Challenging Analogy: Levinas, Maimonides, and Language Addressing Transcendence

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Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of absolute transcendence has been criticized for defeating any possibility of relationship to the divine as Other. Such critiques restage central theological trends that rely on analogy as opening just such an avenue to the divine. Aquinas proposes analogy in his own criticism of Maimonides' negative theology of God as beyond any likeness, in ways similar to arguments leveled against Levinas. Levinas, however, proposes a language model, which also illuminates Maimonides' own language discourses, as a way to allow relationship while sustaining distinction from transcendence. Through language, the divine is addressed while respecting absolute Otherness, in a move away from ontology to ethics.

Keywords

Levinas, Maimonides, Aquinas, Ricoeur, transcendence, Other, negative theology

Introduction

Levinas's philosophy of radical transcendence has been criticized repeatedly for defeating relationship to the divine. These critiques of Levinas interestingly restage classic theological disputes, notably those of Aquinas against Maimonides.

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Aquinas saw Maimonides's negative theology as making access to the divine impossible. Aquinas himself approaches the divine through ontology and analogy, which Maimonides resists, as does Levinas. Yet interpreting Maimonides through Levinas, and Levinas through Maimonides, points to models of relationship to transcendence that challenge classical ontology and analogy. These models are based on language theory, in which an address to transcendence emerges that counters classical challenges as well as the ontology on which they are based. In so doing, they respond to the critique of metaphysics that has been central to philosophy since Nietzsche.

Blocking Analogy

The question of analogy has been pivotal to relationship between the divine and the human, ultimate reality and temporal, material life. Analogy has many meanings, a topic unto itself. Defined as "a comparison between things that have similar features" in the Cambridge Dictionary,[1] or as "correspondence of quantities, proportion" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*,[2] the issue here is with analogy in its theological usages as concerned with language about God. Analogy addresses "how we can speak about a transcendent, totally simple spiritual being without altering the sense of the words we use." Its theological senses take shape within the structures of "metaphysical analogy," the doctrine that "reality is divided both horizontally into the very different realities of substances and accidents and vertically into the very different realities of God and creatures, and that these realities are analogically related."[3]

Analogy is central in Aquinas's dispute with Maimonides. To Aquinas, Maimonides seemed, in his severe and radical commitment to transcendence, to defeat all relationship to the divine. Such a relationship would require, for Aquinas, some resemblance to the divine, allowing "participation" in certain of God's features, "sharing in God's existence, goodness and wisdom," although these would be a "deficient similarity," as well as similarities due to causation.[4] Aquinas accordingly protests that "Rabbi Moses," as he calls Maimonides, denies that language applies to the divine and the world except equivocally, where terms used do not have the same meaning but rather different senses in each case. In Maimonides, there is an absolute difference, an absolute gap, over which neither language nor knowledge can reach from earth into the beyond. But if a term applied to God does not carry the same meaning when applied to creation, Aquinas objects, Maimonides renders it impossible "to express anything that exists positively in

[1] "Analogy," *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/analogy.

[2] "Analogy," Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/analogy.

[3] E. Jennifer Ashworth and Domenic D'Ettore, "Medieval Theories of Analogy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Edward N. Zalta; Winter 2021 ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/analogy-medieval/.

[4] Ibid.

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Him." Aquinas counters: "Therefore we must hold a different doctrine—viz. that these names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of Him" (ST I, q.12, a.2).[5] God can, Aquinas insists, be known from creatures by way of shared common features, albeit in different proportions. God always has eminence over creatures regarding any feature—the *via eminentia*.[6] Yet the creature does resemble God and therefore can represent him: "Every creature represents Him, and is like Him so far as it possesses some perfection. . . . Therefore the aforesaid names signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner, even as creatures represent it imperfectly" (ST I, q.7, a.5). It is possible to name common qualities although imperfectly, with the divine always taking pre-eminence in "proportion" of any term (ST I, q.7, a.5).[7]

Aquinas proposes analogy as a "middle way," not fully univocal as terms that mean the same for both heaven and earth, but also resistant to Maimonides's denial of "any common meaning" to statements concerning the divine and the changing, material world (ST I, q.7, a.7). By analogy, Aquinas insists we can know something of the divine, which Maimonides permits only in equivocal ways.[8] Analogy is partial, but it is adequate, "allow[ing] imperfect speech about divine substance to be constructed on the basis of human understanding," where creatures serve as "splintered likenesses." Despite differences, God can be partly known through created similitudes in a "hierarchical, participational order."[9]

Thus, for Aquinas, God's difference does not entirely revoke likeness to the divine. Analogy is never complete. Its language is not univocal, yet it is also not equivocal. Between "the univocal and equivocal," analogy forms a bridge of at least partial reference to the divine, always checked by what remains unknown.[10] "Apprehension of the word of God could not take place," writes Gregory Rocca, "were there not . . . something in common between God who speaks and man who

[5] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province; 3 vols. New York: Benziger, 1947), https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html (hereafter, ST, appearing in parentheses within the text).

[6] Ze'ev Harvey, "Maimonides and Aquinas on Interpreting the Bible," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 55 (1988) 59–77, describes the *via analogiae* as a compromise, a predication that is "neither univocal nor equivocal," such that, "when applied to God our language is deficient, imperfect but there is something which is predicated *substantialiter*" (72).

[7] Mark D. Jordan, "The Names of God and the Being of Names," in *The Existence and Nature of God* (ed. A. J. Freddoso; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 160–90, at 168.

[8] Joseph A. Buijs, "The Negative Theology of Maimonides and Aquinas," *The Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1988) 723–38, at 730–31.

[9] Jordan, "Names of God," 166–67. Jordan analyzes Aquinas's "Exposition on Dionisius," ST I, q.7, a.7.

[10] Jozef Wissink, "Two Forms of Negative Theology Explained Using Thomas Aquinas," in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (ed. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate; Perspectives in Continental Philosophy 11; New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) 100–120, at 117. This bridge is ultimately Christ: Christ "overcomes the distinction between transcendence and immanence" (107).

hears, an analogy, a similarity, . . . a 'point of contact.'"[11] Analogy allows God to be at least partly known through created similitudes in a hierarchy of participational order. Participation is the basis of analogical likeness.[12] Each rung of the ladder is like the higher one, only less so. Analogy thus derives in "univocity," which must be, "however slight, existing in the essential characteristics of Creator and creature," or else "one must oppose analogy."[13] Upholding this "hierarchy of meaningful predications about God," Mark Jordan writes, Aquinas rejects Maimonides "as destructive of the order of the hierarchy." For Aquinas, "Maimonides . . . would vitiate hierarchical ascent, which would suppress the distance between God and creature," Jordan continues. Maimonides's negative theology is likewise "rejected" because "without some predications one cannot begin the passage to God." It denies a "prior grasp in favor of pure negativity and thus would rob language of meaning (ST I, q.7, a.5)."[14] Joseph Buijs similarly observes: "despite often similar terminology, Aquinas and Maimonides remain fundamentally and philosophically different."[15] While in Maimonides the distance is never bridged, in Aquinas there is participation (ST I, q.3, a.2). This participation is the basis of analogical likeness. As Buijs writes, for Aquinas, analogy is not just a linguistic but a metaphysical relation.[16] Maimonides denied such analogical and participatory intercrossing of divinity and world. Even equivocal language only pertains to the divine in a different sense, as actions in relation to the world, not to the divine in itself.[17]

Aquinas's dispute with Maimonides echoes in contemporary criticisms of Levinas. These ultimately claim that Levinas's radical transcendence permits no manner of relationship to it, lacking the terms of mediation such as analogy provides. Levinas's insistence only on apophatic language regarding the other, as one commentator observes, denies knowledge of it or communion with it and is finally "unable to justify any speech about what cannot be spoken."[18] Such complaints emerge in a variety of modern theorists. Gianni Vattimo censures Levinas as disjoining transcendence from the immanent world, which Vattimo sees as a continuation of metaphysics. To this he opposes a "true Christianity"

[11] Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004) 96, 101.

[12] Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God*: *The Legacy of Maimonides* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), distinguishes Maimonides from Plato, for example, in the Seventh Letter and *Republic* 500b, where "participation implies likeness" (99).

[13] Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 101; Rocca also cites Wolfhart Pannenberg: "Analogy never recovers from this 'core of univocity' present in every similarity, from this 'common logos'" (100).

[14] Jordan, "Names of God," 165–66, 175.

[15] Buijs, "Negative Theology of Maimonides and Aquinas," 738.

[16] Ibid., 736.

[17] Alfred L. Ivry, *Maimonides' "Guide of the Perplexed": A Philosophical Guide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 59.

[18] Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 41.

which he claims to be post-metaphysical, in a structure of "weakened Being"; that is, "the manifestation of Being as the destiny of weakening at the end of metaphysics."[19] In *After Christianity*, Vattimo accuses Levinas's turn to alterity as reverting to transcendence in a metaphysics removed from the world, conducting a "disappearance of the sacred from the world by affirming transcendence as the total 'alterity' of the biblical God."[20] In this, "the failure of Judaism's and Levinas's faith in Incarnation . . . leaves them in the unbridgeable gap between transcendence and world."[21] In *Belief,* Vattimo writes, "theologies of the wholly other do not seem to take too seriously the dogma of incarnation," and he complains, "there is a sort of predominance of Judaic religiosity in the return of religion into contemporary thought."[22] This "Judaic religiosity" proposing, as in Levinas, that the divine is "wholly other," is "untenable," leaving no "relation of intimacy between God and world," writes Vattimo.[23] Levinas's "God as wholly other" remains for Vattimo the icon of an old metaphysics, the "same old God of metaphysics, conceived of as the ultimate inaccessible ground of religion . . . [as] warranted by his eminent objectivity, stability, and definitiveness."[24] This is precisely to misread Levinas's break with metaphysics and turn to alterity as non-ontological.

John Milbank's criticisms derive from a self-proclaimed commitment to metaphysical and theological tradition and to Aquinas in particular. Here, it is not Levinas's philosophy as a return to ontology but rather Levinas's critique of ontology that is at issue. Levinas, Milbank protests, sees ontology itself as violence and lacks a positive relation to the divine that requires "participation, analogy, hierarchy, teleology and the absolute reality of Good in the Platonic sense."[25] "Shadowed by a kind of anti-mediation," Levinas's is a "refusal of participation that places an absolute gulf between self and other. But then," Milbank asks, "how is this gulf to be bridged?" Milbank urges a Thomist notion of "quasi-participation" that allows a "convergence to sameness of being into presence of God" through a "mysterious analogical unity of like and unlike."[26] Following Aquinas, Milbank speaks of an "analogy or common measure" as involving "likeness that maintains itself

[19] Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 38.

[20] Ibid., 37–38.

[21] Gianni Vattimo, "Historicity and Difference," in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (ed. Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly; trans. Bettina Bergo and Michael B. Smith; Perspectives in Continental Philosophy; New York: Fordham University Press 2007) 131–41, at 140.

[22] Gianni Vattimo, *Belief (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (trans. Luca D'iIsanto and David Webb; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 84.

[23] Vattimo, *After Christianity,* 43, 57.

[24] Ibid., 38.

[25] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010) 309, 297.

[26] John Milbank, "Gift, Relation and Participation: Plato versus Levinas," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy, Theology, Politics* (ed. Adam Lipszyc; Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2006) 130–45, at 133; Milbank, *Theology*, 307.

through differences, not despite nor in addition to them."[27] This is made possible through "incarnation," which "means that participation in the divine relational life is restored."[28] Levinas, however, longs for "an impossibly pure encounter of mutually exterior subjects without mediation across a common domain."[29] In this, Levinas "aligns with dominant trends of Jewish theology" which Milbank sees as "Gnostic mystical" but which is also evident in more "scholastic versions" of Judaism. Theirs, Milbank writes, is an "absolute atheist separation of creation from Godhead, the impossibility of predicating attributes of divine substance," which divides the world from the divine. Milbank points back to a "Platonic relationality and participation [in order] to permit a mediation between the one and the many," which is lacking in Levinas.[30] In Milbank's view, "harmony can only be found in the Platonic unity of Being," which Levinas contests.[31]

Paul Ricoeur's critique of Levinas is less directly theological, yet it still rests on the grounds of a failure of participatory mediation. Ricoeur claims in *Oneself as Another*, in language that echoes Aquinas, that Levinas's absolute transcendence allows "no middle ground, no 'between' secured to lessen the utter dissymmetry between the Same and the Other."[32] Levinasian insistence on separation between self and other, world and transcendence, rather than being what Levinas proposes as a mode of relation without identification, becomes "irrelation." Yet, Ricoeur asks, "how are we to think the irrelation implied by this otherness in its movement of absolution?"[33] He elaborates: "E. Lévinas's entire philosophy rests on the initiative of the other in the intersubjective relation. In reality, this initiative establishes no relation at all, to the extent that the other represents absolute exteriority with respect to an ego defined by the condition of separation. The other, in this sense, absolves himself of any relation. This irrelation defines exteriority as such."[34]

Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* explicitly contests Levinas, insisting that the "movement from the Same toward the Other and that from the Other toward the Same" is "dialectically complementary," allowing an "intersecting dialectic" as opposed to Levinas's insistence on ultimate distinction.[35] Each self presupposes and posits the other as its own reciprocal counter-reflection, the other and self as each

[27] Milbank, *Theology*, 290.

[28] Milbank, "Gift," 135.

[29] Milbank, *Theology,* 306, 309.

[30] Milbank, "Gift," 133–37, 144. As Brock Bahler comments, Milbank urges "a return to Platonic participation, which provides creation with the necessary relation to being as the created world's unitary ground"; Brock Bahler, "John Milbank, Emmanuel Levinas, Radical Orthodoxy, and an Ontology of Originary Peace," *JRE* 42 (2014) 516–39, at 517. Levinas's rejection of "an account of participation" then "calls into question some of the central features of [Milbank's] ontology" (535).

[31] Milbank, *Theology*, 291.

[32] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 337.

[33] Ibid., 337.

[34] Ibid., 188–89.

[35] Ibid., 340.

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other's image. As Derrida describes it, Ricoeur's hermeneutics is "a teleological and totalizing dialectics" that "must permit the re-assemblage of the totality of a text into the truth of its meaning," against Derrida's own commitment to "an irreducible and generative multiplicity."[36] An exteriority between self and other, in Ricoeur's view, inserts a break between the two that defeats relation: "Because the Same signifies totalization and separation, the exteriority of the Other can no longer be expressed in the language of relation."[37] Levinas's "figures of the Other" as "intervals of nothingness"[38] make impossible the "analogical transfer" necessary to the "admission that the other is not condemned to remain a stranger but can become my counterpart." This "resemblance" works "to reduce a distance" and "bridge a gap" and is anchored in "the adverb 'like,'" where "someone who, *like* me, says 'I.'" Throughout this discussion Ricoeur seeks to overcome the very difference between self and other that is the foundation of Levinasian ethics. The basis of this counterargument is what Ricoeur calls "the marvel of analogical transfer" from myself to the other and the other toward the self.[39] The core issue, again, is "irrelation," where "because the Same signifies totalization . . . the exteriority of the Other can no longer be expressed in the language of relation."[40]

Radical transcendence thus persists as a recalcitrance in Levinas. It underlies Jean-Luc Marion's critique of Levinas's God as a "distant God" who cannot "intervene in what is," remaining "beyond the reach of our activity."[41] Françoise Dastur, comparing Levinas negatively to Heidegger, contrasts Levinas's "metaphysics of separation" to Heidegger's "ontology of participation," which Dastur sees as a superior ethics. She sees Heidegger as establishing a "sharing of community," a "sharing of differences on the basis of something common." "If there is no dialectical relation with the other," Dastur asks, "how is it possible to enter into relationship at all?"[42] Christopher Norris likewise rejects "Levinas's notion of "absolute alterity," as "in danger of denying those elementary ties of reciprocal trust and mutual obligation which alone offer some hope of achieving peaceful coexistence." Derrida himself first raised this problem in "Violence and Metaphysics," where he objects that "the encounter with the other must take place

[36] Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (trans. Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 45.

[37] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 336.

[38] Ibid., 84, 87, 88, 84.

[39] Ibid., 335.

[40] Ibid., 336. According to Richard Cohen, Ricoeur sees Levinas's lack of dialectical synthesis as a "moral impediment" that leaves unsolved the contradiction as to how there can be "a selfhood capable of receiving transcendent alterity without at all diminishing the radical transcendence of that alterity"; Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 289, 300.

[41] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (trans. Thomas A. Carlson; New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) 293.

[42] Françoise Dastur, "Levinas and Heidegger, Ethics or Ontology?," *Between Levinas and Heidegger* (ed. John Dabrinski and Eric S. Nelson; SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015) 133–58, at 148 and 138.

through some mediating reference to my own experience." However, Norris then complains that Derrida later embraces a radical alterity, thus reproducing Levinas's difficulty.[43] Indeed, in "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida launched a critique that many have since reiterated, that Levinas betrays his anti-metaphysical position in the very language he uses to argue it—"trying to reach an opening beyond philosophical discourse by means of philosophical discourse."[44] This pertains to analogy as well. Levinas still requires or assumes a "mediation" that Derrida refers to as "the Scholastic problem of analogy."[45] Derrida, however, although later conceding that there are vestiges of analogy ("though not in a very classical sense") in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity,* sees in Levinas's own later texts "a whole movement . . . to signal it is necessary to interrupt that analogy."[46]

Maimonides from the Viewpoint of Levinas

Maimonides's language theory has largely been discussed in medieval terms, within his contemporary contexts of the Arabic philosophy, Aristotelianism, and the Neoplatonism (*Enneads* 4–6) available to him in the guise of a collection called the *Theology of Aristotle*.[47] But Levinasian philosophy opens an approach to Maimonides from the viewpoint of modern language theory. Doing so clarifies core issues of Levinasian controversy regarding language, representation, and transcendence.

The *Guide of the Perplexed*, part 1, is in many ways a treatise on language. Its opening discussion of the misapplication of linguistic figures to the divine is already a problem of representation. Here, Maimonides implicitly insists on an absolute gap between the divine and any direct representation of it, which Maimonides calls idolatrous. Levinas agrees. Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being*, warns "not to congeal into essence what is beyond essence," which would be to "set up [essence] as an idol."[48] The *Guide's* discourse of negative theology makes this constraint of

[43] Christopher Norris, "Postscript to the Third (2002) Edition," in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (3rd ed; London: Routledge, 2002) 169.

[44] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in idem, *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 79–153, at 110.

[45] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 43.

[46] Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (2 vols.; ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg; Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 1:143–90, at 186.

[47] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) 203. Cf. Alfred L. Ivry, "Maimonides and Neoplatonism: Challenge and Response," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (ed. Lenn E. Goodman; Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern 7; Albany: State University of NY Press, 1992) 137–53; and Alfred L. Ivry, "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought," in *Perspectives on Maimonides*: *Philosophical and Historical Studies* (ed. Joel L. Kraemer; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 115–40. Needless to say, the bibliography on Maimonides's intellectual background is extensive, with much controversy and disagreement.

[48] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998) 44.

language explicit. Although it is seen to undermine language, negative theology here accepts language's legitimacy, although not as direct representation. Maimonides's treatment of divine figures is often discussed in terms of metaphor.[49] But metaphor, like analogy, presumes likeness. What Maimonides calls "equivocal" language of describing God is in fact not metaphor but catachresis—what Michael Fagenblat refers to, in contemporary philosophical terms, as a category mistake.[50] This is the use of the same word in two entirely different senses, a displacement which must be resorted to since no other term is available. "Univocal" words, in contrast, have the same meaning even when applied to different subjects. Their theological use would allow application to both the divine and the worldly. Analogical language in Aquinas is a third category, distinguishing a "signifying mode" from the "thing signified," where the first term allows dual participation, while the second upholds distinction as applied to God (ST I, q.13 a.3).

In terms of sign-theory, univocal terms assume one signifier can apply in the same way to two signifieds, divine and worldly, attributing a shared substance to both. In analogy, one signifier would apply to two signifieds that are alike with regard to some shared feature. Equivocal terms occur when one signifier is applied to another with no shared feature, but rather, in completely different ways, such that there are two distinct significations. Here, terms that are only available regarding one signified are nevertheless applied to another. But there is an unbridgeable gap between the two senses and domains. The terms drawn from one do not transfer to the second domain. Yet one signifier does provide terms used for the second

[49] Ivry discusses the various figures in terms of parable, allegory, metaphor (*Maimonides' Guide*, 51, 67), noting that Maimonides points to God but does not define him (66) and that terms remain equivocal, with "nothing in common with the terms as commonly predicated" (60). There is "no partial resemblance, any resemblance is purely equivocal, unique and not resembling any other" (81). Joseph Cohen, "Figurative Language, Philosophy and Religious Belief," in *Studies in Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Norbert Samuelson; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987) 367–96, notes that "much of the *Guide* is language analysis" (375), and summarizes by saying that "no figural language as based in resemblance is possible of God" but only equivocal terms which have "nothing in common" (375–77). What Joseph Cohen offers as examples are catachresis. Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides on Divine Attributes as Equivocal," in *Studies in Jewish and Muslim Thought: Tribute to Michael Schwarz* (ed. Sara Klein-Braslavy et al.; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2009) 37–51, speaks of "figures" and "similes" where "nothing is in common except for the name" (49). Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), writes of Maimonides's equivocal "homonyms" that the different meanings "are mutually exclusive disjuncts" (21).

[50] Michael Fagenblat, "Levinas and Maimonides," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 16 (2008) 95–147, at 124. Cf. idem, *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) 116; and in idem, "Levinas and Maimonides": "the proper name is not a metaphorical, analogical, symbolic, or equivocal way of speaking about God because it is not a description at all but a designation" (137). Note Maimonides's terms are translated as homonym, figurative, and hybrid in M. Friedlander's translation of *Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) 5, but translated as equivocal, derivative, and amphibolous in Shlomo Pines's translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). All quotations from Maimonides are from Friedlander's translation, hereafter cited as GP, followed by book and section number and appearing in parentheses within the text.

domain, not as shared substance but because there are no other ways to indicate the second domain except through these terms. A common catachresis is "the eye of a needle," which has no eyes, only holes. To say "I look into my mind" is equivocal catachresis, since the mind is not a space at all that can be seen. Thus, no metaphorical transfer takes place in Aristotle's sense of shared features from one sphere to another, but rather a reuse of terms that simply do not carry the same meaning in the two domains. In theological terms, the divine is not a realm or an ontology, indeed not a signified substance. Therefore, signifiers from the world cannot be transferred or applied to the divine as having a common signification. This is the argument in Maimonides.[51]

Maimonides thus effectively denies that the divine is a "signified."[52] God is "free from substance," writes Maimonides, "to whom none of His creatures is similar, who has nothing in common with them" (GP 1:58). This non-similarity breaks into the structure of metaphor, which, Hans Blumenberg argues, itself reflects the structure of a metaphysics in which language reproduces a prior conceptual truth to which it is either superfluous or distorting: "the perfect congruence of cosmos and logos rules out the possibility that figurative language could achieve anything."[53] Derrida similarly exposes metaphor's reproduction of a metaphysics of analogy and dialectic: "the concept of metaphor issues from this Platonic metaphysics, from the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, and from the dialectic and analogicism that one inherits with it."[54] However, this does not take place in Maimonides. As Kenneth Seeskin writes, uniqueness means "nothing resembles God, . . . that you can't conceive of God through created objects."[55] Nor does God "occupy a position at the top of a metaphysical hierarchy" but is instead "separate from the world and totally unlike it. The wisest among us is therefore the one who

[51] Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Maimonides on the Unity and Incorporeality of God," in idem, *Studies in the History of Religion and Philosophy* (ed. Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams; 2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977) 2:433–547, at 439, writes that "Torah speaks in the language of men" (Berachot 31b) means that "all language of God is figures," which "are not to be taken literally."

[52] Cf. Eliot Wolfson, "From Sealed Book to Open Text," in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age* (ed. Steven Kepnes; New York: New York University Press, 1999) 145–78, at 153: "The *En Sof* cannot be known or demarcated, thus is not a transcendental signified."

[53] Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016) 2.

[54] Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" (trans. Ken Frieden), in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser; New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 3–70, at 36. The critique of metaphor as metaphysical is the central topic of Derrida's "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in idem, *Margins of Philosophy* (trans. Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 207–72.

[55] Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 49.

recognizes this and contemplates God's complete transcendence over anything in the created order."[56]

The *Guide's* chapters on negative theology outline the limits of language in reference to God. There, Maimonides pursues a distinction, which Harry Wolfson traces back to Philo, between the divine in relation to the world over against the divine in itself.[57] This is a distinction Maimonides resolutely sustains. "Every attribute predicated of God . . . denotes the quality of an action" and not of essence (GP 1:58). Even the equivocal language of catachresis only pertains to divine actions in relation to the world, not to the divine in itself, and is overridingly concerned with order and what he later in the *Guide* calls "government" of this world (GP 1:54). Wolfson declares Maimonides to be unique—"the first and only one"—in interpreting "divine attributes in what he himself describes in a purely equivocal sense."[58] Maimonides denies any analogy, any likeness at all, between God and creation. Thus, there is no implication of analogy between God and other beings. Similar terms are predicated of them only in equivocal senses. A human being's relation to God inheres in the effort to "make his acts similar to the acts of God" (GP 1:78).[59] There is "no knowledge of God above the physical world," writes Shlomo Pines. "Resemblance . . . is completely restrictive to fulfilment in that world."[60] *Imitatio dei* is in fact *imitatio viarum dei*, imitating not God in itself but the ways of God in relation to the world, where "ways" evokes *Halakah*, the

[56] Kenneth Seeskin, *Jewish Messianic Thoughts in an Age of Despair* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 44. Seeskin notes there is a distinction between "God is" and "God is called" (47), and that "imitation of God, who is utterly unlike, is then only through the attributes of action, not God himself" (38).

[57] Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Philo Judeaus," in idem, *Studies in the History of Religion and Philosophy*, 1:60–70, argues that Philo was the first to distinguish God's existence from God's essence, "teaching the unlikeness of God" (66). Cf. idem, "Albinus and Plotinus on Divine Attributes," 115–30: "God's existence is only known by his actions" (117).

[58] See Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Saint Thomas on Divine Attributes," in idem, *Studies in the History of Religion and Philosophy*, 2:497–524, where Wolfson traces and distinguishes different senses of the terms equivocal, ambiguous, amphibilous, as against univocal meanings (514, 522, 524). Wolfson distinguishes different senses of analogy in Thomas Aquinas (519–23). Cf. idem, "Maimonides on Negative Attributes," in *Studies in the History of Religion and Philosophy*, 2:195–230, at 196, where Wolfson describes Maimonides's translation of attributes into predicates—language constructions—with predicates seen as actions. Wolfson implies catachresis when describing "equivocal terms which in meaning are absolutely unrelated to similarly sounding terms which are applied to other beings" (198).

[59] Buijs, "Negative Theology of Maimonides and Aquinas": "we can know something of essence by analogy" (731); positive language is descriptive of God's essence (736). Maimonides, however, only describes action. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas at the Limit of Reason* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 187: "Maimonides' concern to guard against any divine corporeality" distinguishes him from Aquinas, for whom "the very fact of incarnation and the Mass makes this not his concern."

[60] Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fabari, Ib Bajja, and Maim," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (ed. Isadore Twersky; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 82–109.

practice of the commandments.[61] In the *Guide*, Maimonides himself identifies the name and word of God with command: "The name of God, the word of God and the command of God are identical phrases" (GP 1:89). Of the divine in itself, only negative attributes can be predicated. The relationship is not directly ontological but ethical. As Levinas observes, "all the negative attributes which state what is beyond essence become positive in responsibility."[62]

Maimonides inevitably uses the philosophical terms available to him, which remain deeply influenced by Greek philosophy as treated in the Arabic philosophical tradition, including terms such as essence and existence. Yet Maimonides also says that the divine is "not a substratum" (GP 1:58) and treats the term "existence" as equivocal with a different sense when applied to God.[63] As Levinas puts it in *In the Time of the Nations*, even as Maimonides praised metaphysical knowledge of God in a Greek mode, "everything culminates in the formulation of the negative attributes," a negative theology beyond knowledge. Levinas calls this "a remarkable reversal," in which knowledge is transformed into "ethical behavior . . . as for the other."[64] Maimonides's negative theology pulls away from a metaphysics of essence toward a transcendence beyond the world, whose relation to it is through praxis and language within its proper constraints.

This Maimonidean sense of the impossibility of knowledge of God culminates in the discussion of the divine names, with the Tetragrammaton as the "*nomen proprium*," the proper name that has "no additional signification" (GP 1:61). Not pronounced except in the yearly priestly blessing, the Tetragrammaton is a negative theological name that, Maimonides writes, "denotes God Himself without including in its meaning any names of the things created by Him." All other names "are derived from His actions," only indicating "the relation of certain actions" to God (GP 1:61). The proper name alone "exclusively indicates" the divine, through letters which guard even as they display, in that it "can be written but not pronounced" (GP 1:61).

In terms of the sign-theory of Levinas and Derrida, God here is not a signified, and no signifier represents the divine as referring to or revealing knowledge of the divine as being. Nor does the signifier refer to elements of the world as

[61] David Shapiro, "The Doctrine of the Image of God and Imitatio Dei," in *Contemporary Jewish Ethics* (ed. Menachem Marc Kellner; New York: Sanhedrin Press,1978) 127–51, at 138. Shapiro comments: "although God as he is in his transcendence is indescribable, the Bible refers to attributes, not as imitation of God himself but of virtues by which his relation to the world and activity are described" (139). Cf. Julius Guttman *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973) 176–77: "the suprasensual world in general is beyond our comprehension . . . all assertions about God refer only to his actions."

[62] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 12.

[63] Josef Stern, "Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language," in *Maimonides and the Sciences* (ed. Robert Cohen and Hillel Levine; Dordrecht: Kluwer/Springer, 2000) 73–226, at 206. Stern rightly claims that Maimonides's negative theology is a negation of theology, as the impossibility of knowledge of God.

[64] Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations* (trans. Michael B. Smith; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 172.

reflections of an ideal reality that they copy. Levinas repeatedly challenges the analogical traditions of Western philosophy, where the "the unity of analogy" attempts to uphold and affirm "totalization."[65] In exploring the divine names in his essay "The Name of God," Levinas refuses to "God all analogy with beings which are admittedly unique but which make up a world or a structure with other beings."[66] Levinas likewise rejects "the paths which lead to God [as] ascent to the Unconditional."[67] In this, Levinas confirms and elucidates Maimonidean language theory. The Tetragrammaton "names a mode of being or beyond of being rather than a quiddity." Other names only "express relations not essence"[68]—a position consistent with Maimonides, whose view of language, according to Beryl Septimus, is conventional rather than natural.[69] In a refusal of correspondence that reminds one of Levinas, Maimonides asserts that "there is no correlation between Him and any of His creatures . . . for the characteristic of two objects correlative to each other is the equality of their reciprocal relation" (GP 1:52). Levinas in turn echoes Maimonides in *Totality and Infinity*: "correlation does not suffice as a category for transcendence."[70] In "Transcendence and Height," Levinas reiterates: "the Other has nothing in common with me."[71] In *Otherwise than Being,* this becomes a point of language: "language about God is never literal"; "God is not an essence." The "abysses of transcendence" as "intervals that cut across analogical unity" cannot be filled.[72] In the essay "Enigma and Phenomenon," the Other as invoking the divine is never disclosed as a signified but rather "signifies itself without revealing itself."[73] In what he himself calls the "scandalous absence of God," Levinas confirms that the ultimate cannot be "represented as phenomena through cognition."[74] Citing the "subtle silence" of I Kgs 19:12, the absolute "gapes open as a void in which

[65] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (trans. Michael B. Smith; New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 64.

[66] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Name of God in Several Talmudic Texts," in idem, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (trans. Gary D. Mole; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 116–28, at 120.

[67] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 120.

[68] Ibid., 119.

[69] Beryl Septimus, "Maimonides on Language," in *The Heritage of the Jews of Spain: The Proceedings of the First International Congress, Tel Aviv, 1–4 July 1991* (ed. Aviva Doron; Tel Aviv: Levinsky College of Education Publishing House, 1994) 35–52, argues that Maimonides's view is that language is conventional, in ways suggesting later pragmatism. Cf. Ivry, who speaks of language as meaning through the "interrelationship of natural objects" (*Guide*, 60).

[70] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingus; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 53.

[71] Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) 16.

[72] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 197, 162, 94.

[73] Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings,* 77.

[74] Ibid., 75.

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the irreversible is not represented,"[75] even as "non-manifestation."[76] This is not, however, a defeat or denial of language but an "invisibility which language sets forth."[77]

An approach to Maimonides's language theory by Ehud Benor confirms that there is in Maimonides "no true description of God," no analogy, no "likeness in respect to some notion." This, however, is not a "concern for the inadequacy of language to express that which can neither be known or thought." Maimonides's negation is not a Neoplatonist negation of "differentiation and particularization that increasingly obscures its sublime source and true being."[78] Michael Fagenblat goes further in analyzing Maimonides and Levinas as they share aspects of language theory. For both, there is a "rupture of analogy." For both, the ultimate name of God has "no semantic value," but rather, "designates its reference without describing": "the proper name is not a metaphorical, analogical, symbolic, or equivocal way of speaking about God because it is not a description at all but a designation."[79] The divine name is "without sense." Its meaning emerges, rather, in a "pragmatics of naming," that is, as "signifiers not as they refer to signifieds but as they interrelate in ongoing articulation."[80] Levinas and Maimonides share what Fagenblat terms the "preference for creation over eternity,"[81] that hesitates before claims about or entry into the noumenal. As Levinas asserts: "we know since Maimonides that all that is said of God in Judaism signifies through human praxis."[82] In Maimonides, then, as in Levinas, the divine is not a signified. It exceeds traditional sign-theory of a prior signified then represented in a signifier, as reproducing a metaphysical ontology in a faulty way. Here, language, rather than representing transcendence, faces the beyond.

[75] Ibid., 73.

[76] Ibid., 67.

[77] Ibid., 77.

[78] Ehud Z. Benor, "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995) 339–60, at 340–47. Benor offers a notion of "symbolic ideas" that are able to "stand for the object without truly representing it" as a mode of signifier that indicates without representation, but, as he concedes, this still "stresses continuity between domains of meaning that tend toward a relation of analogy" (340).

[79] As Fagenblat says, "metaphysics gives way to the pragmatics of naming," that is, "of signifiers not as they refer to signifieds but as they interrelate in ongoing articulation"; *Covenant*, 134.

[80] Ibid., 120, 124, 128. Fagenblat, "Levinas and Maimonides," 137, 136, 134. Cf. Eliot Wolfson, "From Sealed Book to Open Text," in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age* (ed. Stephen Kepnes; New York: New York University Press, 1999) 145–78: "*Ehyeh* is not yet revealed"; this "primary divine name is not a name, it does not designate" (154).

[81] Fagenblat, *Covenant*, 111.

[82] Emmanuel Levinas, New Talmudic Readings (trans. Richard A. Cohen; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999) 14.

Addressing Transcendence

Milbank's question—that, if there is a "refusal of participation [that] places an absolute gulf between self and other . . . then how is this gulf to be bridged?"[83]—is one Levinas himself poses. Facing "the question of how transcendence per se was ever able to let thought know of its very separation,"[84] he asks: how is it possible to "enter into relation with the ungraspable while guaranteeing its status of being ungraspable"?[85] In his 1935 essay, "The Contemporary Relevance of Maimonides," Levinas praises Maimonides for drawing the distinction between the "thought that thinks the world and the thought that surpasses it." Maimonides in this way put "a stop to the impulse of reason to apply notions borrowed from the world to that which is beyond the world."[86] Levinas, however, backs away from Maimonides's elevation of intellect, making language itself the center of divine/human relationship.[87] Levinas praises Maimonides's radical distinction of the world from what is beyond it: "the essence of his work," Levinas writes, "consists in distinguishing between the universe that is already created . . . and the very creation of that universe." He goes on to describe Maimonides's distinction as a project more of "grammar than mysticism," working by way of the "erudite etymological analysis of the words" sufficient "to plumb the depths of Scripture."[88] Levinas then develops in his own language theory an original approach to the classical problem of relation without analogical assimilation and without dialectic as synthesis between contrasting positions. Although analogy is blocked, relationship to transcendence is reconceived, without compromising it through analogy or the mutual assimilation that analogy opens. Here, Levinas likewise responds to the post-metaphysical critique that follows Nietzsche, although without abrogating transcendence itself. He does so according to two related paths. The first is his model, hinted at earlier but developed in *Otherwise than Being,* of "Said," "Saying," and "Unsaying."[89] The second is sketched in the essay "Metaphor" that Levinas wrote when he was held as a prisoner of war in a Nazi camp and that was published posthumously.

Levinas's model of "Said," "Saying," "Unsaying" reworks Karl Buehler's linguistic structure, which features three poles of communication: representation as the reference conveyed; expression, as the role of the addresser; and appeal, to the addressee as receiver.[90] In this linguistic model, the emphasis remains on

[83] Milbank, "Gift," 133.

[84] Levinas, *Time of the Nations*, 170; cf. Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings,* 139.

[85] Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings,* 55.

[86] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Contemporary Relevance of Maimonides" (trans. Michael Fagenblat), *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 16 (2008) 91–94, at 92, 94.

[87] See Fagenblat, *Covenant*, 134, on Levinas's critique of Maimonides's intellectual focus.

[88] Levinas, "Contemporary Relevance," 93.

[89] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 37–47.

[90] Theodore De Boer discusses Buehler in "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," in *Face to Face with Levinas* (ed. Richard A. Cohen; SUNY Series in Philosophy; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986) 83–116, at 97.

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what is represented—what Levinas calls the "Said." Levinas never repudiates what is "Said." Reference, the content of what is communicated, continues to have validity, as does cognitive knowledge, description, and other uses of referential language. However, these are never self-standing or primary. What is "Said" as reference is secondary in Levinas and itself made possible by, rather than preceding or grounding, the interrelationship between interlocutors, what Levinas calls "Saying." The "Said" plays a role of "signified," but, as in Derrida, one generated by "signifiers," not predetermining meaning but arising out of signifier interrelationships. Levinas then implies a radical further step. For him, "signifiers" are not only elements or units of language that are exchanged but are the interlocutors themselves—who actively signaling to each other are also signifiers as speakers. Signification occurs and is made possible by interlocutors as signifiers signaling to each other. Here again, Levinas moves emphasis to the exchange of language, rather than its structure or reference. Meaning emanates from, rather than grounding or determining, the relationship between the signifier-interlocutors themselves. There must be relationship before there is language exchange; and all language exchange occurs through, and is implicated by, the conditions of interchange themselves. "Saying" is the performance of language from active addresser, whose very address is oriented to the interlocutor. But the interlocutor of "Saying" is not a passive addressee but is also active as responder. "Saying" is an address/response in which there is no address that is not already response, no response that is not address, each eliciting the other. Announced by Levinas's "*me voici*," *hineini*, "Saying" is always already responding to an address, the "find me here" out of which selfhood itself emerges as response and, in turn, address. The Levinasian self is a responsive self. Response marks not an erasure of selfhood but its ongoing formation in relation to others. It is Levinas's move to make language an activity between signifier-selves, signaling to each other prior to any "Said" of communication. Without speakers, no communication in language is possible.

In "Saying"—the address and response of interlocutors to each other—there is the association of their interchange. The two interlocutors, however, remain distinct from each other. Not only connection, the channels through which interchange takes place, but also, radically, distance and difference, is conducted in language. As Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity,* language is "contact across a distance, relation with the non-touchable, across a void."[91] This is the core of Levinasian ethics, of which language is itself a core model. Language stands between and apart from distinct interlocutors, visibly as writing but also in speaking. As exterior to and between interlocutors, it is a materiality that is exchanged but is not identical with or absorbed into either interlocutor. It thus marks at once association and distinction. This is likewise a model for relation to the divine, whose otherness is itself the ultimate image of difference for all others with whom a self is in relationship—that is, relationship and distinction, preserving, guarding, and respecting the difference

[91] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 172.

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between selves against the danger of overpowering the other, of absorbing the other into the self.

Levinas may be said to begin in fear of totalization, certainly also political totalitarianism which he experienced directly. What language allows and performs is precisely the possibility of relationship that does not breach distinctness of otherness, retaining transcendence yet also conducting relationship across its distance. As he writes in the essay "Dialogue," language marks "the difference and the relationship" that "transcendence signifies." It "transcends . . . distance without suppressing or recuperating it."[92] The separation/association between selves who transcend yet address each other reenacts the separation/association between self and transcendence.[93] "A Religion for Adults" declares Levinas's philosophy to be one that is "contrary to the philosophy that makes of itself the entry into the kingdom of the absolute and announces, in the words of Plotinus, that 'the soul will not go towards any other thing, but towards itself.'" "Real transcendence" remains beyond without any possibility or ideal of entering into it, external to the self where "contact with an external being, instead of compromising human sovereignty, institutes and invests it."[94] The "ontological separation between human beings and the transcendence that gapes between them" makes "each one absolutely other in relation to the other, without common measure or domain available for some sort of coincidence," formulated in an oxymoron characteristic of Levinas as "absolutely separated by the inexpressible secret of their intimacy."[95] In this way, selfhood itself is upheld. *Totality and Infinity* speaks of the "necessity of maintaining the I in the transcendence it has seemed incompatible with."[96] To transcend in the sense of entering into transcendence is to lose the self, classically in mystical ascent into union. Such participation through likeness "is self-contradictory: the subject that transcends is swept away in its transcendence."[97] Discourse instead makes possible a model of relationship that affirms distinction yet allows connection in what Levinas calls, in the oxymora of *Totality and Infinity,* "unrelating relation," "relation without relation."[98] The self addresses the other across an "opening of transcendence." Between the two there is "no common measure or domain available for some sort of coincidence."[99] In what Levinas calls "the saying of the dialogue,

[92] Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (trans. Bettina Bergo; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 144.

[93] As Derrida comments, "the ethical relation is a religious relation" (*Writing and Difference*, 95). Cf. Levinas, who writes: "We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40).

[94] Emmanuel Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," in idem, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (trans. Seán Hand; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 11–23, at 16.

[95] Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* 144.

[96] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 276.

[97] Ibid., 274.

[98] Ibid., 80, 295.

[99] Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* 144.

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the summons of a You by an I," there remains open a "between" that is not mediation but a "word exposed to the response."[100]

But "Saying"—address and response—in order to uphold both distinction and relationship, requires also what Levinas calls "Unsaying." Unsaying guards against the assimilation into unity through rupture or interruption, the indelible gap between interlocutors. If "Saying" frames and makes what is "Said" possible—signifier-speakers signaling to each other—then "Unsaying" breaks into "Saying," disrupting its exchange so as to sustain the very difference that makes interchange possible. Here, Levinas is challenging long and ongoing traditions in which language itself has been suspected precisely as failing unified understanding. Language in the tradition was seen as exterior to truth and the knowledge of it; as mere vehicle to thought, and therefore secondary to it; in theological terms, as exterior to ideal communion with ultimate reality and the divine. As Derrida analyzes in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," the ultimate state of spirituality promised "the presence given to intuition or vision"[101] as an elevation "toward that contact or vision, that pure intuition of the ineffable, that silent union with that which remains inaccessible to speech,"[102] "where profane vision ceases and where it is necessary to be silent."[103] Levinas, however, as Derrida writes in "Violence and Metaphysics," "does not share the classical "disdain of discourse."[104] Levinas confirms the value of language rather than demoting it against a vision whose unity language would betray.

Derrida already points to Levinasian "Unsaying" in "Violence and Metaphysics," describing "a trajectory of speech that no speech can make into a totality," that "no logos as absolute knowledge can comprehend." This "rupture of logos," however, is not a defeat of language. It is "not the beginning of irrationalism but the wound or inspiration which opens speech and then makes possible every logos or every rationalism." There is an "absolute overflowing of ontology . . . by the other as infinity because no totality can constrain it . . . exceeding the ideation in which it is thought."[105] Ideas, knowledge, are not abrogated, although language is not restricted to their conduct. It is also a trajectory, open and incomplete, never enclosed and summated into a totality, not to repudiate knowledge but to frame and ultimately to limit it as possessable final truth. Knowledge does not encompass the other toward whom the trajectory of language is directed, which launches toward making new discoveries.

The incursion of "Unsaying" marks Levinas's move from ontological metaphysics to radical transcendence. Through "Unsaying," transcendence obtrudes into the chain of signifiers, the "Said," as an excess, beyond what it can contain. Levinas counters Platonic tradition by refusing two world ontologies, the

[100] Ibid., 145, 147–48.
[101] Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 9.
[102] Ibid., 10.
[103] Ibid., 22.
[104] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 116.
[105] Ibid., 98.

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"rectification of one ontology by another, the passage from some apparent world to some more real one."[106] There is no other world as true Being, defining essence. What we experience and articulate in this world are "really true beings," which "enter into the said." But there is a "saying beyond the logos." This beyond is marked as "Unsaying," breaking free beyond knowledge or reason, not into another realm of the irrational, but in a "restlessness" that does not "eternize," opening relation to the world of change although not contained by it. Dualism between lower and higher realms thus gives way to alterity. Instead of a hierarchy between lower and higher ontologies, Levinas posits differentiation and distinction between world and transcendence, which is, however, not itself an ontological realm. Existence resides in and as the material, temporal world. Beyond it there is a transcendence which is not a higher order of of being, into which one is never united and which cannot be represented. Rather, it always remains beyond, yet orienting the material world.

"Saying always seeks to unsay" the "correlation set up between the saying and the said," Levinas writes, preventing "conjunction with the subject."[107] The "need to unsay the said" breaks into "Saying" as difference and distance between interlocutors.[108] The terms, the interlocutors, "absolve themselves from the relation, or remain absolute within relationship . . . discourse relates with what remains essentially transcendent . . . a relation between separated terms."[109] In an interview called "Questions and Answers," Levinas expands:

> Questioning *qua* original attitude is a "relation" to that which no response can contain, to the "uncontainable"; it becomes responsibility . . . every response contains a "beside the point" and appeals to an un-said. . . . Saying must be accompanied immediately by an unsaying. Saying must again be unsaid . . . there is no stopping; there is no definitive formulations.[110]

"Unsaying," far from defeating language, generates it into ever new senses and, in resisting totality, makes possible ever new exchanges.

Notes on Metaphor

While it admits what is "Said" and hence the validity of knowledge, language exchange in Levinas thus places knowledge after and within the relationality of discourse that interrupts thought as union or mutual reflective understanding. The acts of discourse entail difference that breaks into knowledge, disrupting it to sustain that distinction between interlocutors, which guards each one's uniqueness and prevents incorporation and overcoming of one by the other. The discourse relationality of distance and approach interrupts correlation while sustaining interchange. "The relation to the other is not based on identity, but on relationality,

[106] Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* 147, 168.
[107] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 152.
[108] Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* 169.
[109] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.
[110] Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* 86, 88.

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connection and difference," Levinas comments in an interview. "It demands the recognition that the self and the other are unlike."[111] Interestingly, one of Levinas's linguistic avenues for recognizing that "the self and the other are unlike" is metaphor itself. In his posthumously published "Notes on Metaphor,"[112] Levinas begins to reshape the meanings of metaphor from the classical sense of analogy as assuming common ground between multiples.[113] Already in these early notes, Levinas breaks with the model of language as "objectification of a thought: this is comparable to that; this is like that,"[114] as if there were some essential likeness that language merely conveys. Metaphor, rather, points beyond the "transfer of sense from resemblance to resemblance," which would fix meaning into "static essence."[115] Metaphorical "transference" for Levinas is instead "movement" and "amplification," leading "further."[116] It is language that "detaches itself from sensible representation in order to free [its] significations," to open "innumerable significations."[117] That is, metaphor works oppositely from a unification in analogy. Its relationships instead unfold in ever more distinctions and associations, each of which remain provisional through ongoing discourse exchanges. "Metaphor," Levinas writes, "is the excess of meaning."[118] Words are not just "signs" of signifieds but "carriers of multiple meanings," a "multivocality," a "polyvalence" that constitutes "the internal character of meaning."[119]

Metaphor amplifies, without consolidation. There is in it an "excess," a "sense beyond, an absolute,"[120] not representation but trajectory, incomplete and in motion. But this is to say there is also rupture: "transgression, displacement itself towards the beyond."[121] Metaphor can offer resemblances—the "call of like by like"[122] in the way of the "Said." But it differs from referential or phenomenological language

[111] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," interview in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (ed. R. Bernasconi and David Wood; New York: Routledge, 2002) 168–80, at 169–70.

[112] Emmanuel Levinas, "Notes on Metaphor" (trans. Andrew Haas), *International Journal of Philosophical Studies,* 20 (2012) 319–330.

[113] For a fuller discussion, see Shira Wolosky, "Emmanuel Levinsas: Metaphor without Metaphysics," in *Levinas and Literature: New Directions* (ed. Michael Fagenblat and Arthur Cools; Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts 15; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021) 250–80.

[114] Levinas, "Notes on Metaphor," 322.

[115] Ibid., 325–26.

[116] Ibid., 325–26.

[117] Ibid., 320. How Levinasian metaphor compares with Ricoeur's in *The Rule of Metaphor* is too large a subject to enter into here. I will only point out that Ricoeur's remains a structural-phenomenological analysis, whereas Levinas situates metaphor through address and response as these both energize and open figures.

[118] Levinas, "Notes on Metaphor," 328.

[119] Ibid., 320.

[120] Ibid., 326.

[121] Ibid., 326.

[122] Ibid., 326.

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as the "end of thought going towards its object,"[123] where language represents and contains. Levinas already verges, even in these early notes, into the distinctions between "Said," "Saying," "Unsaying." Metaphor is an "excess of that which is said," an "excess and the march to infinity." Thus, it is not "philosophy" as thinking toward an "end point," but "Saying" as "language towards the infinite," a movement that goes beyond the speaker and "comes from the other insofar as language is response to an other."[124] But as an incomplete trajectory, "Saying" is already cut through with "Unsaying."[125] Philosophical thought as "movement with an end point" is ruptured by the "refusal of an end point."[126] It is an "infinite movement without return,"[127] that is, a "departing," the "transcendence of meaning towards another meaning."[128]

Maimonidean language theory posits an unknowable absolute that cannot be the signified of signifiers. Unable to represent what is beyond representation, signifiers can thus not be reduced to single meanings. This is the case with Levinasian metaphor. If analogy consolidates diverse senses, Levinasian metaphor implies a dispersion that denies reduction of terms to one meaning. Commenting on Maimonides, Levinas writes that facing God as "exterior to world" means "one no longer compares the perfection of God to that of a thing." Indeed, the very term "perfection" becomes, using Maimonides's terminology of equivocation, "but a homonym for the perfection of things" in time.[129] Language directed toward transcendence would always point in divergent directions, projecting provisional configurations always finally reflected into the multiple human world, even as language faces toward what is beyond it. In this sense, the very question of relation to the divine no longer can even be asked in terms of what God is, personal or otherwise figured. "Person," too, means equivocally. But we human persons respond to the divine in terms that unfold from our experience, although the divine remains beyond our limits. In the essay "Dialogue," Levinas writes that "the old biblical theme of man made in the image of God takes on a new meaning, but it is in the 'you' not the 'I' that this resemblance is announced."[130] The divine image is generated out of relation to the other, in response to it. The relation to the divine is anchored in the human response to what is beyond, orienting him and her to another not consumed by their knowledge or power.

[123] Ibid., 329.

[124] Ibid., 328.

[125] Cf. Michael Fagenblat, "Levinas and Heidegger: The Elemental Confrontation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas* (ed. Michael L. Morgan; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 103–34, at 108: "Expression, for Levinas, is not the content conveyed, nor even the form this content takes, but that which enables form and content to be incessantly undone."

[126] Levinas, "Notes on Metaphor," 328–29.

[127] Ibid., 328.

[128] Ibid., 326.

[129] Levinas, "Contemporary Relevance," 93.

[130] Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* 148.

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Metaphor does not offer correspondence but trajectory, as language points in multiple directions, at once toward the world and beyond it, as also to addresser and responder, as also to what is "Said." What Levinas calls the "marvels of metaphor" is the "possibility of getting out of experience, thinking further than the givens of our world."[131] Levinas contrasts his position against the "Platonic mistrust with respect to language," which "can only think that which it already knows," but which is also faulty, never fully "capable" of representing what it seeks to.[132] But this is a "negligence of the other intention of discourse towards the other—towards the infinite"—where the "transference of metaphor" would now enact not ontological correspondence but multiple directionality, in address and response. Language is not a "return to thought" but an "aim of the one to whom language addresses itself."[133] Metaphor is the "power of verbal excess [that] places itself in relation to the Other."[134]

Language as trajectory toward the other opens the path from world to transcendence without consolidating them or necessitating their intersection, correlation, analogy or mutual participation. It is through language, "capable of always signifying more than it says" that humans encounter the beyond.[135] Knowledge is possible as provisional, not pregiven or fully grasped. Nor is knowledge the ground of relationship, demanding identical understandings. Relationship instead founds the interchanges in ways that unfold, in which language upholds otherness precisely as addressed and responded to but neither united with nor absorbed. Levinas's is "not a transcendence that situates elsewhere the true life to which man, escaping from here, would gain access in . . . mystical elevation" but "a relationship with the other . . . not by amalgamating with the Other but by speaking to him."[136] Thus, Levinas concludes in "Notes on Metaphor":

> Discourse—that is the ambiguity—the high and the low. Discourse is already in the revelation of the divine. This cannot be proven by the analysis of the symbolic structure of language, dispossessed in syntax and linguistics—but must be brought back to the relation itself with the face, where language arises. Language is thereby *the relation itself with the superior*—or thought.[137]

It is in discourse that the divine is revealed but always also with concealment and "ambiguity," a differential that points to both "high and low." Levinas resists language as structure absorbing its speakers, "dispossessed in syntax and linguistics" as in structuralism. Language in Levinas is relational, where relation is, however, ever incomplete, interrupted, "Saying" with "Unsaying," never fully possessing the "superior" beyond, that we, nevertheless, through the multiplicity of metaphor, address and to which we respond.

[131] Levinas, "Notes on Metaphor," 321.
[132] Ibid., 324.
[133] Ibid., 326.
[134] Ibid., 320.
[135] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, xi.
[136] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.
[137] Levinas, "Notes on Metaphor," 329 [italics original].

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