Speech and Sensibility:
Levinas and Habermas on the Constitution of the Moral Point of View

by

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In thinking constructively about Levinas’ work in the context of Habermas’ discourse ethics, we are well served to consider both the differences as well as the affinities between their understandings of the role of language in the constitution of our sense of moral obligation. At first glance, of course, it is the differences which are most apparent. For Habermas, a moral point of view is based in the procedural requirements of our linguistic competence, the way in which speech implicates us in a communicative sense of rationality that obliges us to an impartial consideration of the point of view of others. For Levinas, it is the way in which we find ourselves related in speech to the face of the other, to a substantive appreciation of what he refers to as the “always positive value” of the other person, that we find ourselves obliged to the other. But these differing conceptions of the moral significance of language need not be seen as opposed to each other. Rather, or so I will argue here, they can be conceptualized as complimentary accounts of the ways in which a moral point of view onto life is inextricably bound up for us with our capacities as linguistic creatures, animals with logos. While Habermas enables us to see the importance of language as a rule-governed social practice for the constitution of a moral point of view, Levinas draws our attention to the way in which the moral significance of language so conceived lies in a form of sensibility, a sensible “exposure” or “vulnerability” to the other person, older than language itself. Appropriately coordinated, these two perspectives give us a more adequate understanding than either can on its own of the central place of language in our lives as moral agents, a place that must be conceptualized at the intersection of norms of speech and forms of sensibility which together make possible our proximity to the face of the other.

Speech and the Other
Levinas begins his reflections on the moral relevance of language in *Totality and Infinity* with a particular use of language as conversation.² “The very fact of being in a conversation,” he writes, “consists in recognizing in the Other a right over (one’s) egoism, and hence in justifying oneself.” (*TI* 40) This point is of tremendous importance in understanding Levinas’ work. The “face of the other” that he evokes as the ground of our sense of moral obligation is always essentially the face of my interlocutor, the one who addresses me in speech. To be in a conversation is to be in a relationship with the other in which s/he, as Levinas puts it, “is called upon to speak” and in so doing “come(s) to the assistance’ of his word.” (*TI* 69) Herein lies what Levinas refers to as the essentially “magisterial” character of speech, the way in which my interlocutor presents her/himself as interlocutor, as irreducible to anything said insofar as s/he always maintains the right to say more, to comment on what is said. To this extent, my interlocutor is my master, my teacher, the one to whom I am obliged to be attentive. (*TI* 51 & 99) Hence, Levinas’ reference to the conversational duty to justify oneself. To converse with another person is to find oneself called into question, (*TI* 195) called precisely to question what one would say in the light of what the other has said, to say only that which takes into account what the other has said and, in this way, genuinely respond to the other. For Levinas, it is the emergence of this critical relation to myself in and through a conversational relation to the other that constitutes the birth of reason as an elementary “critique of spontaneity.”

It is in this conversational orientation to the other that I find myself in proximity to the face of the other, obliged to respond to the other on her/his terms, to defer to the other as my master, my teacher. But in tracing our ethical proximity to the other to a particular use of language, Levinas falls short of realizing his more ambitious aim of showing how a moral
orientation to the other is presupposed in language generally, or, as he puts it, that “Meaning is
the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to
face of language.” (TI 206) What Levinas would appear to need here is an account of how “all
recourse to words” presupposes a conversational use of language and, hence, the sense of
obligation to the other which that conversational practice demands of us. And, indeed, we find
the rough outlines of such an account in his analysis of propositional language where he writes,
“the proposition that posits and offers the world does not float in the air, but promises a response
to him who receives this proposition, who directs himself toward the Other because in his
proposal he receives the possibility of questioning.... A proposition is maintained in the
outstretched field of questions and answers.” (TI 96) If, as Levinas claims, an “outstretched field
of questions and answers” is essential for every proposition, then every propositional use of
language would presuppose some sort of conversational orientation to the other. But how?

It is here that Levinas’ account begins to become rather thin. Though there are many
insightful suggestions, they never come together into a convincing account as to how “all
recourse to words” takes place within an “outstretched field of questions and answers,” as his
account of the proposition so tantalizingly suggests. It is at this point that we can begin to see a
way in which Habermas’ theory of communicative action can come to Levinas’ aid. Habermas’
theory of meaning provides just the sort of account of linguistic meaning generally that Levinas
lacks - one that directly roots our possibilities for an intelligible use of language in an
“outstretched field of questions and answers,” an essentially conversational use of language in
which, as Levinas argues and Habermas confirms, we can discern the roots of a sense of
obligation to the other.
The key to Habermas’ theory of meaning is to be found in his claim that “We understand a speech act when we know what makes it acceptable.” Our understanding of a speech act is dependent on a knowledge of what makes it acceptable, of the sorts of reasons that could be given for it. It is in this sense that our capacity for communicatively achieved understanding depends, for Habermas, on a capacity for reason, the capacity to propose and assess reasons which could be advanced for the claims we make. As such, Habermas’ account of meaning confirms Levinas’ suggestion that a proposition always presupposes an “outstretched field of questions and answers.” For, if Habermas is right, we cannot understand the meaning of any proposition without anticipating the sorts of reasons that could be advanced for the speaker or writer’s entitlement to it as, in effect, an answer to our questions concerning its meaning. My understanding of any speech act presupposes what could be characterized as a virtual conversational orientation in which questions are or could be raised and answers received or anticipated.

To recognize that meaning is dependent on a virtually conversational orientation is to recognize that linguistic meaning would be inaccessible for anyone who was not competent with a conversational use of language, who was not familiar with what it means to defer to an interlocutor as their teacher, the one to whom they are obliged to attend. It is to recognize, just as Levinas suggests, that “all recourse to words” is undertaken in proximity to the face of the other, against the background of an experience of obligation to the other as this emerges in our conversational uses of language which every use of language presupposes. And though Habermas takes a somewhat different route, he derives a similar moral implication from his theory of meaning. As we can only understand a speech act if we can comprehend and assess the
reasons that could be given for it, our competence with language presupposes a competence with reason, the ability to give and ask for reasons for the claims we make. But a commitment to reason presupposes a commitment to a sense of impartiality, a willingness to hear the point of view of the other and a sense of obligation to respond to it which, in the context of the justification of norms, takes the form of the principle of universalization which is at the heart of the moral point of view, for Habermas.5

Sensibility as a Presupposition of the Moral Significance of Speech

There are, of course, many questions that could and ought to be raised concerning the validity of this suggestion of a possible alliance between Habermas’ and Levinas’ accounts of language. But for right now I would like to step back from such considerations to ask a more general question concerning the very possibility of the suggestion. What is it that makes it possible to appeal to Habermas’ theory of meaning in this way as, at the very least, a potential ally in Levinas’ quest for an account of language as grounded in “an outstretched field of questions and answers”? Habermas understands his work as a contribution to a pragmatic analysis of the procedural presuppositions of communicative action. That is, in the very act of speaking with another person I commit myself to a distinctive way of acting that can be articulated in procedural terms, such as the commitment I undertake to provide reasons for my speech acts should they be questioned. These commitments serve as norms for my communicative endeavors, commitments I find myself obliged to make good in order to secure the integrity of my communicative aims. And so, should I find myself unwilling to provide reasons for my speech acts when asked by someone curious or confused about them, I sacrifice the communicative integrity of those speech acts. Indeed, if confronted with such an
unwillingness to say more, with someone who refused to come to the assistance of her/his words, as Levinas puts it, we can only assume that s/he is really doing something besides trying to speak with us - perhaps, just trying to make a scene or call some kind of attention to her/himself.

This sort of pragmatic-procedural perspective onto language is bound to seem inadequate from a Levinasian perspective, ignoring the way in which language is more than just a rule-governed social practice, but a form of proximity to the face of the other. It should not be rejected, however, as irrelevant to our understanding of the moral dimensions of language. For if we are to understand how language can be a form of proximity to the face of the other we must first understand what is involved in the act of speaking itself and how such an endeavor procedurally disposes us to the sort of proximity Levinas is at pains to describe. Indeed, we can discern the presence of such a pragmatic-procedural perspective in Levinas’ own account of language as he insists on the way “the very fact of being in a conversation” obliges us to recognize the right of the other, our interlocutor, to our consideration. This observation is compelling only insofar as it is anchored in an observation about what is procedurally involved in the very act of conversing with another person. Though Levinas will, of course, attempt to make much more of it than this, the argument begins here, where it should, with a procedural point sufficiently compelling to give us a point of entry into his argument.

A procedural analysis of language, such as we find in Habermas’ account of communicative action, is helpful in clarifying the tacitly conversational character of all language. But it can only take us part of the way Levinas would take us, leaving us with a purely formal analysis of our sense of morality as a matter of procedural commitments undertaken in the service of communication. Lost in this procedural analysis is any substantive sense of the
other to whom we relate in speech, our interlocutor. We get no hint of what Levinas refers to as the face of the other, the way the other comes to me in speech with a sense of moral authority, a sense of “height,” capable of commanding my consideration, (TI 75 & 200) nor of the way we find ourselves delivered over to this “height” through a sensible form of “exposure” or “vulnerability” to the other in which we find ourselves “torn from (ourselves) despite (ourselves),’ ‘torn from our complacency’ “to-be-for-another, despite (ourselves) ... to take the bread out of (our) own mouth(s), to nourish the hunger of another with (our) own fasting.”

Especially in the way Levinas stresses the sensible form of my relationship to the face of the other, the way in which I am moved as a corporeal being to nourish the other as a corporeal being, his analysis approaches themes also emphasized by Carol Gilligan’s analysis of care as a neglected dimension of our moral experience centered in an affectively grounded sense of responsibility for the needs of the concrete other. For both Levinas and Gilligan a moral orientation to the other is an orientation to a concrete, embodied being whose unique needs matter to me in a sensible, affective way.

Unlike Gilligan, however, Levinas wants to connect this sensible form of caring for the other to speech. It is an exposure to the other which is a saying presupposed in everything said to the other. “Saying is communication, to be sure,” writes Levinas, “but as a condition for all communication, as exposure.” (OB 48) Levinas’ analysis finds a moral orientation to the other presupposed in every conversational use of language and, ultimately, in language per. se. And when we articulate this moral orientation we do not find the sort of formal, procedural respect for the point of view of the other that lies at the center of Habermas’ discourse ethics, but rather a substantive sense of the moral authority of the other grounded in the way I find myself sensibly
torn from my self-complacency toward a caring consideration of the other. But how precisely is Levinas to make a case for this connection? Levinas’ analysis never seems to consider the Habermasian possibility of a purely procedural analysis of the moral significance of language. It is as if he takes an intuitively plausible phenomenology of our moral experience as having a sensible dimension in which I find myself moved to care for the other, to see the other as deserving of my caring consideration, and assumes that this dimension of our moral experience must be implicit in the moral orientation we find operative in speech. But, in the light of Habermas’ analysis, it is not apparent why this has to be the case. Why does the moral orientation implicit in speech need to be articulated in anything more than procedural terms? Why, in particular, does it demand an analysis in terms of a form of sensibility that, as a way in which we find ourselves moved to care for the other, seems utterly remote from the exigencies of speech as we would ordinarily conceive them?

To begin to answer this question, we need to return to a procedural analysis of language, in particular, to the way in which the commitments we presuppose in speaking with another person oblige us to a mode of consideration of the other which is unconditional in character. This is not to say, of course, that we never have our own reasons for speaking with another person which condition our interest in the interaction. Perhaps I need information from you that I can only attain through conversation with you. But whatever the reasons, once we embark on that conversational relationship, we find ourselves bound to a form of consideration of the other that is not limited by those reasons, that remains unconditional precisely insofar as it may call into question any of the reasons we might intend as limiting conditions for our consideration of the other. In seeking the information I need from you, I may find that what you say to me calls
into question the very aim which drew me into conversation with you. As such, I find myself obliged to reconsider my aims, bound to an unconditional mode of deference to you, a form of consideration for you that is not and cannot be limited by the reasons which may have brought me to undertake a conversational relationship with you in the first place.

It is in this sense, then, that the mode of obligation to the other to which I find myself bound in a conversational relationship is unconditional. Not that I never have my own reasons for entering into such a relationship which may condition and limit my interest in it, but that every interest I bring with me may be called into question in that relationship. Of course, it is always my option to end a conversational relationship with another person when it is no longer expedient to my interests. But that is not an option consistent with the obligation I have undertaken in conversing with another person. It is, rather, a betrayal of that obligation. Our commitment to relate to the other person as an interlocutor is usually undertaken in a conditional spirit. But the sense of obligation to which I thereby find myself committed always threatens to explode the conditional parameters of my commitment, to call them into question in a way I am bound to consider insofar as I remain related to the other as my interlocutor. For this is what it means to relate to another person as my interlocutor. It is to recognize in the other “a right over (one’s) egoism” that cannot be conditioned or limited by the interests which bring me to the point of that recognition.

It is because of the unconditional character of the commitments assumed in speech that they can come to have a distinctively moral significance for us in the context of the justification of practical norms. In finding myself obliged to consider the point of view of the other, I do not find myself obliged to consider it only insofar as it suits my interests. The demand of
impartiality which constitutes the moral point of view for Habermas is, like Kant’s categorical imperative, an unconditional demand. Being communicatively rational involves justifying my position in the light of whatever challenges might come from others, not merely those which are easily assimilated to my own point of view. But the unconditional and, therefore, the distinctively moral character of this sense of obligation remains unintelligible at a purely procedural level inasmuch as it remains inexplicable why I should give the other this sense of consideration. In speaking with another person we find ourselves bound to a mode of deference to the other capable of calling into question any reasons we might have for entering into a communicative relationship with that person. As such, we find ourselves encumbered with a commitment which must be unintelligible insofar as it exceeds and potentially undermines what is required by any of our more self-interested, or what Habermas characterizes as “strategic,” objectives with speech. Making sense of such a strategically unintelligible commitment demands a substantive recognition of the unconditional worth of the other as the point of such a commitment, the reason why we might regard that commitment as appropriate despite its lack of strategic utility.

With these considerations we touch on one of the most significant shortcomings of Habermas’ procedural analysis of the moral point of view: his inability to answer why we should be moral, why the procedures of communicative rationality which constitute the moral point of view should be understood as unconditionally authoritative for us, as meriting our respect even to point of the sacrifice of other strategic interests we may have with our lives. Understanding the moral point of view exclusively in terms of procedural commitments leaves us unable to explain why we should take those commitments with a degree of seriousness proportional to the
unconditional character of the commitments themselves. As constitutive of a moral point of view onto life obliging us to an impartial consideration of the other’s perspective, the procedural commitments Habermas analyzes demand to take precedence over other, self-interested aims we might have. But viewed merely as a set of procedural commitments, consequent to the undertaking of communicative modes of action, it is unclear why they should be given such precedence. Why should I refrain from unfairly taking advantage of you merely because it is inconsistent with an impartial consideration of your point of view? Granted, my attempts to communicate with you must involve me in an impartial consideration of your point of view. But it is unclear why those considerations should be given such importance that they take precedence over my desire to take advantage of you in a way that would profit me.

It is one thing, in other words, to establish the necessity of a procedural commitment to taking an impartial point of view onto life and quite another to establish the moral importance of that commitment as one that ought to be taken more seriously than any of our other commitments or desires, whose unconditional demands ought to be understood as appropriate. Without a sense of the point of that procedural commitment, the substantive value that is served by it, it is merely one commitment among others with no greater claim on us than the others. Transgressing the limits of a purely procedural analysis, however, Levinas’ account of the face of the other does not fall prey to this shortcoming. For Levinas, to speak is to do more than undertake a particular mode of action with distinctive procedural commitments. It is to come into proximity to the face of the other to whom my speech is addressed who, in that proximity, emerges for me as the one with the authority to command my consideration, the one whose “always positive value” enables me to make sense of why it is important to give the other the
unconditional sense of consideration my communicative commitments demand of me. Levinas’ reference to the face of the other can, in this context, be understood as a reference to what is at stake in our communicative commitments, the substantive value those procedural commitments serve. It is to speak of what Charles Taylor has described as the moral point of our commitment to such procedures, the “constitutive goods,” as he puts it, which establish their moral importance.¹⁰

We see the point of the unconditional form of consideration of the other we find ourselves obliged to in speech in coming to see the other as deserving of our care, deserving of our sacrifice even to the point of taking the bread from our mouths, of nourishing the hunger of the other with our own fasting. For every communicative orientation to another person has this sort of sacrifice as its potential. To see someone who lacks adequate nutrition while I have trouble keeping my weight within reasonably healthy limits and comprehend them as someone who can speak to me, who can become my interlocutor and call my opulence into question, expose it as wholly arbitrary in the face of her/his hunger, is to find myself in a position in which my unconditional consideration of the other demands nourishing the hunger of another with my fasting or, at the very least, a sacrifice on my part to alleviate the other’s need. This kind of consideration of the other can make absolutely no sense for me unless I am capable of being touched by the other’s suffering, unless I am vulnerable to her/his suffering in a way which can move me to care for her/him. This is certainly not to say that every time I speak with another person I must be moved to care for her/him. But I must be capable of such a response, capable of seeing my interlocutor as worthy of such a response if I am to make sense of the unconditional character of the form of consideration of the other I am procedurally committed to in speaking
with her/him. An intelligible appropriation of the procedural demands of speech requires the kind of sensibility Levinas evokes in his account of my exposure to the face of the other. I would not be capable of fully making sense of the demands I find myself encumbered with as a communicative agent if I were not also someone capable of being touched by the suffering of another person and moved to care for her/him.

**The Universality of the Moral Point of View**

To follow Levinas this far into the sensible conditions of our moral orientation to the face of the other is to raise new questions, however, regarding the universality of that moral orientation. For Habermas, it is the universality of communicative action and its formal exigencies which underwrite the universality of the moral point of view. But if the moral significance of those formal exigencies only makes sense for someone sensibly vulnerable to the suffering of the other, then we also need an account of the universality of that form of sensibility if we are to make a case for the universality of Levinas’ analysis of the face of the other in human experience. Levinas appears to want to make a case for its universality by analyzing our sensible exposure to the face of the other as a condition for the possibility of speech itself, a form of saying presupposed in every said. As we have already noted, saying is, for Levinas, “a condition for all communication, as exposure.” But it is difficult to find a compelling argument for this claim if we understand this exposure to involve more than the procedural sense of obligation stressed by Habermas. Levinas’ analysis of the moral dimensions of speech appears to presuppose what I have been characterizing as an intelligible appropriation of the procedural demands of speech, one that makes sense of the unconditional sense of obligation to the other which is implicit in those procedural demands. But there is nothing inherent in speech itself
which demands such an intelligible appropriation. It is not difficult to envision an appropriation of speech which fails to make sense of the unconditional sense of obligation it raises for us. All we need do is envision the subordination of its communicative structure to our strategic aims with life, a strategy which is successfully carried out every time we exploit a communicative situation for our personal advantage, as when we lie to someone.

The capacity to make sense of the unconditional procedural demands a communicative use of language raises for us, to be able to see those demands as deserving a response on our part, lies in our capacity to be sensibly affected by the other, to see the other as deserving of our caring consideration. But, as far as I can see, Levinas gives us no compelling reasons to suppose that this sensibility is a universal feature of human experience, there to be drawn on by every linguistic agent in the formation of a genuinely moral experience of the unconditional importance of those who are capable of addressing us in speech. It is tempting, therefore, to agree with Habermas that in seeking to unfold the substantive dimensions of moral experience we have reached the limits of moral theory which is, as he stresses, “competent to clarify the moral point of view and justify its universality, but ... can contribute nothing to answering the question ‘Why be moral?’ ...” For Habermas, the substantive dimensions of moral experience, sufficient to answer this question, remain the province of the study of “socialization into a form of life that compliments the moral principle.”

We have, in effect, with Habermas, a division of labor between moral theory proper which justifies the universality of the moral point of view and clarifies its content through a reflection on its formal dimensions and empirical inquiries into substantive understandings articulated in social forms of life which complement that formal analysis, but make no contribution to moral theory itself. I believe Habermas is right to stress the
importance of empirical inquiries in helping us to understand the substantive dimensions of moral experience - a point I will turn to shortly. But Habermas’ division of labor, as it stands, presupposes a serious underestimation of the importance of a substantive sense of the unconditional worth of the other person in constituting what we might call the moral significance of the moral point of view. Lacking that substantive sense, the procedural demands of communication can appear as only one set of demands, one set of aims among other more strategic aims we have with our lives, missing the moral significance we would otherwise associate with them. Only when viewed in the light of a substantive sense of the “always positive value” of the other person to whom we address in speech can they be seen as aspects of what we can now characterize as a moral point of view whose unconditional demands make sense for us in the context of my exposure to the face of the other. If one of the tasks of moral theory is, as Habermas says, to “clarify” the moral point of view, then moral theory cannot be restricted to an analysis of its procedural constituents which, though necessary, are not sufficient to it.

If there is merit in Levinas’ analysis of the face of the other, then moral theory, understood as a predominantly reflective, philosophical endeavor is capable of making greater inroads into the clarification of the substantive dimensions of the moral point of view than Habermas is willing to grant. Levinas’ phenomenological reflections on the face of the other clarify how our sensible exposure to the face of the other, our caring vulnerability to the suffering of the other, form necessary aspects of a fully intelligible moral point of view onto life. But in doing so, Levinas also introduces an element of contingency into the moral point of view, the contingency of a form of sensibility which is intelligible neither in terms of the sort of pragmatic-procedural analysis favored by Habermas nor, as Levinas would have it, as a
condition for communication. There may be opportunities, however, for overcoming this contingency and resuming the attempt to make a case for the universality of the moral point of view in its substantive-sensible dimensions by taking note of the way Levinas stresses the corporeal nature of our sensible vulnerability to the face of the other. Characterizing it even as a form of maternity, he writes, “it is maternity, gestation of the other in the same. Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne? In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others ...” (OB 75) The reference to maternity here is well made. My sensible vulnerability to the face of the other is a corporeal vulnerability in much the way maternity is. In maternity the mother finds herself physically affected by the other who is her child, moved to care for her child in a way that is wholly irreducible to any deliberative process, instinctive, without need of anything said. The caring sensibility which brings me into proximity to the face of the other is, like maternity, older than language, an aspect of my corporeal being that I draw on in making sense of the unconditional procedural exigencies of speech, but is not derived from speech and its procedural exigencies any more than is a mother’s love for her child.

Stressing the corporeality of our sensible vulnerability to the other in this way suggests the feasibility of empirical avenues of investigation that would understand it as a product of our psycho-social development as well as our biological evolution. In particular, the latter line of inquiry appears promising as a way to approach the question of the universality of our sensible vulnerability to the other. For what can seemingly appear as only a contingent feature of our corporeality from a philosophical perspective may be understood as a shared adaptation of our
species acquired through a process of natural selection from an evolutionary perspective. It goes without saying, of course, that this sort of naturalism runs directly against the grain of Levinas’ own attitude toward nature. He has never left any doubt as to his understanding of nature as an exclusive realm for the play of self-interest. For instance, in response to a question regarding our obligations to animals, he insists, “I do not know at what moment the human appears, but what I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being, which is always a persistence in being. This is my principle thesis. A being is something that is attached to its own being. That is Darwin’s idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics.” It is, as such, no surprise that he insists on the “prenatural signification” of sensibility. But it is also important to note that Levinas’ understanding of a Darwinian conception of nature appears to presuppose a social-Darwinist caricature of Darwinian thought that would not be shared by many evolutionary scientists today. Much theoretical work has been done in delimiting various contexts, involving genetic kinship with others, reciprocal relationships, and specific forms of involvement in groups, in which altruistic regard for at least some others can function as adaptations that would be favored by natural selection. And study of animal behavior, most significantly the behavior of apes, our closest evolutionary kin, have documented a range of remarkably caring forms of interaction “which may sometimes be hard to distinguish from human expressions of sympathy.” The image of ‘nature red in tooth and claw’ which dominates Levinas’ understanding of nature is, to this extent, quite out of step with much contemporary evolutionary science.

One occasionally hears the objection, however, that such evolutionary accounts of altruism and morality are no more than reductions of these phenomena to products of self-
interest. The mother who cares for her offspring, for instance, is said to be promoting her own self-interest in helping to insure the survival of her genes. What looks on the surface to be other regarding behavior is revealed as self-interested on the biological level. But such objections in principle to evolutionary accounts of other regarding sensibilities are confused, presupposing a conflation between, as Killen and de Waal put it, “function and motive”: “If behavior in the long run serves the individuals who perform it, it is argued, the underlying motives must be selfish. Whereas the first part of this assumption is logical, the second is not. Self-serving behavior does not need to be selfishly motivated. We should retain a separation between how and why certain behavioral traits have been selected over millions of years and the actual motives and psychology activating the behavior.” Even Richard Dawkins, whose classic *The Selfish Gene* helped to motivate this confusion, is clear on the need to distinguish these different levels of analysis. A mother can still be said to genuinely care for her offspring even though the behavior enhances her genetic fitness. Indeed, as Sober and Wilson have argued, given what we know of how natural selection operates, this is by far the most empirically plausible hypothesis.

At best, all I mean to do and can do here is to merely take note of this naturalistic strategy as one plausible way to come to terms with the contingency of Levinas’ account of our corporeal vulnerability to the other and, in doing so, affirm in a qualified way Habermas’ understanding of the need to transgress the limits of moral theory proper in dealing with the substantive dimensions of moral experience. And I certainly do not mean to suggest any easy convergence between Levinas’ analysis of our corporeal vulnerability to the other and evolutionary accounts of our other regarding sensibilities. In particular, many evolutionary accounts of altruism and morality focus on phenomena which are of dubitable moral
significance, blurring the lines between our properly moral and more generally social sensibilities. And much work needs to be done clarifying the relation between the exclusive character of the forms of altruism which emerge in the context of kinship relations and specific forms of group interaction and the inclusive character of a properly moral sense of obligation to any other, regardless of kinship or group affiliation. But it is hard to read de Waal’s account of consolation among chimpanzees in which uninvolved bystanders come to the aid of recent victims of aggression, ‘hugging and touching them, patting them on the back, or grooming them’ and not bring to mind Levinas’ invocation of “human kindness in everyday life ... instinctive and blind ... the kindness of an old lady who gives a piece of bread to a convict along the roadside ... the kindness of a soldier who holds his canteen out to a wounded enemy ... goodness without ideology ... goodness without thought.” Though it would be a mistake to identify such elementary acts of kindness in chimpanzees and humans, it is equally mistaken to overlook their affinity on the basis of a scientifically misinformed conception of nature or confusion regarding levels of analysis in evolutionary thinking.

**Speech and the Face of the Other**

Thus far, I have been stressing the irreducibility of our sensible vulnerability to the other to the procedural exigencies of speech, as a mode of corporeality older than language. It would be a mistake to simply leave it at this, however, as my corporeal vulnerability to the suffering of the other only assumes the form of an exposure to what Levinas refers to as the face of the other in the context of my involvement with speech. For the face of the other is the face of the other *qua* other. As Levinas puts it, it is “in the nakedness of the face,” the face of the other as “abstract man, disengaged from all culture,” that we find “the birth of morality.” But a
mother’s caring regard for her child is a regard for her child *qua* her child, not her child *qua* other. We are moved corporeally to care, first and foremost, for those close to us, not those far removed. And it is as those close to us, as our children, families, friends, and other loved ones, that we come to care for them, not insofar as they are other to us. But in the context of the procedural exigencies of communicative interaction, we find ourselves obliged to an unconditional mode of consideration for the other *qua* interlocutor. In this way, if only implicitly, the abstract humanity of the other comes to the fore as we find ourselves relating to the other *as if* s/he was worth our unconditional consideration merely insofar as we find ourselves addressed by her/him. In our communicative orientation to the other we find ourselves procedurally disposed, we could say, to a *presumption* of the unconditional worth of the other, a presumption that can only be cashed out by coming to understand the other, just insofar as s/he is my interlocutor, as deserving of the same care I find myself sensibly moved to give to others. In this way, my communicative orientation to the other establishes a context which requires my sensible vulnerability to the other to become responsive to the abstract humanity of the other, the other just insofar as s/he is capable of addressing me in speech. It forms a context in which I can learn to care not only for those close to me but for anyone capable of becoming my interlocutor. Apart from this communicative context, it is difficult to see how the full moral significance of our sensible vulnerability to the other could emerge, as a response we owe not just to some others but, in principle, to any other.

This is a position that is close to that of Karl-Otto Apel and James Marsh who both argue, in a critical consideration of Dussel’s appropriation of Levinas’ work, that an appreciation of the moral significance of the sensible appeal of the corporeal, suffering other is impossible
apart from a communicatively rational context. In all fairness to Dussel, it is not completely clear that he means to deny this point. In response to Apel and Marsh, Dussel stresses that the Levinasian moment of the embodied appeal of the suffering other enters his work at the critical level where the liberation of those excluded from a dominant and dominating consensus is our specific concern. And this critical level presupposes rather than grounds a communicative sense of rationality. But there are also places where he seems to, as Marsh puts it, “affirm a pre-originary ethical recognition of the other as prior to any discursive validation.” Statements such as “The recognition of the Other, the ‘originary -ethical reason’ (of Levinas), is prior to critique and prior to argument” and “Proximity is . . . the point of departure for all responsibility for the other” at least suggests that my proximity to the other serves as a moral ground for the procedural dimension of morality highlighted by discourse ethics.

If Dussel means to suggest that my sensible proximity to the other constitutes a sufficient ground for my sense of moral responsibility to the other independent of the procedural constraints of communicative action, then Apel’s and Marsh’s point is a valid one that we are well-advised to remember in attempting to coordinate the procedural and substantive-sensible dimensions of our moral sensibilities. If, however, Dussel is pointing out that our moral sensibilities cannot be adequately understood in procedural terms alone apart from a reference to what Levinas describes as my sensible proximity to the other, then the point I am developing here is not at odds with his. The key to this issue is to recognize that what Levinas describes as my proximity to the face of the other cannot, in its full moral significance, be articulated apart from a context of communicatively rational interaction. Though it cannot be reduced to the procedural dimensions of that context and, hence, brings to light an important dimension of our
moral orientation toward others which is ignored by discourse ethics, neither can it be understood apart from it. Rather than seeing the procedural dimensions of a moral point of view onto life as foundational for its sensible dimensions (as Apel and Marsh’s claims appear to suggest) or vice-versa (as Dussel’s comments appear to suggest), it is best to see them as irreducible, but mutually necessary dimensions of our moral orientation toward others. Though each may be highlighted and examined independently of each other, a full understanding of the moral significance of each requires an understanding of the other.

For much the same sort of reasons it is also a mistake to think of taking my sensible vulnerability to the other in a communicative context as a matter of moving from, as it is sometimes put, the concrete to the abstract other. It is still the concrete other with her/his unique needs and vulnerabilities who addresses us in a communicatively structured context. But as it is *qua* interlocutor that the concrete other comes to address us, our obligations to her/him do not emerge as contingent on the particularities of our cares for those close to us. In this way the face of the other in its “nakedness” can emerge as we come to see the other *qua* interlocutor as worthy of the same caring response we give to those close to us. The moral point of view, for Levinas, is rooted in corporeal modes of sensibility in which we find ourselves moved to care for the concrete other contextualized by communicative exigencies which require for their intelligibility something like a principled focusing of this sentiment, this “passion” (*OB* 128) for the other *qua* my child, my kin, my friend, etc. onto the other *qua* other, the other *qua* interlocutor who can address me in speech and, in that gesture, call me into question.

Levinas’ understanding of the role of sensibility in adopting a moral point of view onto life does, however, place us in a better position to understand the interdependence between the
abstract and the concrete other. From a Levinasian perspective we can see why Michael Sandel, for instance, is right to believe that “At their best, local solidarities gesture beyond themselves toward broader horizons of moral concern, including the horizon of our common humanity ...” and why “in practice . . . it is the savage in his poor hut who welcomes the stranger” before the cosmopolitan. What Sandel and others like him have been trying to articulate is the way in which a universal concern for humanity, for any other and especially the stranger, presupposes the cultivation of our concern for others in their specificity as our family, friends, neighbors, fellow citizens, and so forth. For the procedural exigencies of communicative action which impel me to a consideration of the point of view of any other are pointless and unintelligible apart from our ability to be sensibly moved by the other in her/his uniqueness. Though the moral significance of our “local solidarities” does not come into its own apart from a communicatively rational context in which we can see any other capable of addressing us as worthy of our solidarity, and though the strength and ideological articulation of these local solidarities can always undermine their generalization, a genuine commitment to justice for all demands a “heartfelt generosity” that stems directly from those local solidarities and demands their continual cultivation. This is what Levinas reminds us of in one of his most transparent passages in which he writes, “justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there remains the impossibility of passing by the closest.” (OB 159) This insight is a direct implication of his foundational conception of morality as constituted on the basis of both speech and sensibility, sensibility contextualized by the procedural exigencies of speech.

Of course, in fairness to Habermas who has grappled directly with this question of the
relation between the abstract and concrete other, between justice and care, the Levinasian account we are developing here is not that far removed from one of his proposals regarding the way in which a sense of “empathy” or “agape,” care for the other in her/his concreteness is a presupposition of both the application and justification of moral norms. The principle of universalization demands that we take account of the relevant interests and concerns of every other in arriving at a justified moral judgement. But only our care for the other as a concrete person can move us to be sensitive to the potential moral relevance of the other’s unique interests and situation. In this way, care emerges as an affective-motivational prerequisite for the cognitive demands made on us by the moral point of view. This way of seeing care as a presupposition of the moral point of view fails, however, to see how the moral point of view is rooted in our sensible vulnerability to the other, how our caring exposure to the other establishes the point of the moral point of view as established procedurally in communicative action. Our care for the concrete other remains something of an auxiliary to the moral point of view proper, which is still sufficiently captured with an analysis of the procedural requirements of discourse. For Levinas, on other hand, our care for the other is essential to a point of view onto life that would be understood as moral. It is only in the way in which the procedural exigencies of speech require us to draw from our sensible vulnerability to the other to make sense of the unconditional character of those exigencies that we find ourselves with a moral point of view onto life.

In closing, I want to reiterate that this conception of the connection between speech and sensibility that I have been proposing does not go as far as Levinas seems to want to go in his
own consideration of this issue. To say, without qualification, that saying, as exposure to the other, is a “condition for all communication” is to say, I believe, that communication would be impossible for someone who was not also capable of finding themselves vulnerable to the face of the other. The position I have been arguing for is weaker than this, implying only that a fully intelligible appropriation of the procedural demands of communicative action would be impossible for someone not capable of this form of sensibility. This is still, I believe, a significant thesis and is close enough to Levinas’ own to characterize it as ‘Levinasian’ in inspiration and character. Lacking any discernible way to justify Levinas’ stronger claim, I would recommend it as a somewhat pruned, but more defensible version of his thesis; one that has the virtue of being able to acknowledge the enormous significance of the contribution Habermas has made to contemporary moral and political philosophy with his procedural analysis of the demands of communicative action while remaining able to move beyond it to a substantive and, as I have argued here, more complete understanding of the moral point of view as constituted in speech, certainly, but in forms of sensibility as well that are older than speech, from which we must draw in order to cash out the presumption of the unconditional worth of the other to which we find ourselves disposed in speech.

Notes


2. The brief sketch I provide in this section of Levinas’ and Habermas’ conceptions of language and its relevance for our sense of obligation is more adequately developed in Ch. 1 of my *From*

4. Actually, this overstates the case a bit. At this point I have only made this point in relation to what Habermas calls communicative uses of language oriented to understanding. But, as Habermas is careful to remind us, not every use of language is communicative in this sense. There are also those strategic uses of language which are oriented not to securing an understanding as to the meaning of what is said or written but to bringing about some “perlocutionary” effect in the world, such as an insult which is not made primarily in order that we may understand what is said in the insult but that the person who is the object of the insult will be made to feel bad. Habermas argues, however, that even such strategic uses of language have to presuppose that the meaning of what is said or written is understood. An insult whose meaning has not been understood, for instance, will not be successful. Hence, even strategic uses of language presuppose an orientation to understanding, as a condition of their success, which presupposes the conversational competence with language I have been stressing here. This point deserves further consideration than I can give it here. See Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 286-295.

5. “Every valid norm has to fulfill the following condition: (U) All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests.” Jürgen Habermas, “Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification” in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans., Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press,

8. Enrique Dussel’s ethics of liberation provides one possible line of response to this question. He contends that the formal dimension of ethics articulated by discourse ethics needs to be complemented by an analysis of the material dimension of ethics which provides ethics with a substantive content: a concern with promoting “the reproduction and growth of human life.” (Dussel, “The Architectonic of the Ethics of Liberation,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 23, No. 3, 1997, 7.) My own response to this question is different from his, I believe, in one principal ways. Whereas Dussel’s material ethical principle is broadly teleological in character, having to do with “the reproduction and growth of human life” as a universal aim of human action, my proposals are unequivocally deontological in spirit, conceiving my sensible proximity to the face of the other in terms of the unconditional authority of the other to oblige me to her/his service. Though I can see how a sensible proximity to the face of the other could lead us to conceive of “the reproduction and growth of human life” as our primary moral agenda, I would argue that this should be understood as a teleological consequence of this prior deontological level of analysis; that, in other words, though our two responses are entirely complimentary, my response should be understood as prior to Dussel’s (a point with which Dussel may not, in the final analysis, disagree: see my discussion of Dussel’s position on my proximity to the face of the other as an “‘originary-ethical reason’” (“The Architectonic of the Ethics of Liberation,” 17) below). It is only in the light of grasping my duty to the other, that I can appreciate the importance of advancing the other’s concerns with “the reproduction and growth” of her/his life, rather than merely advancing my concerns with “the reproduction and growth” of my own life. It is for this reason, as well, that I am not entirely convinced by Dussel that discourse ethics actually stands in need of a material ethical principle in the way he
proposes. Once we recognize the substantive point of a procedural commitment to impartiality in our moral judgements in our sensible proximity to the face of the other; once discourse ethics is developed in this direction, I do not see why what we are ethically concerned to promote need not remain indeterminate - something to be determined, as Habermas argues, only in and through the deliberations of the participants in a practical discourse, something we would expect to be fluid as the concerns of the participants themselves change over time.


12. It is important to Levinas that our sensible vulnerability to the other is not mediated by principles, as a deliberative process is. See Otherwise than Being, p. 100. Also see Enrique Dussel who writes of the “recognition of the Other, the ‘originary-ethical reason’ (of Levinas) (as) prior to critique and prior to argument.” “The Architectonic of the Ethics of Liberation,” 16-17.


14. Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 68. “Our analysis will follow sensibility in its prenatural signification to the maternal, where, in proximity, signification signifies before it gets bent into
perserverence in being in the midst of a nature.”

15. I am alluding to mechanisms of “kin selection,” “reciprocal altruism,” and “group selection.” There are many accounts available of the first two mechanisms. See, for instance, Richard Dawkins’ The Selfish Gene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), chs. 6, 10, & 12. For a sympathetic account of “group selection” which has recently found a renewed respectability in limited, well-defined forms, see Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson, Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).


17. Which is not to say that it is out of step with the attitudes of all evolutionary scientists. See, for instance, Dawkins who writes, “I think ‘nature red in tooth an claw’ sums up our modern understanding of natural selection admirably” (The Selfish Gene, 2) and George C. Williams’ “Mother Nature is a Wicked Old Witch” (in Evolutionary Ethics, ed., Matther H. Nitecki and Doris V. Nitecki (Albany: State University of New York Press, 217-231)) whose title aptly sums up his perspective.


20. See *The Selfish Gene*, 4 where he writes, “I am not going to argue about whether people who behave altruistically are ‘really’ doing it for secret or subconscious selfish motives. Maybe they are and maybe they aren’t, and maybe we can never know, but in any case that is not what this book is about.” Admittedly, this sensible construal of the limits of his thesis does not square easily with his more hyperbolic statement of it one page earlier, “Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish.” (*The Selfish Gene*, 3)

21. See Sober and Wilson, *Unto Others*, ch. 10. Also note their point that their discussion of the motivation behind parental care for offspring “generalizes to helping directed to individuals other than one’s offspring.” (304)

22. I am thinking, in particular, here of accounts of reciprocal altruism, other regarding behavior which takes the form of “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” Accounts of reciprocal altruism should not, however, simply be dismissed as irrelevant to morality. As Michael Ruse notes, “morality is but one of the urges promoted by reciprocal altruism. Non-moral, restricting feelings are also produced by the same mechanism.” (*Taking Darwin Seriously* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 243.)


25. Several points would need to be emphasized here, beginning with the cognitive processes involved in each and the way each is more or less generalized to strangers.


28. In the sense that the second part of his ethics presupposes the first which includes a material and a formal element, the latter of which basically accepts the formal insights of discourse ethics. See Dussel, “Epilogue,” in Alcoff and Mendietta, eds. Thinking from the Underside of History, 274 & 281.


32. See Emmanuel Levinas, Difficult Freedom, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 212