



## Rhetoric's Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response

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### ABSTRACT

It does not seem terribly unfair to say that studies of both rhetoric and dialogue have tended, by and large, to pass over listening in favor of speaking. In scholarly as well as quotidian parlance, it would appear that both rhetoric and dialogue are principally concerned with *speech*, banishing listening to the silent subservience of rhetoric's *other*. Whichever way it is glossed—as rhetoric, dialogue, language, or argumentation—the Western conception of *logos* emphasizes speaking at the expense of listening (Fiumara 1990). And the problem with conceiving of *logos* in terms of speech and speaking is not only that it ignores the importance of listening but also that it obscures how listening makes the ethical response possible. Drawing on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, this article examines the ethical exigency of the face and its relation to primordial discourse in order to disclose the otherwise hidden ethical significance of listening and its vocation as a form of co-constitutive communicative action that can “listen persons to speech.”

“How is the vision of the face no longer vision, but hearing and speech?”

—Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”

It is by now perhaps a commonplace that studies of both rhetoric and dialogue have tended, by and large, to pass over listening in favor of speaking.<sup>1</sup> In scholarly as well as quotidian parlance, it would appear that both subjects are principally concerned with speaking—with or without

eloquence or colloquy—banishing listening to the silent subservience of rhetoric’s other. Whichever way it is glossed—as rhetoric, dialogue, language, or argumentation—the Western conception of *logos* emphasizes speech at the expense of listening (Fiumara 1990). And the problem with conceiving of *logos* in terms of speech and speaking is not only that it ignores the importance of listening but also that it obscures how listening makes the ethical response possible. Drawing on Levinas’s early philosophical writings, this article examines the ethical exigency of the face and its relation to primordial discourse in order to disclose the otherwise hidden significance of listening. In so doing, I make a case for conceptualizing listening as a form of co-constitutive communicative action that can “listen persons to speech.”

In spite of his allergic reaction to both rhetoric and dialogue, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas gives us insight into the relationship between ethics and speech, and his work tends to blur, or at least bend, dualistic distinctions between the two.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of six decades, Levinas produced a voluminous body of work that developed his philosophy of ethics and the other. From the beginning, Levinas rejected the Eleatic unity of being by addressing the infinite and irreducible alterity of the other. This “daring break with Parmenides” (1989c, 42) enabled Levinas to pose ethics as a “first philosophy” that privileges plurality, exteriority, and alterity over unity, interiority, and ontology. To Levinas, what come first are not questions about *being*, but questions about *relations* with others. “Preexisting the plane of ontology,” he argues, “is the ethical plane” (1969, 201). Levinas’s philosophy does not ask the ontological question of whether to be or not to be but the ethical question of whether my relation to others is justified. In short, to Levinas the response to this question means “to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice” (1989a, 85). In Levinas’s view, the self is always accompanied by a “bad conscience” as to whether it has usurped the place of the other. In contrast to his teachers and existentialist contemporaries such as Heidegger, Husserl, and Sartre who focus on consciousness and the ideation of the self, Levinas’s self is not a self-same-subject but a relational intersubjective subject. To Levinas, subjectivity is not for itself but for the other, and it manifests in what we might call “dialogic ethics” (though Levinas himself doesn’t)—ethics *through* *logos*. The term “dialogic ethics,” however, should not be taken to imply that dialogue and ethics are two separate phenomena but rather as suggesting the extent to which they are intertwining aspects of human existence. Dialogue depends on ethics and ethics on dialogue, and the two

converge in the whorl that is human being. When speaking of dialogue and ethics in what follows, then, I will be speaking specifically about being with others.

Although the Levinasian face-to-face encounter exemplifies this simultaneity of the ethical and the dialogic, it nevertheless posits an ethical encounter that presupposes yet underestimates the importance of listening. For Levinas, the revelation of the face is speech, and the self's responsibility to respond to the face of the other is infinite, unlimited. And yet quietly embedded in this assertion of responsibility—the ability to respond—lies the prior action of listening. It is hidden behind a face, despite the centrality of speech and speaking. We can hear traces of listening's erasure even in the very word "response/ability." For as its etymological derivation from the Latin "spondere" suggests ("to pledge, to promise"), "responding" emphasizes the speaking, but not the listening, of an ethical actor. Listening, however, is essential to the ethical encounter—it is an invocation that can give birth to speech. Drawing on Levinas's early philosophical writings (up to and including his epic 1961 *Totality and Infinity*), this article traces the conceptual development of the role of the face in Levinas's ethics in order to disclose how its polymodality can bring us not just *up to* but *through* the doorway of logos by means of listening.

#### THE FACE THAT SPEAKS

Levinas's interest begins with the transcendence of being through ethics, through the self's responsibility for the other. His attempt to locate what is otherwise than being is not a negation of being but an effort to come to grips with it in a way that departs from the egotistical imperialism of Cartesian hegemony. Levinas theorizes that the ethical relation originates in the asymmetrical subordination of self to other, wherein the priority of the other always comes first. This sense of the ethical as abiding in the disruption of the self's presumed "right of being" is reflected by Levinas's repeated quote from Pascal's *Pensées*: "That is my place in the sun. That is how the usurpation of the whole world began" (1998a, ix) and in another favored quote from Dostoevsky's *Brother's Karamazov*: "We are all guilty in everything in respect to all others, and I more than all the others" (2001, 133). Ethics, according to Levinas, begins with the renunciation the self's right to be in favor, always, of the other. The self is called to responsibility for the other before it is free, and the face is the manifestation of the ethical exigency that is woven into the very structure of human being. As exemplar

of the ethical, the face of the other calls my being into question. The face is neither figurative nor literal but is the expression of the demand of the other. Thus the face, like the face-to-face, is always dual. It is a relational and not an absolute term. "The facing position, opposition par excellence, can only be as a moral summons" (1969, 196). As an absolutely and infinite exteriority, the face can never be grasped or possessed or absorbed into what Levinas calls "the same." Ethics "begins in the face of the exteriority of the other, in the face of the other—that face which enlists my responsibility by its human expression" but that can be neither assimilated by interiority nor reduced to "the same" (1984, 317). Levinas's face is a sign of the other that transcends social categories of identity, and ethics derives from the recognition of this face in all its otherness. The face is not on the order of ontology but of the relation. "The face does not exist before the encounter with it. . . . *It is in the encounter that the face is produced as such*" (Perpich 2008, 76).

#### FACE AND VISION

When ethics discloses itself in an encounter with a face, rather than, say, a voice, we are placed in a visual world that privileges vision over audition. As an epistemic stance, the metaphor of the face reflects the prevalence of visual dominance in Western philosophy wherein seeing is thought to be synonymous with understanding, and words like "vision," "view," "outlook," and "perspective" orient toward a visual mode wherein acts of cognition such as thinking, comprehending, and understanding are understood as mental pictures to be seen by the mind's eye. Listening, in contrast, is seen as a subordinate modality, most useful for bringing invisible events and objects to light, as when radio astronomy and ultrasound transpose sonic phenomena into visual images and when sounds are "thought of as anticipatory clues for ultimate visual fulfillments" (Ihde 1976, 55). Even ornithologists are bird*watchers*, not bird listeners, wherein seeing is the ultimate aim and auditory experience merely points toward the invisible presence of birds. As Ree describes this dominant perspective, "Vision is for the most part sheer self commanding voluntariness compared with hearing, which appears to be little more than supine passivity[,] . . . mere susceptibility" (1999, 52). Communication scholars Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Walter Ong (1958, 1982) have documented how this privileging of vision arose historically through the introduction of writing into previously oral cultures. Their work demonstrates how each new technology—from writing to print to broadcast—worked to reshape everything from

economics to metaphysics, as societies moved toward increasingly more visual orientations. According to these scholars, when words are written they become part of a visual world that silences the sound of language, that “splits thought and action” (McLuhan 1962, 32) and cleaves speaker from addressee (Ong 1982). McLuhan describes how medieval readers originally conceived of literature as “something to be listened to” (1962, 106) and how even solitary reading was done aloud. But the uniform homogeneity of literary technologies, such as the standardized typeface of printing, dampened the lively resonance of speech, “crack[ing] the voices of silence” (1962, 298). Ong is quite eloquent on the implications of this transformation when he writes that “in this economy where everything having to do with speech tends to be in one way or another metamorphosed in terms of structure and vision[,] . . . speech is no longer a medium in which the human mind and sensibility lives. It is resented, rather, as an accretion to thought, hereupon imagined as ranging noiseless concepts or ‘ideas’ in a silent field of mental space” (1958, 291).

Levinas is of course fully cognizant of the implications of visual bias in the Western philosophic tradition, and he taps the prestige of vision advisedly.<sup>3</sup> In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas goes to Plato to show the privileging of light as the origin of existents in the void, in the horizon in nothingness. “The eye does not see the light, but the object in the light. . . . The light makes things appear by driving out the shadows” (1969, 189). He also goes to St. Augustine and Heidegger to illustrate the objectification inherent in vision and thereby its establishment of separation and empty space. But at the same time, he critiques the limitations of vision on two fronts—firstly, it “moves in to grasp” and hence dominates the other, and secondly, it is limited by its own perspective. Levinas writes, “To see is hence always to see on the horizon. The vision that apprehends on the horizon does not encounter a being out of what is beyond all being” (1969, 191). Diane Perpich (2005, 2008) and Jacques Derrida (1978) have both noted several contradictions in Levinas’s metaphor of the face. One paradox resides in the fact that as an image, the face resists conceptual representation—it is unthinkable, ungraspable, unrepresentable. Yet so deeply does the modality of vision dominate that, ironically, even these remarks tend to reinforce a visual rendering of the face. Perpich, for example, describes the face in the language of image and representation. She writes that “rhetorically, the face is an image that represents the inadequacy of every image for representing alterity[;] . . . it represents the impossibility of its own representation” (2005, 103). Perpich and Derrida also note a second paradox that arises from the

impossibility of expressing the singular alterity of the other without at the same time describing an abstract universal essence. Levinas describes the face as exceeding and refusing the containment of my gaze. According to Derrida (1978), this depiction of the irreducible and infinite alterity of the other produces an unsolvable logical contradiction, because it is impossible to think the other without simultaneously thematizing, or containing, the other. In Perpich's words, because "Levinas's notion of an absolute other forbids us from assigning to the other any determinate predicate, it seems as if all unique, singular faces are the same" (2005, 104). Thus the contradiction of face arises from the fact that it is both particular (in that every "other" is a completely unique and specific "other") and at the same time universal (insofar that everyone is an "other"). But these paradoxes may be at least partly resolved when the polymodality of the face discloses the otherwise invisible portals to listening.

#### SPEECH AND VOICE

But what of speech? Does the face not speak? Yes. In fact, Levinas's face commands through speech. By the time *Totality and Infinity* was first published in 1961, Levinas's face had come to exemplify the ethical. But earlier, beginning with the 1946 publication of *There Is*, Levinas had emphasized the silent voice of the *ilya*, which frighteningly transcends "inwardness as well as exteriority" (1989c, 30). At this time, he stressed both face and speech as primary modalities of relation. "The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no 'interiority' permits avoiding" (1969, 201). This idea of a polymodal "face that speaks" introduces an interesting contradiction that Levinas himself addresses in 1951 when he asks, "How is the vision of the face no longer vision, but hearing and speech?" (1987, 11). That is, how can the face, a visual phenomenon in which seeing is the primary experience, manifest not in sight but in hearing? This paradoxical question recurs throughout Levinas's texts, as he continually employs polymodal metaphors suggestive of both sight and speech, such as revelation, invocation, appellation, implying that something more than vision alone is needed for the encounter with the other: "It is the face; its revelation is speech" (1969, 193). So while Levinas's encounter with alterity manifests in the face, a visual phenomenon, it is also more than that: it is speech, too. The other is a face precisely because faces manifest exteriority, otherness outside the self. Moreover, because faces both reveal and conceal, the face of the other reminds us that there is always already more, as yet unseen.

But the other also reveals itself through speech by introducing a dimension of transcendence that is not possible with vision alone. Speech, in its transcendence of vision's horizon, can restrain or temper vision's inclination toward violence and domination. As Levinas writes, "The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised" (1969, 198). Thus the face eludes the apparent totalizing grasp of my vision by introducing (im)possibilities and (mis)understandings that are inevitably the accomplishments of speech. Levinas's ethics of the face implies a seeing eye/I that is grounded in the subjectivity of vision's objectification but that is also accompanied by the transcendent possibilities invoked by nonviolent speech.

And what of the voice, does it not speak? Unlike the face, speech comes from, but is not itself, the body. But the voice, as the resonating organ of speech, testifies to our embodiment as speaking and listening beings. So in place of speech, I here introduce the notion of the voice as the face's counterpart. While voice and face are both elements of the human body that can signify and express, the voice brings the *temporal* embodiment of human being into sharper relief. The voice moves rhythmically through time as an event, not as an object, through the medium of the breath and its rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. The voice of the other, unlike the face of the other, is invisible and cannot be seen. It has not one but many surfaces, and it reverberates with the echoes of all the other voices past and present, heard and unheard. As sound, the voice of the other is a wave of energy that surrounds me, enters me. But unlike the exteriority of the face, which preserves the subject/object dualism of "the seeing" and "the seen," the voice of the other mingles inextricably, crossing through semipermeable boundaries between inner and outer.<sup>4</sup> And this may be in part what deters Levinas from pursuing listening as a doorway to the ethical—for the resonating interpenetration and boundarylessness of sound come perhaps too close to the impulses, both philosophical and political, of union that the ethical encounter with alterity must at all costs avoid. In his 1947 essay on Proust, Levinas states the problem quite directly: "But if communication bears the mark of failure or inauthenticity in this way, it is because it is sought as a fusion. One begins with the idea that the duality must be transformed into a unity, and that social relations must culminate in communion" (1989b, 164). Listening, as noted, however, is a radically different epistemic process from that of visual perception—vision distances and separates while listening connects and bridges. Like light, sound has a horizon that animates space, but unlike

light, sound blurs the boundaries between interior and exterior. When sound waves of speech enter me, they become a part of me by vibrating through my body so that I am, as deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie says, a participator of sound (Riedelsheimer 2004). “I can also tell the quality of a note by what I feel. I can sense musical sound through my feet and lower body, and also through my hands, and I can identify the different notes as I press the pedal according to which part of my foot feels the vibrations and for how long, and by how I experience the vibrations in my body” (Glennie 1990, 103). Sound is thus embodied in its reception, rippling through skin, muscle, bone, and synapse.

At the same time, however, speech contains both language and non-language elements and can convey meaning without sound and word. Thus beyond the sonic vibrations of speech, listening also requires an aural eye—an eye that listens. Scholars of nonverbal communication understand the importance of a listening eye that attends not only to words but also to the sounds and sights that comprise and surround them. They study visual attributes of communication such as gesture, posture, proximity, facial expression, eye gaze, and other forms of “body language,” as well as sonic attributes such as intonation, prosody, pitch, rhythm, and inflection. It might be said, then, that the ethical fulcrum sits not between visual and auditory domains but between oral and literary perspectives—ethics springs not from a literal eye that speaks but from an aural eye that listens. The voice of the other invokes listening ears and aural eyes grounded in the intersubjectivity of the relation rather than speaking eyes and deafened ears born through the subjectivity of objectification and domination. Speech reveals the always elusive other through a face that preserves the infinitude of alterity. At the same time, the silence of the face points to the unsaid and unsayable—it reminds us of the ineffable inexhaustible infinity of the saying. And just as the unimodality of vision alone cannot hinder the impulses toward mastery and domination, so the voice without a face cannot resist the lure of speech’s call for merger and unification. Thus a polymodal face, comprised of voice, vision and listening, is necessary. But when Levinas writes that “to put speech at the origin of truth is to abandon the thesis that . . . the solitude of vision is the first work of truth” (1969, 99), might we not go still further and put listening, in conjunction with speaking, at the origin of truth? That is to say, perhaps my encounter with the other manifests neither in the separation of vision nor in the invocation of voice, but in my attentive attunement to the speech of the other—something that might be called “listening otherwise” (Lipari, 2009).

## THE LISTENING AND THE HEARD

In his early work, Levinas was drawn to sound's ability to destabilize and disrupt the apparent mastery of vision. In a 1949 essay on the work of surrealist writer Michel Leiris, he writes that "to speak is to interrupt my existence as a subject, a master, but to interrupt it without offering myself as spectacle, leaving me simultaneously object and subject. My voice brings the element in which that dialectical situation is accomplished concretely" (1998b, 149). In this essay Levinas begins with the idea of sound as word and explores the power of speech to disrupt the empire of the self and establish an intersubjective relation. He writes: "There is in fact in sound—and in consciousness understood as hearing—a shattering of the always complete world of vision. . . . Sound is all repercussion, outburst, scandal" (1998b, 147). Given this early acknowledgment of the ethical importance of voice and sound, it is curious that Levinas would come to so neglect the listening.<sup>5</sup> But in spite of his earlier explorations of sound, word, and the invocation of the other, Levinas rarely references speech's other—listening. However, Levinas is not the first or last philosopher of communication to make this omission. Consider how in spite of their seminal contributions to scholarship, the orality/literacy binarism of Ong (1958, 1982) and McLuhan (1962) is itself deaf to listening. Although there is much to say about the implications of this neglect, I here only briefly address two. Firstly, Ong's arguments rest heavily on claims about the temporal evanescence and spatial interiority of sound.<sup>6</sup> But when examined through a listening lens, speech's relation to time and space is less fleeting and more complex. Ong says, for example, that "sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent" (1982, 32). But is it? Does sound go out of existence, or does it move through and away, leaving a trace behind? Leaving aside questions about how far sound waves can travel and echo across space over time, does the sound of language in fact die? What are you hearing right now as you read these words? And what are those voices from the past that speak, from time to time, in your head? Or what about the thoughts and music one hears while silently riding the bus or sipping a coffee? Similarly, Ong's theory about the evanescence of sound also overlooks the simultaneity of sound. There is in sonic resonance and sympathetic vibration a kind of simultaneity—sound does not abide alone but gathers other voices with it. Sound has a kind of inevitable polyphony created from the sound itself and the vibrations it triggers around it. And in this sense, the polyphonous simultaneity of

sound is not unlike the polymodal simultaneity of the face-to-face ethical relation. Another example of the philosophical neglect of listening can be found, ironically, in the great scholar of understanding, Hans-Georg Gadamer. For even while Gadamer considers hearing to be “the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon” he nevertheless oversimplifies when he writes “when you look at something you can also look away from it by looking in another direction, but you cannot ‘hear away’” (2003, 462). While it is certainly true that we can literally shut out visual but not auditory stimuli, it is also true that we can hear but fail to listen. For just as seeing can occur in the absence of looking, so can hearing occur without listening, and both the communication literature and everyday life are filled with examples (ranging from “turning a deaf ear” to “selective listening”) that convey the idea of what Gadamer calls “hearing away.” That is, hearing without listening is response without responsibility; it is a form of pseudodialogue without ethics.

And this raises a question—why do both French and English (in addition to other) languages have two words for the auditory process: “entendre” and “écouter,” “to hear” and “to listen”? In English, the verb “to hear” derives from the Middle English “heren,” Old High German “hören,” and Latin “cavere.” *Merriam-Webster’s 11<sup>th</sup> Collegiate Dictionary* defines “to hear” as “to perceive or apprehend by ear” and “to gain knowledge of by hearing.” Similarly, the *OED* defines “to hear” as “to perceive, or have the sensation of, sound; to possess or exercise the faculty of audition of which the specific organ is the ear.” In French, the verb “entendre” (from the Latin “intendere”) is defined as “au sense de percevoir par l’ouïe” (Girodet 2001, 281), which translates, as does the English “to hear,” roughly to “the sense of perception by hearing.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the English verb “to listen,” is derived from the Middle English “listnen” and is defined by the idea of *attention* to sound. The *OED* defines “listen” as “to give attention with the ear to some sound or utterance; to make an effort to hear something; to ‘give ear’” and derives it from the Sanskrit “crusti” (meaning “obedience”), also associating it with the cognates of “audition” (“audit,” “auditorium,” “audio,” etc.) that stem from the Latin “audire” (“obedience”). In French, the verb “écouter” (from the Latin “auscultare”) is defined as “prêter attention aux paroles, au son, au bruit” (Girodet, 261), which translates, as does the English “to listen,” roughly as “to pay attention to words, sound, or noise.” These definitions illustrate that “listen” and “hear” are not simply synonyms but are inflected with different meanings that suggest different ways of being in the world. Etymologically, “listening” (“écoutant”) comes from a root that

emphasizes attention and giving to others, while “hearing” (“entendant”) comes from a root that emphasizes perception and receiving from others. Indeed, the ideas of “gaining” and “possessing” found in the English etymology of “hearing” foreground the self’s experience of assimilation, while the ideas of attention and obedience found in “listening” focus on the other’s experience of expression.<sup>8</sup>

This contrast between listening and hearing raises another possible one that, echoing Levinas’s later distinction between “the saying” and “the said,” we might call “the listening” and “the heard.” In his second masterpiece, *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), Levinas began to develop a theoretical distinction between the said, or the propositional content of utterances, and the saying, the sociality of addressing an interlocutor. Levinas describes how the saying “opens me to the other before saying what is said, before the said uttered in this sincerity forms a screen between me and the other. This saying without a word is thus like silence. It is without words, but not with hands empty” (1987, 170). I would here like to propose that if the saying expresses an infinite surplus of responsibility and vulnerability that precedes signification, then perhaps “the listening” enacts an infinite surplus of welcoming invitation and reception, no matter what is said or heard. The listening, in contrast to the heard, is an enactment of responsibility made manifest through a posture of receptivity, a passivity of receiving the other into oneself without assimilation or appropriation. The listening is a process of contraction, of stepping back and creating a void into which the other may enter. It is the distance the “I” creates so that the alter may come forward. In the listening, I create a space to receive you, letting your speech enter me, flow through me. In contrast, the heard, like the said, pertains to propositional content, and it arises from taking in your words and making them mine. The heard thus involves judgment and distinction—the seeking of certainty using cognitive structures, schemas, and familiar ways of seeing and doing. The heard is created when I fix your words over and against mine in order to assimilate, appropriate, convince, or seek a kind of communion. Without attending to any conceptual distinctions between listening and hearing, our ethical inquiries tend to focus too much on the heard and miss the fact that the listening, like the saying, has its own meaning, if not priority. As Levinas enjoins, to make the stranger a familiar is to do violence to the otherness of the other, to exclude some part of the stranger. The listening, as opposed to the heard, does not absorb the other into conformity with the self but instead creates a dwelling space to receive the alterity of the other, and let it resonate.

## THE VOCATION OF LISTENING

When the voice of the other calls me into question, do I listen? And what does this Levinasian invocation evoke? In contemporary English, the word “vocation” has become nearly synonymous with occupation, work, labor, career, or profession. We have vocational training and vocational rehabilitation, vocational services and vocational-technical schools.<sup>9</sup> Still lingering, however, is the sense of the religious vocation as something closer to a call, to being summoned. Thomas Merton describes how the religious vocation requires one “to deliver oneself up, to hand oneself over, entrust oneself completely” to the call (1956, 101). But what is a call without an ear to listen? Might we say that it is not yet quite a vocation? The English etymology of the word “vocation” comes by way of the Latin “voc” for voice, originally from the Sanskrit “vak” or “vac,” “an early Vedic term for the absolute word” and for the goddess of speech (Beck 1993, 251). The word “vocation” echoes in cognates such as “invocation” and “evocation,” which imply something beyond a call or a summons. According to the *OED*, “to evoke” is “to draw out something hidden” and “to invoke” is to perform “a form of conjuring.” Thus we might say that in dialogic ethics, listening is my vocation, my calling. And this vocation of listening requires an encounter with the unknown; listening draws forth something hidden, bringing something new into the world. Levinas frequently invokes the biblical phrase “here I am” (“hineni” in Hebrew), which is spoken both by Moses and Isaiah upon encountering God. This “here I am” is a posture of openness—a readiness to listen to the other who is at once hidden and about to be revealed. But this posture of a listening receptivity is difficult in a Platonic view of language, where thinking and speaking are synonymous with representing and signifying and where language is seen as a kind of tool that symbolizes thoughts and objects and then transfers these representations from one place to another. In this view, the world of vision dominates the world of audition; the result is that the transmission and semiotic functions of language render other aspects of language, such as the performative and constitutive functions, inaudible (Stewart 1996). A constitutive view of language, in contrast, hears language not merely as a system of signs, symbols, tools, or instruments. Rather, it hears how human worlds come into being in language. As Gadamer says, “Language is not just one of the human’s possessions in the world, rather, on it depends that fact that the human has a world at all” (2003, 443). In this view, language reverberates with the echoes of every utterance ever spoken. Language shapes thought just as thought, in turn,

shapes language. Thus thinking, or meaning making, does not just happen privately; rather it is always in conversation with language. "By becoming sound a word is not merely drawn out of the silence and communicated to others, but rather set off against the other words that are still in silence" (Picard 1988, 45). In this Heideggerian sense, language speaks me as much as I speak it. But might we not also consider how language listens me? As with speaking, the constitutive powers of listening happen not only within and between individuals sitting face to face but among large collectivities gathered side by side as well. One need only consider the power of public orators to forge large groups of people into previously nonexistent communities and solidarities. It is not simply the voice of a Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Mohandas Gandhi, or an Adolph Hitler that creates new worlds for good or ill but in fact the gathered hearkening of those assembled collectivities, of what "comes to presence" through the process we might call "listening others to speech."

When Levinas contends that the communicative action of saying takes priority over the substance of the said, he is not just suggesting that speech has to be situated in the intersubjective occurrence of dialogic address to an interlocutor. He is also, as Heidegger did with the word "being," privileging process over product. Saying precedes the said just as being precedes the being. As I have noted, what is missing from this formulation is the ways in which the listening precedes the heard. But now we are faced with another question regarding yet another grammatical distinction; whether the verb "to listen" is transitive or intransitive. The transitivity of verbs express agentive action—a subject does something to or with an object, as in, the clause "She speaks the words." Transitive verbs transfer some form of energy or action from the subject to the object. Intransitive verbs, in contrast, express a nondirected action or express the action of a subject in relation to an object, but they cannot express the action of a subject on an object. Thus, the intransitive verb form either stands alone, as in "He wept," or it can be modified by an adverb or else a prepositional phrase that serves an adverbial function, as in "He wept before her," but it cannot take either a direct or indirect object as in "He wept her" or "He wept her the story." In English, many verbs are both transitive and intransitive as in the clauses "She speaks" (intransitive) or "She speaks the words" (transitive). In English, the verb "to hear" is both transitive and intransitive—we can say "She hears the words" or simply "She hears." The English verb "to listen," however, has only an intransitive use in contemporary English.<sup>10</sup> Thus we can say "We heard the words" but not "We listened the words." Similarly, we can say "She listens"

or “She listens to the others” but not “She listens the others.” In French, in contrast, both “écouter” and “entendre” are transitive verbs that can act on an object, as in “Je vous écoute” and “Je t’entends.” The question of why the transitive form of “listen” has disappeared from English is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is worth examining the previously undisclosed meanings that emerge when we employ the verb “to listen” in a transitive form in such a way as turn the recipient into the object of the action. The feminist theologian Nelle Morton illustrates this largely neglected, productive power of audition with her observations about how “hearing others to speech” is itself a compelling and, at times, political act. Morton describes how “we empower one another by hearing the other to speech. We empower the disinherited, the outsider” (1985, 128). How resonant Morton’s phrasing is here with Levinas’s ethical directive that we respond to the face the “widow, the orphan, and the stranger” who “commands me as Master” from “a dimension of height” (1969, 213–14). The empowerment of “listening others to speech” reverses authoritative normative social arrangements that silence and/or refuse “to listen the voices” of the oppressed. And, as with Buber’s (1958) I—Thou relation, listening others to speech is not a strategic or tactical practice aimed at achieving a predetermined goal; to assume such an attitude would be to disobey the demands of the other in the present moment. Buber’s observation that true dialogue is “a matter of renouncing the pantechanical mania or habit with its easy ‘mastery’ of every situation” (Buber 1975, 39) is echoed by Levinas’s insistence on the mastery of the other over self, and on Morton’s reflection that “clever techniques seen as positive agents for creation and change are not good for the kind of hearing that brings forth speech” (1985, 206).

Transitive uses of the verb “to listen” thus convey a sense of listening as constitutive of and prior to speaking—listening is an invocation, a calling forth of speech. The (in)vocation of dialogic ethics is a giving birth to speech by listening, it is a *dwelling place* from where we offer our hospitality to the other and the world. But it is not only that the voice of the other calling requires a listener to be complete; it is that, more radically, without a listener, the speaking simply may not occur. Morton describes how as a young doctor Carl Jung worked with women who were not willing or able to speak to their doctors, who, in turn, assumed that the women had no language. With patience and perseverance Jung found a way to connect with the women by listening and imitating their gestures and movements until finally they began to speak. Morton writes how Jung “had touched the place where the connection had been broken. But he did this through

their language and not the language of the doctors. He had heard them to speech" (1985, 209). Another example of the constitutive power of listening can be seen in the work of therapist Dori Laub, who describes the process of psychoanalytic work with Holocaust survivors. Through the process of listening to untold and repressed stories, therapists and survivors were able to co-create "a record that is yet to be made." Laub writes: "The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*" (1992, 57).

## CONCLUSION

For too long communication scholars have taken speech and speaking as stand-ins for the logos. But a logos that speaks without listening is no logos at all. This essay argues that listening makes a "forgetting the self" ethical response possible. Whereas vision too easily possesses, such that what is seen is mine, audition offers the opportunity to listen others to speech. As Gemma Fiumara describes it, "The cognitive dedication to the word of the other demands . . . a kind of inner abnegation. Without this inner renunciation the individual can only hold a dialogue with himself" (1990, 125). Just as the concept of intersubjectivity has opened up new conceptual spaces for scholarly inquiry outside the self-other binary, the concept of listening others to speech can open new pathways for both ethics and understanding. But a cautionary note is in order. It might seem easy to paint speaking with the blue brush of negativity and listening with a gleaming aura of gold, but that is oversimplification. Both speaking and listening are part and parcel of one process of human action—communicating. In our attempts to bring listening into the heart of communication we should not overlook the limitations and misuses of listening and hearing. Like speaking, listening can act for ill as well as good. In fact, we might chronicle a veritable resume of listening "misdeeds" that could include secret listening, careless listening, faithless listening, and coercive listening. Technologies of communication, from the fourth century BCE tyrannical Ear of Dionysus to the present-day data mining expeditions of corporations and of Homeland Security, have a long history of harnessing the powers of secret listening as a way to extend power and control. The ringing church bell of medieval Europe did more than tell the time; it regulated activity and imposed a standardized temporal regime on its listeners. Similarly, interrogations, whether from a

doctor, a cop, or a member of the CIA, enact a mode of coercive listening that diminishes the humanity and agency of speakers. And faithless listening is exemplified by a history of innumerable failures to listen and heed a warning—most recently exemplified by the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the 2008 mortgage crisis, and the 2010 BP gulf oil spill. Thus, just as not all speaking constitutes an engagement with dialogic ethics, neither does all listening.

In summary, this article has argued that listening is a form of co-constitutive communicative action fundamental to dialogic ethics. That is, listening is neither a secondary subordinate process that follows and flows from speech, nor is it a futile gesture of “the feeble-minded [who attempt] to douse the world conflagration with a syringe.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, listening is the invisible and inaudible enactment of the ethical relation itself; on it, everything depends.

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## NOTES

The author wishes to thank the reviewers for their help in revising this manuscript. It is a far better essay thanks to their insights, questions, and suggestions.

1. Some important exceptions of course exist in areas of communication studies, education, and clinical psychology (see, for example, Ratcliffe 1999). Nevertheless, most of the scholarship in both rhetoric and dialogue tend to overwhelmingly focus on speaking.

2. Levinas was deeply suspicious of both rhetoric and dialogue, albeit for different reasons. He associated rhetoric with the said rather than the saying, and, like Plato, distrusted the seductions of eloquence (see Levinas 1993b). His resistance to dialogue was more complex, perhaps stemming from his need to distance himself from Martin Buber and from (the apparent) insistence on reciprocity in the dialogic relation (see Levinas 1984, 1993a, and Lipari, 2004).

3. Edith Wyschogrod notes the peculiarity of Levinas’s famous phrase “ethics is an optics” and suggests that its oddity stems from the fact that, given his rejection of a visual model, “it is in and of itself a command to action without intervening theoretical structures” (2000, 102). I would further emphasize how Levinas sets himself the task, in *Totality and Infinity*, of describing his ethical optics as “a vision without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing virtues of vision, a relation of . . . a wholly different type” (1969, 23). It is my aim in this article to elaborate on how this “wholly different type” of ethical relation

arises from a face that speaks and to which I listen—a polymodal relation of vision, speech, and listening.

4. A brief note on the difference between sound and light may be helpful here. Light is an electromagnetic wave phenomenon that travels through air but is impeded by matter—that is, visible light waves don't shine through the body. Sound, in contrast, is a mechanical wave phenomenon that can travel through multiple media—solids, liquids, gases—actually vibrating the material it travels through—such as the flesh and bones of the body.

5. Why this might be so is beyond the scope of this article, though several possibilities suggest themselves. Perhaps it stems from the problems of union and fusion implied by sound and voice that muted, for Levinas, their conceptual value? Or perhaps his debate with Buber interfered with bringing voice to face? Or perhaps it had to do with the “terror” and “horror” Levinas associates with the voice of silence in the *il y a*. But for whatever reason Levinas eventually chose a unimodal face without voice, and the result has been an almost total neglect of listening.

6. In this, one can perhaps clearly hear Harold Innis (1951) speaking through Ong about the bias in Western communication toward spatial rather than temporal (i.e., historical) conceptual understandings. I also leave aside, for now, discussion of how Ong's conception of sound as pure interiority obviates the exteriority required for the ethical relation.

7. Additionally, in both French and English the verbs “entendre” and “to hear” have a secondary meaning that pertains to understanding, as in “Je t'entends” or “I hear you.”

8. As one of the reviewers of this essay noted, according to the Ciocan and Hansel concordance (2005), Levinas tends to employ “entendre” (“to hear”) far more often than he employs “écouter” (“to listen”). What this suggests to me is that in keeping with the argument of this article, Levinas didn't think much (that is to say neither substantively nor, perhaps, appreciatively) of the place of listening in his ethics. And while an etymological reduction of an English translation of an originally French text may seem untoward to some readers, the general correspondence of “entendre” with “hearing” and “écouter” with “listening” (the latter of which, as the reviewer points out, is occasionally translated by Lingis as the Germanic/Frisian “hearken”), as well as the shared roots of French and English in Latin and the family of Indo-European languages, seems to underscore the point.

9. Similarly, the French “vocation” has two primary senses, one as a “penchant” or “appel” (“call”) and the other as “destiny, role, or mission” (Boussinot 1994, 921).

10. According to the *OED*, an archaic transitive form of the verb “listen” was in use until the early nineteenth century.

11. This is from Levinas's paraphrase of Vasily Grossman in “The Proximity of the Other” (1999b, 108).



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