

# Introduction

## The ethical dimension as the I-other intrigue

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With Emmanuel Levinas (but also with Charles S. Peirce and Mikhail M. Bakhtin), we discover that alterity is constitutive of identity, indeed is at the very heart of identity. The other is in the same. The allusion is to an uncontainable excess with respect to identity, what Levinas also describes as “pre-categorical” alterity before the constitution of identity. In his reflections on the interpersonal dimension, the I-other relationship is transcendent with respect to the dominion of rational knowledge, abstract thought, conceptualization, though the latter are only possible thanks to this relation. The I-other relation, which Levinas calls “ethics,” is a relation of inextricable “intrigue,” “entanglement.”

As described by Levinas, therefore, this is not ethics as it has been traditionally understood. In Levinas “ethics” and “ethical” do not resound in the sense of morals, as a branch of philosophy, a program or decalogue designed to regulate human behavior. His task was not to build an ethics. On investing “ethics” with the meaning of “intrigue” of the I with others, indeed with the world in its entirety, of indissoluble entanglement that cannot be unraveled, Levinas utterly renews the word “ethics” with a sense that is all but commonplace and moralistic. This is “ethics” before ontology, before the State, before politics, before ethics in any ordinary sense of the term. Levinas explains his conception of ethics in a note to “Langage et proximité” (in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 1949, in the 1967 edition, p. 255, note):

We call ethical a relationship between terms such as are tied neither by a synthesis of the understanding nor by a relationship between subject and object, and yet where the one weighs or concerns or is meaningful to the other.

(“Langage et proximité,” 1949, in Levinas 1967,  
Eng. trans. 1987, 116)

Reasoning with Levinas, “ethics” and “ethical” lead beyond the categories of knowledge, truth, and being, revealing an excess with respect to ontology, cognition, thematization, objectivization, and identification. As observed by Jacques Derrida (1997, Eng. trans., 58–64), “ethics” according to Levinas overflows with respect to politics. In Levinas’s own words, “ethics beyond the political,” in the sense that ethics involves a completely different relationship, an altogether different bond compared to what unites representatives of the same national identity, the same political party, the same movement, and the same ideology. Derrida’s claim is that with his notion of “ethics” and reflections on the inevitable I-other interrelationship, Levinas warns us that, whether we like it or not, this “inextricable intrigue” demands not just the welcome as an adequate response to the other, but charity, compassion, mercy, and, if necessary, even sacrifice of the self for the other.

Foundational to the I-other relation, thus to the involvement with the other, compromise with the other, “ethics” and “ethical” testify to what Levinas describes as the inevitable condition of “proximity,” “responsibility,” and “substitution.” These three notions delineate the Levinasian conception of alterity where the relation interconnecting them may be read as follows: “proximity,” i.e., “responsibility,” i.e., “substitution,” or “proximity” as “responsibility” as “substitution”. The order indicates a movement of one for the other to the very point of “substitution,” that is, of sacrificing oneself for the other, of giving oneself up in the other’s place, of risking one’s own life for that other up to the point of extreme sacrifice (*De Dieu qui vient à l’idée*, 1986, 129–32). It is evident that with these terms, we are outside the categories of knowledge, beyond the cognitive horizon, beyond the dominion of seeing, of the visible, beyond the phenomenon, and beyond thematization.

Therefore, with what Levinas thinks as “ethics” (and us with him), we find ourselves in a completely different dimension from where the thought is held to the correspondence between “noesis” and “noema,” to the adjustment between visible and seen. Here all metaphors of vision, of seeing, of the seen no longer have a reason to exist (9). To reflect on alterity in terms of proximity, responsibility, and substitution is the consequence of the constitutive “invisibility of the other,” as Levinas says, of its characteristic irreducibility to the object (*Totalité et infini*, 1961, opens with a section dedicated to the “invisibility of the other” and to the “desire of the invisible”). According to Levinas, while vision involves an adjustment between the idea and the thing, understanding that englobes, the relationship to the other is beyond vision; the other is “invisible” in the sense that it is not given, it is not an object, it is not representable, and it is not definable.

This special meaning which Levinas attributes to “ethics” is taken up in the expression “semioethics,” introduced in 2003 as the title of a book

by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, *Semioetica* (new enlarged edition 2025; see also Petrilli 2010, 2014; Petrilli and Ponzio 2010). “Semioethics” does not designate a new branch in semiotic and philosophical studies, but rather a new orientation in general sign studies which emerges once practitioners and theorizers become aware of their responsibilities toward life all over the planet (Petrilli 2019a). Such consciousness responds to the condition of intercorporeal interconnection among all living bodies, hence among all signs, pivotal in Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s (1990) “architecture of answerability” as much as in Thomas A. Sebeok’s (2001) “global semiotics”. As regards the origins of semiotics as a science, it is not incidental that Sebeok should have underlined the importance of the role carried out by medical semeiotics in addressing that special type of sign as are symptoms, to the end, let us add, of safeguarding life in its variation and multiplicity.

Reading together the sign sciences and the life sciences, semioethics thus develops these connections relatedly to the human sciences in the direction of caring for semiosis, for bodies and signs, for the sake of protecting and nurturing the lifeworld in all its manifestations, human and nonhuman. In light of the condition of inextricable interrelatedness between life and signs, semioethics stresses the need for *responsibility*, for unconditional responsibility toward life over the entire planet. As regards the I-other in the human world, the relationship is one of inevitable interdependency and co-implication (Athamor 2019; Petrilli 2019b). This situation renders closure within the boundaries of individual self-interest altogether delusory, such that not only the sense, but the very possibility of one’s own life depends on the life of others. Consequently, dialogue and responsibility in the interpersonal relationship are not a choice made by the “subject,” whether the single individual or a collectivity, but an inevitable necessity demanded of that “subject”– if life over the planet in whatever form is to thrive (Petrilli and Ponzio 2002).

From the perspective of semioethics, interesting to observe is how both Bakhtin and Sebeok acknowledge the importance of the concept of “biosphere,” introduced in the early 1920s by the biologist Vladimir I. Vernadskij (1926). The biosphere shifts the focus from partial and isolated aspects of the lifeworld to the totality, with Bakhtin an “unfinalizable” totality (Ponzio 1980, 1985, 2015). The reference is to planetary life conceived as a unitary whole and not as the sum of separate, independent living organisms, of bodies. From the perspective of “global ecology,” what with Sebeok we know as “global semiotics,” which is a major development on his biosemiotics (see Copley et al. 2011), the concept of the biosphere in fact evidences the interconnection among all lifeforms, the relation of inextricable *interdependency* among all bodies over the planet, which leads Bakhtin to say that “all life is dialogical” (Ponzio 2006).

For Levinas, the “ethical intrigue” in which every human being finds oneself, concerns one’s body relatedly to the word, the word as contact, as voice, as writing, including literary writing, but it also concerns the word as consciousness, awareness, as a decision-making act, as taking a standpoint. The body and its ethical intrigue imply that the word in the first place is contact, encounter, and involvement. Implicitly the body is already saying independently from explicitation in saying, in the said. Beyond bilateral communication, as occurs in message exchanges and the transmission of information, Levinas describes the condition of *asymmetrical communication* between I and other. In the I-other relationship, sense is not reversible, the distance between one term and the other does not necessarily converge with the distance that separates the latter from the former. This relationship begins from the other who immediately puts the I into the “accusative”—as Levinas says the first case of the I is not the “vocative”, but the “accusative”—such that the other requests the I (even if implicitly, simply with one’s presence)—to justify its “being here”, thus and thus constituted, while the being of the other may even present itself in the form of total destitution. Of course, the I in the accusative can find a hundred excuses to justify itself and its condition, but this does not exclude that the original situation of the I in front of the other is one of immediate responsibility for that other.

Otherness and dialogue are central themes in Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s reflections as well. For both Bakhtin and Levinas dialogue and otherness imply the problem of the word, of verbal language (oral and written), and of the sign in general. Most significantly, signs, whether verbal or non-verbal, are not considered mere channels for the transmission of meaning and values. Far more substantially, signs are the objective, material way of being of alterity and dialogue. In other words, alterity and its revelation through dialogue only occur through signs. Consequently, as Augusto Ponzio maintains in his most recent monograph on Levinas, it is not a reflection on signs, whether verbal or nonverbal, which throws light on the problem of alterity and dialogue. On the contrary, the problem of alterity and dialogue contributes to explaining signs without sacrificing a dimension that is essential to them, that is, the dialogical (Ponzio 2019, 234). In spite of their relevance and omniscience in human relationships, alterity and dialogism are commonly neglected in dominant approaches to linguistics and semiotics, oriented as they are by monologism and identity.

There exists for each and every single human being a means not to recognize one’s ethical intrigue in the relationship with every other in the human world, especially at this point in history; indeed not to recognize entanglement of the human world with the rest of the lifeworld. This means is called “identity,” from identity of the human being and from identity of the single individual to identity of gender, social status, national

affiliation, religion, skin color.... In addition to being a means to justify its indifference to another identity from which it differentiates itself and which it counteracts, identity is a means which leads to conflict and which ends up justifying war (Athanos 2009).<sup>1</sup> In contrast to this tacit identification of each one with a specific identity or with many of the identities one has a right to (gender, social status, profession, national affiliation...), Levinas had occasion to say that “humanity” itself is not an identity in the sense that it is not given once and for all, but rather is an open modality of being, in process, in becoming (*Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 1972).

Otherness and dialogism are in the sign, but they cannot be reduced to sign and communication functional to an I that claims self-sufficiency. This is the case of “relative alterity,” dependent on the conferral of sense by the I, even at the cost of damaging the other, not only the other’s interests but even the other’s life conditions. The I in self-consciousness, in *consciousness of self*, in its interpretations of itself, with respect to which it reacts as a consequence, does not coincide with self which as such is an absolute alterity in itself. The other of self and the other from self—thematized by both Bakhtin and Levinas—is what it is independently of objectifying conscious, of the I, independently of sense conferral by that I. As such non-relative, absolute alterity resists homologation with identity in social reality and cannot be eliminated without resorting to violence in whatever form.

Alterity and dialogism constitute the materiality of the sign, its perspective, and its way of being in the world. As such the sign is constitutively other, transcendent with respect to being, to the identity of being, and its various and diversified articulations in the social. Irreducible to the monologism of identity, its codes and conventions, alterity, and dialogue are manifest above all in the indirect discourse of literary writing. It is no incident that the philosophers Levinas and Bakhtin both valued literature, in particular Dostoevsky’s novels, and independently of each other. As Plato revealed in his dialogues between Socrates and his interlocutors, dialogue as a genre, different from what occurs in monological discourse, allows for speaking with reserve; and alterity is not overwhelmed and annulled. In dialogue, the speaker/writer remains at a distance from the I of discourse with expedients that destabilize the fixity of belief, truth, certainty, and univocality, which interrogate the authority of dogma, of the obvious, of established truth, and imposition of the monological word. This does not mean that dialogue, whether written or oral, cannot become a merely formal expression, that is, a question and an answer in which the question (a “rhetorical question”) orients and decides the answer. However alterity and dialogism, in the sense we are considering them with Levinas and Bakhtin, are distinctive features of the live word, a responsive word in listening to the other in its otherness, where I and other are not included in an identity of some sort, are not reduced to an identity. This is a word that

is truly responsive insofar as it attends to and is responsible for the alterity of the other, the other's not relative, but absolute alterity.

The sense of human life, the properly human, according to Levinas, is founded on responsibility of the I for the other, responsibility prior to the *conatus essendi*, prior to being, and to ontological categories. However, a world where interhuman relationships identify with the world as-it-is is a world characterised by antihumanism which as such fails to trace the signs of prehistorical and an-archical responsibility. The human is lost in history, in identities conceived as totalities—whether psychological, sexual, social, national, ethnic, religious, etc. (Levinas, “Humanism and An-archy,” 1968, in Levinas 1987b, 127–40). Nonetheless, responsibility for the other is the original relationship with the other and is unlimited, absolute responsibility, the “secret of sociality” (“Diachrony and Representation,” in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans., 169).

In contrast with the expression that recurs *à propos* the relationship among nations, that is, “preventive war,” Levinas identifies in the original I-other relationship what he calls “preventive peace” (Ponzio, *Levinas, Globalisation, and Preventive Peace*, 2009). Preventive peace is the sign of a *dirty conscience*, of patience that does not ask for patience from others, but rather is based on a difference between oneself and others, on an *inequality* in a sense wholly opposed to oppression. Viewed in this way difference is asymmetrical. Preventive peace is in unindifference to the other, an unindifference which is responsibility for the other, in the words of Levinas from *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, “the very difference between me and the other” (1974, Eng. trans., 178). I am accountable in the face of the other, responsible before all others for all others. This is a relationship which manifests itself as the first impulse, as the first response to the needs, difficulties, and dangers in which the other finds itself. However, this original impulse is followed by justifications for de-responsibility and for deferring help in support of one's neighbor to others. It is necessary to free ourselves from all the arguments used by the ego in its current “conformation” to escape the original impulse in order to respond to the needs of the other. This means to account not only for one's own rights but also for the rights of the other, thus interrogating with Levinas the concept of so-called “human rights” (“Les droits de l'homme et les droits d'autrui,” in Levinas, *Hors sujet*, 1987a, 180–83).

Responsibility is responsibility for the other. In the context of “asymmetrical communication” in the I-other relationship, as described by Levinas, where sense is not reversible, my responsibility for the other is not reciprocal, is not reversible. Responsibility for the other is irrefutable, an original modality in attitude, an original impulse toward the other. Responsibility is not decided by me, what is decided by me is the result of

arguments based on which I convince myself that I have no responsibility whatsoever for the other's discomfort, for the conditions that produce the other's pain. With Levinas:

The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory,' an 'ulterior to every accomplishment,' from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question 'Where?' no longer holds.  
(1974, Eng. trans., 10)

Responsibility is implied in the I's unindifference to the other, in the so-called original "face-to-face" relationship with the other, a responsibility without alibis, beyond the boundaries of identity and its justifications. This is quite the opposite to Thomas Hobbes's definition of the original human condition as *homo homini lupus*, exchanged for the historical situation of his time, which was no different from the current state of affairs made of interhuman oppositions, contrasts and conflicts, resulting from the formation of closed totalities, nations and states with their respective identities.

Nor is the relationship between I and other regulated by the logic of equal exchange. Levinas claims that the true difference between I and other is that my responsibility for the other is not reciprocated, and is not exchangeable. I am responsible for the other, for all others, for their guilt, their faults, their deeds, and their misdeeds. Levinas explains responsibility for the other with the metaphor of the hostage. The condition of being hostage is an authentic figure of responsibility for the other. The I is hostage for the other, totally, unconditionally. The other, says Levinas,

is the persecuted one for whom I am responsible to the point of being a hostage for that other, and in which my responsibility, instead of disclosing me in my 'essence' as a transcendental ego, divests me without stop of all that can be common to me and another man, who would thus be capable of replacing me. I am then called upon in my uniqueness as someone for whom no one else can substitute himself.

(Levinas 1974, Eng. trans., 59)

Levinas elaborates on this originary sense of responsibility, on his understanding of ethics, and on many occasions (an example is his interview with Philippe Nemo in Levinas, *Éthique et infini*, 1982, 89–98).

Though expressed in different terms and with different arguments, Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the I's responsibility to the other is

not distant from Levinas. Bakhtin speaks of the “architectonics of responsibility” which revolves around two centers of value, that of the I and that of the other, each a singularity endowed with sense on its own account. Each single individual occupies a unique place in the world that cannot be covered by anybody else, as such that single individual cannot be substituted, is unreplaceable. As a singularity each individual is a participative and unindifferent center of value endowed with a capacity for *unlimited responsibility, responsibility without alibis*. To describe the I, individual life, in its uniqueness and incomparability, Bakhtin uses the Russian word *edinstvennĭi* which corresponds to the German *einzig* (see Bachtin, Michail e il suo Circolo 2014, 47–49, 113–17).

In Bakhtin’s view, life and culture, cultural consciousness, and consciousness of the single individual’s uniqueness are connected to the unindifference of the responsible act. However, separated from the vitality of the lifeworld, cultural, cognitive, scientific, political, and even aesthetic values remain trapped within the boundaries of identity, the code, that is, the official order. Moreover, deprived of comparison, of opening to the external viewpoint, to the other, these values are not open to verification and consequently are incapable of revision and transformation. Bakhtin critiques separation and division between two worlds that seem impenetrable, the *lifeworld* and the *world of culture*, showing us instead how these worlds are united by the *unique event of the act*, a sphere where each single individual makes choices and matures standpoints, which involves responsibility, responsiveness, the capacity for unindifference. We cognize, contemplate, create in the “lifeworld,” objectifying life under different aspects and constructing new visions of existence, all from the perspective of a given culture. In this double context the unique event of the act, says Bakhtin, is charged with a double responsibility: on the one hand, responsibility relative to the objective unity of a given cultural sphere, that is, “special responsibility” or “technical responsibility” which is limited to a given role, to a given social function, to the repeatable identity of the objective and interchangeable individual; on the other hand, “moral responsibility” which concerns the unique, singular event-ness of the act (*sobytiĭnost’*), “absolute responsibility,” without the limitations or guarantees offered by a given order, without alibis, responsibility without exemptions and without derogations, that cannot be delegated to others, “unlimited responsibility” of the individual as singularity, uniqueness, and unlimited responsibility of the unrepeatable *act* (see Bachtin, Michail e il suo Circolo 2014, 37–39).

Bakhtin makes this distinction from his very first writings. He maintains that detached from “absolute responsibility,” “special responsibility” is reduced to “technical responsibility” and its alibis and loses in sense (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, 1993 [1920–24]). Special



responsibility is no more than *representation* of a role, of an identity, and human action reduced to “representation”, thus to “technical activity” becomes *imposture*—Bakhtin exemplifies with reference to politics. To live life in obedience to the canons of technical action excluding the indifference, answerability, creativity of participative involvement is to reduce the sense of life to a fact of representation—which implies delegation, and to diminish its actors to the status of impostors, pretenders. To interpret one’s whole life as representation in Bakhtin’s sense is to become an impostor. Representation does not abolish, but simply specializes personal responsibility, reduces it to technical responsibility which results in a lack of participation, personal, unique participation with respect to the social roles we are called to carry out in everyday life, in art, and above all in politics. Responsibility cannot be reduced to special responsibility understood reductively as technical responsibility, for this gives rise to technical action rather than to a responsible act. Life is only fully understood, only fully experienced, fully lived in concrete responsibility, that is, absolute, unlimited, unindifferent responsibility (Bakhtin, Michail e il suo Circolo 2014, 124–27).<sup>2</sup> From this point of view, as Bakhtin teaches us, philosophy of life is ultimately “moral” philosophy.

The question why each human being must be responsible for semiosis, for life over the planet, why and in what sense, is pivotal in semioethics where we distinguish between “ethics” and “semioethics.” From the perspective of ethics, this question does not necessarily require an answer: to be responsible for life on the planet is a moral principle, a categorical imperative. Instead, in the framework of semioethics, it does require an answer: unlike ethics, semioethics involves scientific research, argumentation, interpretation, a dialogic response regulated by the logic of alterity and interrogation. Semioethics formulates a definition of the human being as a “semiotic animal” which inevitably implies “semioethic animal.”

In our discussion of responsibility, the reference is not to limited responsibility, with alibis, but to unlimited responsibility, responsibility without alibis, absolute responsibility. In globalization, the late capitalist communication-production phase of development in social reproduction, our responsibilities to life, human and nonhuman, are unbounded to involve all life-forms in the global ecosystem with which human life is inextricably interconnected (communication and life, signs and life converge). As the study of signs and communication, semiotics – above all when practiced as global semiotics – is called to address this condition, one of inevitable “intrigue,” “entanglement” between the signs of life and the life of signs. Considering the nature of communication today, how the historical-social sphere interferes with the biological, puts it in crisis, renders it dysfunctional, how the cultural sphere invades the natural in a way that destabilizes the relation between semiosphere and biosphere, with a force that is ever

more destructive of life, human and nonhuman, at a planetary level, the task of recovering the semioethical dimension in the life of signs is now urgent.

Semioethics proceeds from ongoing comparison and verification, from critique with different trends and figures in the history of semiotic inquiry, with an attitude of continuous interrogation for the sake of regeneration and renewal. Referring to a philosophical tradition that begins from Kant, the expression “critique” resounds in a special sense, the “ethical,” precisely, and implies the obligation to respond, to answer to self and to answer for self, even before the demand for reasons and justifications from others. For semioethics key authors in a philosophical tradition concerned with “critique” include, beyond Kant, signposts like Karl Marx with his “critique of political economy,” Mikhail Bakhtin and his “philosophy of the responsible act,” Victoria Welby and her Significs, Charles Peirce with his return to Kantism and critique of Cartesian dogmatism (see “On a New List of Categories,” 1867, in Peirce 1931–1958, 1.545–67), and Emmanuel Levinas with his research from the perspective of *Otherwise than Being* (1974).

If with Peirce we claim that “man is a sign,” a direct consequence is that with respect to signs, *humani nihil a me alienum puto* (nothing human is alien to me). An implication is that signs in the human world are not studied separately from valuative orientations, nor is the focus exclusively on truth value and its conditions. Instead, a truly general sign theory aims to account for all aspects of human life and for all values, not just truth value. Signs are the material out of which the self is modeled and developed, just as they are the material of values. However, while signs can exist without values, values cannot exist without signs (Petrilli 2010, 137–58). The relation between signs and values is structural to live expression in historico-socially specified operations. Semiotics as semioethics critiques the reification of signs and values to investigate the processes that produce them. Practiced in these terms, the general science of signs contributes significantly to philosophical investigation into our relation to the world, to others, to the self, which presupposes the connection of signs to values, calling for the critical work of demystification. Such an orientation in sign studies means to recuperate the sense of signs for humanity, to interrogate them, rather than accept them as givens, thereby moving toward a more adequate understanding of communication, dialogue and responsibility where the “properly human” is a pivotal value (Petrilli 2010a, 205–209). Ultimately, this project recovers Edmund Husserl’s transcendental constitutive phenomenology, but on a condition: that all claims to pure descriptiveness, to neutrality are left aside. This means to recover the search for sense, for the sense of knowledge, experience, and practical action, and for the sense of the sciences that study the latter, as proposed by Edmund Husserl and

his phenomenology which deals extensively with signs and their typology (see “Semiotik,” in Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, 1900–1901).

To evidence the sign nature of the human has a counterpart (particularly on a practical level) in asserting the human nature of signs which leads to the possibility of envisaging a new humanism. Reading both Bakhtin and Levinas, this is humanism oriented by alterity and dialogism, humanism that evades egocentric identity. Alterity, non-relative, absolute alterity is transcendent with respect to the sphere of the identical, of being, of the same and is associated to the valorization of singularity and responsibility. Such values inform Bakhtin’s critique of ontology and reformulation of humanism for a new humanism, with Levinas “humanism of the other,” precisely, “humanism of alterity” (see Levinas 1972; Ponzio 2008).

By contrast to the “humanism of identity,” the “humanism of alterity” foresees difference unindifferent to other differences (Petrilli and Ponzio 2021). Indifference as it characterizes abstract differentiation is replaced by unindifference of the responsible act, answerability, accountability, and exposure without alibis to the other. Given the condition of intrigue in the I-other relationship, the I is always compelled to attend to the other, even when indifference is flaunted, even when conflict prevails. The I is always involved with the other, affected by the other. Implication with the other is inevitable whether the I knows it or not, wants this or not, apart from will or awareness. In this framework *dialogue* is not the result of a kind concession made by a subject, it does not ensue from a subject’s decision to open to the other. From a semioethical perspective, dialogue is impossible closure to the other, to the other’s alterity, as foreseen by the condition of intercorporeality and interconnectivity bonding all lifeforms in semiosis over the planet.

Semioethics is a response and a development on critical approaches to sign studies practiced by important trends in philosophy and semiotics; a response that resists abstract theoreticism as it has often characterized such studies, certainly “official semiotics.” Semioethics is inevitably associated with the new form of humanism described as the “humanism of alterity,” inscribed in the analysis, interpretation and production of values relatedly to signs in signifying processes. Understood as the global science of signs, which relatively to human semiosis covers the relation between signs and values, thus the domains of both “signification” and “significance” – analyzed by another noteworthy philosopher and semiotician, Charles Morris (1964) –, the term “semiotics” strictly speaking should be sufficient for such an orientation. Nevertheless, insofar as it indicates an approach to sign studies which is not purely descriptive, which does not make claims to neutrality, but rather extends beyond abstract logico-epistemological boundaries to concentrate on problems of an axiological order, pertaining to values, therefore to ethics, aesthetics, and ideology theory, “semioethics” signals more decisively the direction semiotics is called to follow

today, as demanded by our responsibilities as students and scholars of signs, language, and communication.

The essays included in this volume examine the interplay of semioethics and dialogue with each pointing to responsibility for the other as a key concern for our contemporary moment. Semioethics and dialogue recognize responsibility through the signs of the social and relational realms of human life. In each case, these areas of investigation come limited and flawed. This project intentionally engages the coordinates of human life under siege largely due to our own failure to recognize and accept unlimited responsibility for the other. With the proposal of a constructive counter to limited notions of technical responsibility and indifference, this volume offers a basic call that resonates in semioethics and dialogue: unconditional responsibility for the other as the essential foundation of every human right.

In an era where imposition is too quickly the communicative gesture inflicted upon another, each chapter in this volume addresses existential dialogue and semioethics. The collection explores communicative acts of disruption to a social environment unduly attentive to individualism, consumerism, bureaucracy, and self-profit. Grounded in the dialogic perspectives of Bakhtin and Levinas, semioethics—an emerging orientation to sign and language studies that relies upon a commitment to unindifference, otherness, and dialogue—has garnered international attention from research communities that address semiotics, dialogue, communication ethics, and philosophy of communication. Each chapter addresses an applied artifact to extend theoretical contributions of the intersections between dialogue and semioethics.

Semioethics provides a theoretical basis that introduces readers to the intersections of alterity, dialogue, and responsibility. The latter is understood independently from what Bakhtin calls technical responsibilities. Semioethics promotes responsibility outside any form of exchange, outside *do ut des* logic, responsibility oriented as a movement toward the other, without return, without gain, and without profit, through to the limit-form of being one for the other that Levinas calls “substitution.”

## Notes

- 1 In 2009, A. Ponzio published a volume in his Athanor series (founded in 1990, presenting a collective monothematic volume every year since) titled *La trappola mortale dell'identità* (Athanor XX/13). A subsequent volume published a decade later in the same series, co-authors A. Ponzio and S. Petrilli, is dedicated to *Identità e alterità. Per una semioetica della comunicazione globale* (Athanor XXIX/22 2019).
- 2 Referenced here is Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* in the version proposed by Augusto Ponzio under the title *Per una filosofia dell'atto responsabile* translated from the Russian original and collected in the Russian/Italian bilingual volume, *Opere 1919–1930*, see Bachtin, Michail e il suo Circolo (2014, 33–168).

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