are external to us, at some point the experience becomes a special experience, an event, beyond the mere perception involved, compulsion and constraint to think otherwise than we are used to be involved in. This is a force without regularity or causality, merely brute force[23]

Thirdness is the state of consciousness in which meaning is constituted on the basis of the first two states of consciousness.[24] Thirdness includes individual and cultural modes of thought, various systems of rules (grammatical, biological, etc.), and ethical and religious decisions. In thirdness a goal of action is defined; or in Peirce's terms, a specific "interpretant" of some sign, which depends on two previous elements: the sign and the fact or object, which have a dyadic relationship. The "third" functions, for example, in the operation of the symbol, which is "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object."[25]

One can summarize Peirce's three states of consciousness as a gradual movement from the internal world to the external world. This is also a gradual process of choice: from the lack of choice in firstness, through a forced encounter in secondness, to the choice of a relationship, which has a particular meaning, towards an external object, in thirdness. It is important to add that Peirce created modern semiotics as an activity within the framework of a system of emotional, sensory, and verbal signification (corresponding to his three states of consciousness). Semiotics is based on signification and the interpretation of signification, which endow our thoughts and actions with meaning. In other words, ethical choice has a meaning only at the level of thirdness, through the interpretation of the triadic relationship between sign, object, and interpretant.

Several passages will be quoted from Levinas's philosophical writings and propose that we see the process of ethical choice as a Peircian process in which individuals initially exist in their internal world; in the second stage, the face appears as a "denotated imperative" (as described above). It is only in the third stage that an ethical choice takes place.

The first stage, for both Peirce and Levinas, is the monadic stage. In the second stage there is an encounter with the world that may lead to the development of existential meaning, which is constituted by means of a choice in the third stage. As Peirce expresses it, "Existence […] is dyadic; though Being is monadic."[26]

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23. Ibid., 1:336.
24. Ibid., 1:337.
25. Ibid., 2:249.
26. Ibid., 1:329.

Firstness: "At Home with Oneself"

For Levinas, firstness, the foundational position of consciousness, is atheism:

> One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated – eventually capable of adhering to it by belief. […] One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one is an I, an egoism. The soul […] is naturally atheist. By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I.[27]

Levinas describes a state of consciousness that exemplifies an experience of firstness in Peirce's sense. Individuals live by themselves and with themselves, separated and detached from the world. They do not yet choose or make any distinction between themselves and any Other. In the next passage, which emphasizes the private and monadic state (the same term Peirce applies to firstness), Levinas juxtaposes firstness and secondness:

> I see the other. But I am not the other. I am all alone. It is thus the being in me, the fact that I exist, my *existing*, that constitutes the absolutely intransitive element, something without intentionality or relationship. One can exchange everything between beings except existing. Inasmuch as I am, I am a monad. It is by existing that I am without windows and doors, and not by some content in me that would be incommunicable. If it is incommunicable, it is because it is rooted in my being, which is what is most private in me.[28]

In the contrast he draws between *seeing* the other and *being* the other, Levinas is in effect distinguishing between firstness and secondness: we see the Other in the stage of secondness, and this perception is distinct from the sense of the self as a monad in the stage of firstness. Here it is important to sharpen an important difference between Peirce and Levinas, which sheds light on the place of language and its use for each of them. Whereas Peirce was the first to articulate the interpretive process in modern semiotics, and highlights that there is an experience that is prior to language, Levinas operates within the linguistic tradition of semiology founded by de Saussure, who, as shown above, did not allow the possibility of preverbal consciousness.

In his article "Language and Proximity," Levinas articulates a complex position that maintains both the primacy of language and the firstness of the

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27. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 58.

28. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 42.

experience that precedes seeing the Other and the ethical choice. According to him, language can function in four different ways and in several ways in parallel: as the manifestation of truth, as a communicative act; as the operation of signs on the transcendent level; and as a universal infrastructure for making contact.[29] Levinas proposes two important innovations about how language enables recognition of the other by means of the multiple levels of language, on both the level of existence and that of performance. A person can employ two levels of language—the everyday and the transcendent. With regard to how it functions, language can act in a universal way that crosses the boundaries of culture, as well as in a private and unique fashion for a particular person. In the next passage, Levinas uses the stunning metaphor of language as a "battering ram" to illustrate how language is a force for making contact even before its actual use in a concrete situation. In this formulation, Levinas expands the domain of what language can do but does not subordinate language to ethics; quite the opposite, in fact:

> A sign is given from one to the other before the constitution of any system of signs, any common place formed by culture and sites, a sign given from null site to null site. The fact that a sign, exterior to the system of evidences, comes into proximity while remaining transcendent, is the very essence of language prior to every particular language. […] 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.[30]

Levinas distinguishes language's primary function, which expresses the fact of a statement, from its secondary function, which includes identification and specification and depends on a system of signs. It is possible to see the parallel between Peirce's state of firstness, which is articulated through language but lacks distinctions and generalizations, and Levinas's "language prior to every particular language," which does not occupy a defined space and which precedes a system of cultural signs (the source of habits and rules, according to Peirce). In such a situation, according to Levinas, language includes the possibility of developing a relationship even before any action using the system of signs. This formulation is parallel to Peirce's description of the stage of firstness, which includes "may-bes" that can come to fruition at a later stage if a person chooses to give them meaning in the stage of thirdness.

Later in "Language and Proximity," Levinas writes that the stages of the development of ethical meaning in the process of consciousness are based on the characteristics of language *ab initio*, even before the subject sees himself as such; every state of consciousness is based on some quality or qualities of language:

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29. Ibid.., §§1, 2, 6, 8 (respectively).
30. Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 122.

If the thought behind speech is to remain a consciousness, it retains the structure of speech. We are thus brought to discover the place that language has in thought from the moment of the first movement of identification […]. In its running after what has already escaped through the original flowing of time, identification is borne by a discourse consubstantial with consciousness. Speech and universality will be born in the separation between feeling and felt, where consciousness awakens. This consciousness is, to be sure, without a subject; it is a "passive activity" of time, which no subject could claim to have initiated, a "passive synthesis" of what "passes," which is born in the flow and divergency of time, an anamnesis and a rediscovery and consequently an identification, in which ideality and universality take on meaning.[31]

Language enables one to act in a way that expresses time, in an ideal and universal fashion, even before the subject acts through it. As in Peirce's firstness, the subject does not perform any action that expresses separateness or subjectivity, but can feel that he has an experience of presentness that contains "the universal essence of truth"[32] and is a foundation for all future communicative activity.

The second stage is the stage of proximity. Peirce describes the transition from the ocean of possibility in the inner world of fancy to the "rudimentary fragment of experience" that can be observed, which results from struggle and the resistance to something external. Levinas, too, describes the process of coming closer to the Other as expressing the transition from "the tranquility of the perseverance of my being" to an encounter with the external and foreign:

To address someone expresses the ethical disturbance produced in me, in the tranquility of the perseverance of my being, in my egotism as a necessary state. […] A going outside oneself that is addressed to the other, the stranger. It is between strangers that the encounter takes place; otherwise, it would be kinship.[33]

Levinas emphasizes that this is not a case of familial closeness but rather of a closeness between strangers, which requires an encounter that necessarily subjugates thought to the ethical relation.[34] But the internal drive does not yet have the sense of ethical choice, which coalesces only in the third stage. Levinas emphasizes that the Other's appearance on the scene is the appearance of a

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31. Ibid., 114.
32. Ibid., 115.
33. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Proximity of the Other," in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 97.
34. Ibid.

"third": a neighbor, a face, ungraspable otherness—and this thirdness creates the proximity of human pluralism.[35]

The parallel between Peirce's thirdness, in which meaning is provided and receives a practical expression such that it becomes a habit, and Levinas's ethical choice occurs when the communication between inner experience and the Other as a sign becomes an experience that has ethical meaning; in other words, a theme. If we connect the three stages, we see that language enables each of them. In the first stage, language constitutes objectivity; in the second stage, it creates separateness and proximity; and in the third stage, the Other and the person who makes a choice become themes:

> A meaningful world is a world in which there is an Other through whom the world of my enjoyment becomes a theme having a signification. Things acquire a rational signification, and not only one of simple usage, because an other is associated with my relations with them. In designating a thing I designate it to the Other. […] Utilizing a sign is therefore not limited to substituting an indirect relation for the direct relation with a thing, but permits me to render the things offerable, detach them from my own usage, alienate them, render them exterior. […] Objectivity results from language, which permits the putting into question of possession. […] The thing becomes a theme. To thematize is to offer the world to the Other in speech.[36]

In contrast to Peirce, for whom language appears only in the stage of thirdness, for Levinas language constitutes the ground on which the ethical act is possible, through the choice of a meaningful world. Language exists as an objective platform, as a set of signs that makes it possible to replace indirect relations with direct relations and even to free the subject from his own usage and see other possibilities, and serve as the medium that supports the ethical move towards the Other and gives meaning to this move.[37]

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35. Ibid., 101.

36. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 209.

37. Elisabeth Goldwyn asserts that Levinas refers to "saying" as preceding speech and language and as already including the calling on the Other and the exclamation *hineni*. She interprets this as a consciousness of obligation that stands at the foundation of all language, an obligation that precedes its role of describing the content of the mind or reality. The "saying" contains the infinite, which is compressed into written and spoken language (*Reading between the Lines*, 62-63). In practice, this description, too, is made with more than the words that make it understandable and is based as well on the role of language.

Language as a Situation and Discourse as a Speech Act

At this stage, we may ask whether the language of each of these states of consciousness is the same system, with different mechanisms operating in each state of consciousness; or whether, according to Levinas, there are different types of language at work. Edith Wyschogrod resolves the difficulty of "language prior to every particular language" by finding four types of language in Levinas's thought: (1) the face of the Other, which is "always already language [… and] intrudes into the totality that has been historically constituted and issues a call to responsibility"; (2) "language as a gift, a bestowal of signification upon another, […] the 'dionysian' language of art and of a certain poetics"; (3) "an ethics that becomes discourse, a discourse that becomes ethics"; and (4) "a language that is prior to speech, one that is always already ethical […] in its relation to propositional discourse, the language of linguistic practice and 'semantic glimmerings.'"[38] This suggests that there are different types of language. But an alternative interpretation can be proposed, following Peirce: for him, all three states of consciousness are required to create the interpretation, although they could be described separately. In Levinas's writings, too, there is evidence—as it has been shown above and will show again below—that language can be seen in a similar way. Language is a state of firstness that gives rise to the interpretive process, which also includes the ethical choice that is the apex and finality of the interpretive process:

> Truth is sought in the other, but by him who lacks nothing. […] The separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack proper[39] to need nor by the memory of a lost good. *Such a situation is language*. […] Language, which does not touch the other, even tangentially, reaches the other by calling upon him or by commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness of these relations.[40]

The presentation of language as a "situation" reflects Levinas's personal ontology. This infrastructure includes the languages that Levinas knew (his parents spoke Yiddish; he was fluent in Hebrew, Russian, and German, had some Greek, Aramaic, and Latin, and wrote his philosophical works in French). He

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38. Edith Wyschogrod, "Language and Alterity in the Thought of Levinas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 188–205, 190.

39. There seems to be a problem with Lingis translation and here is the original French: "L'être séparé est satisfait, autonome et, cependant, recherche l'autre d'une recherche qui n'est pas aiguillonnée par le manque du besoin ni par le souvenir d'un bien perdu une telle situation est langage".

40. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62 [emphasis added].

describes language as a situation that does not derive from psychological motivations (the satisfaction of a psychological or physical drive) or an idealistic theory (as in the Platonic concept of memory), but emerges as a system of speech acts. This system is based on a permanent (and total) separation between individual human beings and the possibility of communication through illocutions and perlocutions, such as calling, commanding, and obeying. This possibility, and not necessity, reflects a person's freedom to respond to or ignore a call or command.

To "language as a situation" Levinas adds the concept of discourse. Discourse is not another type of language, but rather a certain speech activity that includes a move towards the transcendent. Discourse is the creation of a meaning that is the result of the bridging to and the relationship with the external being, which is revealed as the living presence of the face:

> A being is not placed in the light of another but presents itself in the manifestation that should only announce it; it is present as directing this very manifestation – present before the manifestation, which only manifests it. *The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation:* a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses. […] The face is a living presence. It is expression. […] The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. […] Discourse is not simply a modification of intuition (or of thought), but an original relation with exterior being. […] It is the production of meaning.[41]

Language itself, Levinas asserts, being the most basic state, makes it possible to grasp the difference between individuals and also to connect to the transcendent.[42] Language enables the use of the vocabulary and rules that are shared by speakers without committing oneself to one's interlocutor. The speech act of calling, commanding, or obeying makes it possible to focus the activity of two individuals in a concrete context that does not influence their separate persons. Nonetheless, mutual knowledge, of a sort that is still very far from mutual relations and an ethical demand, becomes possible.

The distinction between "language as a situation" and discourse as creating a relationship with the transcendent sharpens the question at the basis of the current discussion: How does language enable human freedom? Levinas's answer to this question is demonstrated most clearly in his talmudic readings, his concept

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41. Ibid., 65–66 [emphasis in original].

42. "*Absolute difference,* inconceivable in terms of formal logic, is **e***stablished only by language.* Language accomplishes a relation between terms that breaks up the unity of genus. The terms, the interlocutors, absolve themselves from the relation, or remain absolute within relationship. Language is perhaps to be defined as the very power to break the continuity of being or of history. […] *Discourse* relates with what remains essentially transcendent" (ibid., 195 [emphasis added]).

of the Torah and talmudic texts, and in his interpretation as the embodiment of "ethical discourse."

Freedom as an Embodiment of Humanity

In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Levinas places freedom at the forefront, as a possibility that constitutes both the individual and all modern nations:

> Freedom with regard to the sedentary forms of existence is, perhaps, the human way to be in this world. For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who sums up an important aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges. […] Is it not these consciously willed and freely accepted links […] which constitute modern nations, defined by the decision to work in common much more than by the dark voices of heredity?[43]

Levinas criticizes Heidegger, who expanded the domain of technology in human life instead of focusing on the human face. It is important to emphasize, pace the common position among students of Levinas as to the ostensibly self-understood nature of the ethical choice, that Levinas was explicitly aware of the tension between the contingency of the ethical choice and its ostensibly self-understood nature. It is important to emphasize that the manifestations of this tension, like its resolution, are embodied in linguistic mechanisms: speech in the first, second, and third persons. First-person speech enables self-knowledge, whereas the focus on the second or third person is directed towards seeing the Other and the ethical obligation towards the Other:

> If "know thyself" has become the fundamental precept of all Western philosophy, this is because ultimately the West discovers the universe within itself. […] Only the vision of the face in which the "You shall not kill" is articulated does not allow itself to fall back into an ensuing complacency or become the experience of an insuperable obstacle, offering itself up to our power. For in reality, murder is possible, but it is possible only when one has not looked the Other in the face. The impossibility of killing is not real, but moral. The fact that the vision of the face is not an *experience*, but a moving out of oneself, a contact with another being and not simply a sensation of self, is attested to by the "purely moral" character of this impossibility.[44]

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43. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 23.

44. Ibid., 10 [emphasis in original].

Levinas formulates the two possibilities available to an individual in the West, and in these words already begins to point towards the ethical choice. This direction is strengthened when he clarifies why this ethical choice is universal but imposes a greater obligation on "the person who receives this revelation."[45] At the end of the book, Levinas presents the Other as "the first intelligible, before cultures and their alluvions and allusions,"[46] who exists even before the revelation of the face, which appears in language:

> The epiphany of that which can present itself so directly, outwardly and eminently is *face.* The expressing of the face is language. […] But the infinite in the face does not appear as a representation. It brings into question my freedom, which is discovered to be murderous and usurpatory. But this discovery is not a derivation of *self-knowledge.* It is heteronomy through and through. In front of the face, I always demand more of myself; the more I respond to it, the more the demands grow.[47]

Language as the Starting Point in the *Talmudic Readings*

Levinas preferred not to be identified as a Jewish thinker, so it is interesting to see that it is in his talmudic readings that language receives the place it deserves. In other words, the writings that are taken as sacred texts embody the power of language to function on Peirce's three levels: as a state of consciousness that includes possibilities of choice, without any decision or distinction; as a state of consciousness that reflects closeness to and a conflict with the world and the Other; and as the choice of a particular interpretation that bears an ethical meaning. The examples of talmudic readings presented below manifest each of these states of consciousness.

The Verse as a State of First Consciousness

Levinas describes the primary character of the holy texts as a mystery that precedes the diverse roles and activities that characterize language as a set of tools. This mystery articulates the divine word even before it is formulated as a command:

> The enigma of the verse and the line is not, therefore, simply a matter of imprecision which […] gives rise to misunderstandings. […] *Language here no*

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45. Ibid., 21.
46. Ibid., 295.
47. Ibid., 294 [emphasis in original].

longer has the simple status of an instrument. Language which has become Holy Scriptures, and which maintains its prophetic essence—probably *language par excellence—the Word of God that is already audible or still muffled in the heart of every act of speech,* is not solely a matter of the engagement of speaking beings in the fabric of the world and History. […] In language a signified does not signify only from words which, as a conjunction of signs, move towards this signified. Beyond what it wants me to know, it co-ordinates me with the other to whom I speak; *it signifies in every discourse from the face of the other,* […] from the expression before words my responsibility for-the-other is called upon, […] a responsibility in which arise my replies. […] Writing is always prescriptive and ethical, the Word of God which commands and vows me to the other, a holy writing before being sacred text, […] extending beyond information—a break, in the being that I am, of my good conscience of being-there. [...] It brings into question the "self-care" that is natural to beings, essential to the *esse* of beings.[48]

The verse functions as a primary state of consciousness because it is prior even to the most basic natural state of concern for the self, as well as to any objective distinction or interpretive distinction that involves a semiotic relation (a link between the object, sign, and interpreter). Levinas sheds light on the situation that precedes speech, which he calls "responsibility," and from which the response to the Other emerges. In a critical reading, however, it is possible to see that the function of language is not amorphous; rather, "it signifies […] from the face of the other." And this signification creates the link of responsibility from which obligation stems. In practice, latent in Levinas's words is a key feature of language, on which his ethics is based: the separation created by language enables recognition of the Other in the most primary meaning as well; only such a separation creates the minimal space necessary to create a sense of relationship, responsibility, and response. With regard to the mode of action, Levinas distinguishes between "writing" and "text," which refer to two different methods of expression by means of linguistic mechanisms. Writing represents the divine word that teaches the ethical directive; the text embodies this teaching, not by saying it directly, but by formulating it implicitly in the talmudic narratives.

For example, in "On Religious Language and the Fear of God," Levinas refers to the paradox in the Mishnah found in B *Berakhot* 33b:"If one (in praying) says 'May thy mercies extend to a bird's nest,' 'Be thy name mentioned for well-doing' or 'We give thanks, we give thanks,' he is silenced."[49] He leaves aside the accepted interpretations of these lines and notes the astonishment at the meaning assigned to a verse when it appears in prayer: Why is it inappropriate to glorify

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48. Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse,* trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xii–xiii [emphasis added].

49. Ibid., 88–92.

God's mercy on animals? Why is it forbidden to mention God's name after mentioning the Good? Why is it inappropriate to double "We give thanks [to You]"?

Levinas reinterprets the concept of the appropriate love and explains that there are two types of good: the first corresponds to our virtues and satisfies our needs; the second is the ethical good that expresses gratitude for the closeness we feel to God, "as if the possibility of the ethical good, above and beyond the difference between natural good and evil deeds, were the opening to transcendence and the source of religious language."[50]

Religious language is the ground of the talmudic text and guides readers/ interpreters to how to read it at intersections that raise questions of where they point, by creating the estrangement that presents an interpretive difficulty concerning recognition of the ethical good latent in the lines and that demand an effort of discovery and decoding. Talmudic language, like freedom, is "difficult," and the textual meaning, like the ethical meaning, requires an individual effort of understanding and interpretation.

"The Verses Cry Out: 'Interpret Me'":
"The De-structure – of Transcendence"[51]

A clear expression of the importance of language in the constitution of the ethical, can be seen in the midrash about the "agreement between the human court and the heavenly Court."[52]

In the first chapter of *New Talmudic Readings*, "The Will of God and the Power of Humanity,"[53] where Levinas analyzes a passage from B *Makkot* 23–24, he quotes Exodus 24:12, in which God calls on Moses to ascend Mt. Sinai and receive the Tablets of the Law.[54] Levinas sees this verse as indicating that the text, the language of Scripture, grounds Scripture's authority and does not depend on it.

Levinas refers to the midrash on the verses as an "adventure" and asserts that he is expressing "the very way in which another voice is heard among us— the very way of transcendence."[55]

This possibility comes to fruition through language's ability to sustain

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50. Ibid., 92.

51. Emmanuel Levinas, *New Talmudic Readings,* trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 69.

52. Ibid., p. 70.

53. Ibid., 47–78.

54. "'Go up on the mountain and tarry there, I will give you tablets of stone, the doctrine and the precepts, etc.' (Exodus 24:12)" (Levinas, ibid., 68) [correcting the incorrect verse reference in the book].

55. Ibid.

meaning, "as if the sense of thought were carried—meta-phor—beyond the end which limits the intention of the thinker. […] It is said outside of the sayer. Its folded wings of the germ of innumerable lives promised in it […] are also lodged in the letters of the text—metaphors of a thought exceeding what it thinks."[56]

Language can function metaphorically, and metaphor (whose literal sense is "carry across") is one of the mechanisms of language. Levinas praises the talmudic sages' devotion to the written word, a devotion he sees as an attempt to penetrate more deeply into the text's meaning in its concrete occurrence, through reading and through midrash. But the clearest example of reliance on the power of language to constitute an ethical move comes later in the discussion, where Levinas describes how language passes from one speech act to another as a demonstration and preface to the passage from one to the other, through an expansion from the conveyance of information to interpretation. Thus, in the hermeneutic act, ethics becomes an activity for its own sake when it speaks of interpersonal relations and makes it possible for transcendence to disturb us and shake up our lives so that we are forced to propose a meaning. He proves this from a passage about three rulings by the human court that were ratified by the heavenly court: reading the book of Esther, employing the divine name to greet another person, and bringing tithes to the Temple (B *Makkot* 23b). Levinas sees the freedom to institute these three practices as an expression of openness and freedom, pure deed, without the command or promise of reward, an openness to the infinite through human generosity.

In conclusion, I would like to present a talmudic reading that is astonishing even to those who are familiar with Levinas's ethical move throughout his writings. In "Toward the Other," Levinas interprets a well-known Mishnah (*Yoma* 8:9, trans. Danby):

> This did R. Eleazar b. Azariah expound: *From all your sins shall ye be clean before the Lord* (Lev. 16:30)—for transgressions that are between man and God the Day of Atonement effects atonement; but for transgressions that are between a man and his fellow the Day of

> Atonement effects atonement only if he has appeased his fellow.

Evidently transgressions between a man and his fellow are worse than those between man and God, because there is atonement for the latter through observance of Yom Kippur; but if a person transgressed against his fellow, he must appease him in order to win divine forgiveness. In other words, this atonement depends on the Other, and this dependence creates a lack of confidence. On the other hand, "not to depend on the Other to be forgiven is […]

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56. Ibid., 69.

to be sure of the outcome of one's case."[57] But in practice, Levinas asks, rhetorically,

> Perhaps the ills that must heal inside the Soul without the help of others are precisely the most profound ills. […] In doing wrong toward God, have we not undermined the moral conscience as moral conscience? The ritual transgression that I want to erase without resorting to the help of others would be precisely the one that demands all my personality.[58]

Levinas surprises us with his conclusion that a ritual transgression is more destructive than an interpersonal transgression,[59] especially in light of the place in his system of the face, proximity and alterity, responsibility, and compassion towards the Other. Here Levinas casts the spotlight on the need for "a healing of the self by the self,"[60] which is both the relationship to God and a wholly internal event. The focus on a person's inner life and on the need for self-healing as the broad foundation of which the responsibility towards the Other is based on two pragmatic principles to which Peirce referred: first-person certainty, which is the basis for every act of giving meaning and is founded on the stage of firstness;[61] and the understanding of the metaphysical as the broad and overarching context of giving meaning.[62]

Conclusion

The article traced the place of language in Levinas's thought, which is based on his declaration that ethics is first philosophy. This statement creates a strong tension between the freedom that Levinas attributes to the individual and the uncompromising demand for closeness to and responsibility towards the Other. We have examined various linguistic mechanisms and features of Levinas's writings that reflect the fact that language includes both that which enables the articulation of ethical or other meaning, and the possibilities of choice, through identification, separation, distance, and closeness, and, ultimately, talmudic interpretation. Understanding the place of language makes it possible for us to see it as the basic state of consciousness, from which later states of consciousness

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57. Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings,* trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 16.

58. Ibid., 17.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Peirce asserted that the possibility of recognizing the existence of another person derives from the certainty of the first person, which compares itself to another. See Peirce, *Collected Papers,* 6.160.

62. "Metaphysics has to account for the whole universe of being. It has, therefore, to do something like supposing a state of things in which that universe did not exist, and consider how it could have arisen" (ibid., 6.214).

coalesce, as Peirce stated clearly. The concepts of firstness, secondness, and thirdness allow us to understand the gulfs, in the word that Levinas studies, between freedom and the problems it raises.

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