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# Levinas, Meaning, and Philosophy of Social Science: From Ethical Metaphysics to Ontology and Epistemology

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Levinas, Meaning, and Philosophy of Social Science:

From Ethical Metaphysics to Ontology

and Epistemology

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

Levinas, Meaning, and Philosophy of Social Science:

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Master of Science

The current approach to science for mainstream psychology relies on the philosophical foundation of positivism that cannot account for meaning as humans experience it. Phenomenology provides an alternative scientific approach in which meaning is constituted by acting toward objects in the world that is more consistent with how humans experience meaning. Immanuel Levinas argues that the phenomenological approach, while more consistent with human experience, does not provide a grounding for meaning. Rather, Levinas argues that meaning is grounded in the ethical encounter with the Other, or other person, such that meaning is given by the Other in rupture. For Levinas, the physical world, or elemental, and the I provide constraints for the meaning given by the Other but the Other is logically prior to all other experience. This alternative to the mainstream scientific approach in psychology of positivism has implications for the epistemology, methodology, and scientific community of psychology. The Levinasian perspective advocates an epistemology that is open to the rupture of the Other as a way to provide new knowledge. This emphasis on openness to rupture produces a methodology in which the scientist must allow object of study to influence the method used in research. Finally, the Levinasian perspective implies a scientific community that is sensitive to the rupture occasioned by the encounter with the Other.

Keywords: philosophy of science, Levinas, epistemology, psychology, Other

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**Levinas, Meaning, and Philosophy of Social Science:  
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Recently, scholars in psychology have called for critical evaluation of the scientific practices of psychology and the philosophical assumptions underlying those practices (Faulconer & Williams, 1990; Machado & Silva, 2007; Slife, 2004; Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005; Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005; Yanchar, Slife, & Warne, 2008). These scholars have argued for a more careful examination and re-evaluation of what has come to be called a positivist approach to scientific investigation and theory-construction, an approach that has come to represent the mainstream of the discipline (Bishop, 2007; Machado & Silva, 2007; Robinson, 1995; Slife, Reber, et al., 2005; Yanchar, et al., 2008). This positivist approach is typically described in terms of its commitment to philosophical assumptions such as mechanism (Bishop, 2005, 2007; Hedges & Burchfield, 2005; Slife & Hopkins, 2005), universalism (Reber & Osbeck, 2005; Slife, 2004), and atomism (Cushman, 1990; Reber & Osbeck, 2005; Slife, 2004). Mechanism is the assumption that all events proceed according to causal laws such that the world operates much like a clock is determined by its very construction to keep time without anything like “will” playing a part (Bishop, 2007); universalism is the assumption that the basic constituent(s) of reality do not change (Polkinghorne, 1990); and atomism is the assumption that these basic constituents (whether conceived as one type or many types of constituents) of reality are fundamentally independent of each other (Bishop, 2007; Reber & Osbeck, 2005; Slife, 2004). In combination, these authors have argued that mainstream psychology—in both its theories and its practices—assumes that humans are completely predictable (as long as all causal factors are

known), fully stable, and totally separable from context. This critique does not apply to every specific theorists and concept because the critique as applied here is aimed at the general trends of mainstream psychology. However, these authors have argued that specific theorists, theories, and concepts do participate in these general trends. For example, the edited volume by Slife, Reber, et al. (2005) traces the impact of the positivist worldview through counseling, social psychology, neuroscience, experimental psychology, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, and methodology in psychology with reference to specific concepts within each field. Also, in his book, Bishop (2007) discusses the scientific approach of the social science, particularly in regards to universalism, and applies that approach to psychology to demonstrate the approach engenders atomism and mechanism within psychology. So, as indicated, this critique most likely does not apply to every theorist or concept within psychology but the general trend—as indicated by the literature—does display mechanism, universalism, and atomism.

The positivist worldview engenders a particular viewpoint in regards to the fundamental nature of reality and knowledge that is colored by the assumptions discussed. As authors have argued, this worldview does not allow for an approach to human nature that recognizes the importance of meaning to humans because, for many thinkers, meaning requires an intimate relationship with context that generates genuine possibilities (Clegg & Slife, 2005; Cushman, 1990; Faulconer, 2005; Fuller, 1990). In other words, possibilities are required for meaning because without possibilities meaning must always be static or stable. For these thinkers, static meaning is not genuine meaning because there is no possible alternative meaning. Alternatives are required for genuine meaning and an intimate relationship with context generates the possibilities required for meaning. Thus, for the positivist worldview, the fundamental nature of

reality is devoid of genuine meaning and knowledge is gained through a correspondence of theories with the meaningless external world. This issue will be discussed further below but the important point here is that the positivist viewpoint—as argued by several thinkers—does not allow for meaning as humans’ experience it.

Philosophical approaches such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, and social constructionism have increasingly been offered up as viable alternatives to the traditionally positivist approach to psychological investigation and its epistemological and ontological foundations (see, e.g., Bishop, 2007; Faulconer & Williams, 1990; Fuller, 1990). These alternatives have typically focused on the meanings<sup>1</sup> of everyday life rather than on the presumably meaningless operations of the natural world because they emphasize meanings as fundamental; meanings—either as personally interpreted or socially constructed—are held to constitute the essence of human experience because the world is presented to humans in and through meaningful experiences. Also, despite some significant differences in these philosophical approaches, nonetheless, each of them argues that human experience is only possible as meaning because it is impossible for humans to experience an object or event from a “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986). From these alternative philosophical perspectives, any approach that does not account for meaning in such a way as to preserve it ultimately serves only to eliminate the very core of human experience—namely meaning.

This focus on meaning stands in direct contrast to much thinking in mainstream psychology which seeks to derive meaning as a byproduct of the fundamentally meaningless activities and interactions of causal, stable, and atomistic entities or variables (e.g.,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, *meaning* will include lived-experience of events, pre-conceptual meaning, and linguistic, conceptualized meaning. This definition will be solidified in the following section.

neurotransmitters, stimuli, social variables, etc.). In contrast to the perspectives offered by these alternative approaches, scholars in mainstream psychology have argued that the discipline should emphasize an independent, mechanical reality separated from experienced meaning because of an intellectual commitment in theorizing, research, methodology, and practical application that stems from a positivist philosophical or natural scientific emphasis on mechanistic, universal, and atomistic forms of explanations (see, e.g., Bishop, 2005; Bishop, 2007; Clegg & Slife, 2005; Cushman, 1990; Faulconer, 2005; Gantt, 2000, 2002, 2005; Hedges & Burchfield, 2005; Reber & Osbeck, 2005; Robinson, 1995; Slife, 2004; Slife & Hopkins, 2005; Slife, Mitchell, & Whoolery, 2004; Slife, Wiggins, et al., 2005; Williams, 2005; Yanchar, et al., 2008).

Of the three alternative traditions mentioned above, phenomenology, broadly conceived, is most often characterized as a call to return to the “things themselves” (Husserl, 1983, p. 35). Since Husserl, thinkers such as Martin Heidegger have understood the rally to return to the things themselves as an emphasis on the experience of things as the meanings they are as the foundation for knowledge of any type, be it scientific, philosophical, or otherwise (see, e.g., Heidegger, 1962). As will be described in detail in the next section, phenomenology requires a return to experience as lived because meaning is revealed through such experience. Meaning is revealed in experience because in its essential nature experience constitutes meaning. Indeed, lived-experience, in the phenomenological account, *is* meaning. The return to meaning and experience is the return to the things themselves spoken of by Husserl because the things themselves are meanings.

This emphasis on the experience of things as the meanings they are challenges the contemporary psychological and natural science emphasis on mechanistic, universal, and

atomistic explanations of meaning in terms of causal entities by returning to the meanings of things as the meanings are revealed in experience itself. In contrast, natural science endorses a mechanistic understanding of sensation that provides causal laws to connect distinct sensory experience. These sensory experiences, from a natural science perspective, are devoid of meaning. Humans place meaning onto sensory experiences in causally determined ways from a natural science perspective. Phenomenology challenges this natural science perspective in that phenomenology understands meaning as inherent in the way humans experience the world. This challenge arises because, on the phenomenological account, meanings do not have efficient causal force (mechanistic), cannot be understood void of historical, social, or interpersonal context (universal), and cannot be adequately reduced to separable constituent parts (atomism). Thus, the phenomenological call to return to the things themselves is not a call to access an objective, external world of quantities, variables and natural forces. Rather it is a call to return to how things as meanings are in fact experienced in the everyday business of living. Furthermore, as I will elaborate shortly, phenomenology emphasizes that experience is an event of meaning and, as such, cannot be meaningfully separated from the context of ongoing human actions in the world. As I will address later, phenomenology seeks to access the meaning-filled experiences that constitute knowledge in such a way that the meaning of experience is not completely separable from the experienced object or event.

This thesis will provide a brief sketch of the general features of phenomenological thought and then focus on the work of one phenomenological thinker in particular—Emmanuel Levinas—in order to provide a brief outline of an alternative approach to contemporary psychological research and theorizing. I feel that this alternative approach is better able to depicts the “things”

of psychology, namely meaningful human experience in concrete, genuinely social and moral relationships and contexts. As mentioned, phenomenology returns to lived-experience—rather than mechanistic, universal, and atomistic experience, such as sensory processing—to ground meaning because such experience can and does reveal something about the meaning of a thing.<sup>2</sup> As such, I hope the reader will recognize that, in contrast to the positivism of mainstream psychology, Levinasian phenomenology depicts the experiences of human beings as they experience themselves and others.

### **Phenomenology, Meaning, and Levinas**

For phenomenology, meaning is more than what can be captured in concepts because everyday experience as an event of meaning cannot be adequately reduced to concepts. This understanding of experience is particularly the case with Heidegger (1962) and his understanding of ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. For Heidegger, ready-to-hand is the everyday experience while present-at-hand is a conceptual understanding of meaning. The ready-to-hand cannot be fully captured by present-at-hand understanding. In other words, the world is meaning-filled—meanings are the world in which we live—such that concepts are not adequate to capture all the meaning inherent in our experience. While it is true that concepts are meanings, they are not sufficient for the meanings inherent in the world in which we live because human experience is deeper and broader than any meaning captured within the narrow confines of abstract concepts. Experience is meaningful such that every event reveals meanings. The events of our lives are meaningful (Faulconer, 1990) because meanings are constituted through human actions as events in the world. These meaning-filled events can be, and are, conceptualized such that language

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<sup>2</sup> What exactly it means for Levinas to return to experience itself will be articulated later in the subsections for this section of the paper.

consists of meaning. However, concepts are abstractions from lived-experience because language conveys experience in a way that only some features of an experience are included. For example, psychologists' current use of the concept of "depression" as an abstract state of being or category of psychological disorder tends to emphasize the negative affect of an individual in such a way that other emotions and facets of "being depressed" are often ignored or marginalized by the therapist and, in turn, by the client.<sup>3</sup>

Phenomenologists, in general, have sought to attend to the ways in which lived experience provides the basis for our concepts, explanatory categories, and theoretical entities that are necessarily abstract. In sum, in the phenomenological tradition, meaning is usually held to be more than any theoretical concepts or explanatory devices that rely on hypothetical abstractions can adequately express because the very process of theoretical abstraction moves us away from the immediacy of lived-experience, its fluidity, and ambiguity.

In general, then, phenomenologists understand meanings as events to be "the things we deal with in daily life" such as cars, trees, flowers, and other people (Fuller, 1990, p. 1). Humans are seen to experience the world in events because what something means is itself constituted in and through the actions of humans in the world. For example, the event of driving from place to place is part of what a car *is* along with other events, such as speed of travel, that constitute the meaning of a car. Meanings *as* events occur in the world of human experience because meanings *as* actions constitute that world of experience. Our world is constituted by the events experienced as meanings—a world of meanings—because it is not possible for humans to

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<sup>3</sup> More will be said about how language limits understanding by focusing in on abstraction during the discussion on totalization in the section entitled "The Other and Meaning."

experience a world without meanings, a world providing what Nagel (1986) called “a view from nowhere”.

Within phenomenology, meanings are events in that meanings are constituted by acting in the physical world. In fact, for phenomenology, intentionality is the process of acting toward the physical world that gives rise to meaning. Phenomenology does not endorse radical idealism because for phenomenology the physical world does exist. However, meanings are still experienced through events such that humans never experience the physical world devoid of all meaning. Humans do not experience the physical world devoid of all meaning because objects, which humans do experience, are constituted through human actions toward the physical world even as objects, too, constitute human meaning. So, the physical world is never directly experienced because all human experience is through meanings (i.e., objects); instead, the physical world contributes to the meanings humans experience at the same time that human actions partly constitute meanings. For example, from a phenomenological perspective, a car is not simply an external thing devoid of all meaning that has a meaning placed onto it via a detached subjectivity (idealism); nor is it merely a contentless stimulus configuration in objective physical space (objectivism). Rather, as Husserl (1983) argued, intentional acts require a holistic relation between the physical world and consciousness. An intentional action is required for meaning because without an intentional action, the car would not be a car—i.e., would not be something driven from place to place—but would participate in a different meaning, such as a useless conglomeration of physical qualities (e.g., mass, momentum, location, etc.).

For phenomenologists, the intentional act is required for meaning to happen<sup>4</sup> since all meanings are underdetermined by the context of the physical world. An intentional event is an event in which someone acts towards another person or meaning. Thus, intentional actions are not necessarily consciously deliberated or the result of a specific purpose. For example, when a person turns on a car, the person is intending the car (acting toward the car) in such a way that the meaning of car as a mode of transportation happens (Fuller, 1990) even though the person may be consciously thinking about an upcoming exam. The action of turning on the car with the intention of driving from place to place partly constitutes the meaning of a car *as* a car. The event of acting toward objects as meanings constitutes the world in which we live. In other words, meanings are events in the world that are constituted by acting toward objects. In sum, phenomenology understands meanings as events which are intentional actions *in the world* such that each meaning is constituted through acting in the world toward other meanings.

In events, meanings constitute an existential “network of references to one another” (Fuller, 1990, p. 43) because intentional acts occur only in a social, historical, and relational context—which includes some objects and persons (but not every object or person). Since the intentional act occurs in a world of objects that also contribute to the meaning of the act, a given intentional act does not fully constitute a particular meaning. The existential network of references does not entail a mapping of cognitive thoughts onto objects so that a single cognition refers directly to a given object because the events of the existential network are holistic: the intentional act and the world in which the act occurs constitute holistically the meaning of the event. The “network of references” (Fuller, 1990, p. 43) is holistically

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<sup>4</sup> This fundamental idea is where Levinas disagrees with the rest of the phenomenological tradition because Levinas claims that the experience of alterity gives meaning in such a way that there is no interpretation of the experience of alterity, or the Other. I say more about this difference in the section below titled “The Other and Meaning.”

constituted by many events through various different meanings that are all decided by intentional actions in a world of objects. For example, the intentional act of turning on a car also intends other events and objects such as driveways, passengers, highways, stop lights, traffic rules, and so forth. because the meaning that is a car is partly constituted by the meanings of driveways, passengers, highways, and destinations. In other words, in acting toward a car, one is also acting toward the meaning of destinations and driveways.

Meanings as events constituted by acting in the world are also partly constituted by the world itself, not solely by human actions and events. For phenomenology, “world” includes not only the physical constituents of the material world, but also the historical, cultural, contextual constituents of the existential network of references. While phenomenology does not claim that it is possible to experience the physical world outside of meaning, it does recognize that the physical constituents of the world contribute to the constitution of particular meanings. For example, a door can only mean an exit or entrance because of the physicality of walls that prevent people from walking through them. However, the physicality of the door is never experienced apart from some interpreted meaning, such as exit or entrance that I must go through to achieve one purpose or another.

The term “world” here is being used in a somewhat technical manner that relies far more heavily on Gadamer’s notion of horizon than on the notion of the brute, objective physicality of the planet Earth presupposed in much of natural science (Gadamer, 1989). The Gadamerian notion of horizon includes personal history as well as human history, includes the present context and the cultural meanings (of, for example, America) in which a person lives. The intentional act

that constitutes the meaning of a car is thus constituted by one's horizon because the intentional act is constituted by the contextual and cultural meanings of one's horizon.

For example, the meaning of a car includes contextual and cultural constituents such as Henry Ford, the car's designer, roadways and highways, the media, and going to the grocery store. Furthermore, the meaning of a car is also constituted by the physicality of the car: the physicality of the car makes it possible to turn the car on because of electrical wiring and combustion. Such examples could be multiplied in many ways (e.g., the cultural context of modern America partly constitutes the meaning of the car as a personal convenience as opposed to European culture where public transportation is more the norm), but the point should be fairly obvious by now that no intentional act occurs in a vacuum, in dead space, with nothing else there. Rather, intentional actions always, already occur *in a world* of relationships that serve to constitute meaning by providing possibilities for intentional action.

Likewise, the world—including the physicality of the world—constrains actions by limiting the possible meanings available even as it opens up possible meanings. For example, a car cannot fly—the world constrains the meaning of a car such that no matter what my intentional actions are, the car will not and cannot fly. However, a car also opens meanings because a car makes travel from Utah to California in one day possible so that I can go home for the short Thanksgiving break—a meaning that was not present before the car is now possible with the car. Meanings are intentional events in the world as understood within the horizon of culture, history, context, and physicality.

For phenomenology, this understanding of existence as fundamentally meaningful, comprised of events of meaning, is the foundation of all phenomenological accounts of

existence. In other words, the world is “meaning all the way down.” Meaning as foundational is the ontological alternative, from a phenomenological perspective, to traditional ontologies in which meaning is in an important sense epiphenomenal because it is rendered secondary, merely subjective, or otherwise derivative of the fundamentally non-meaningful. Ontology is the philosophical study of the basic nature of reality and, in the ontology of most phenomenologists, the basic nature of reality is meaning.

Levinas, however, despite his clear affinities with the phenomenological tradition, and his general agreement that the world is its meaning, has consistently argued that the concept of a network of meaning articulated by many other phenomenologists does not *sufficiently* ground meaning. As will be discussed in the following sections, Levinas offers a substantial (insider’s) critique of this phenomenological approach to meaning by questioning the ontological foundation for meaning. He replaces the ontological foundation by grounding meaning in such a way that meaning is not solely dependent on ontological considerations for its possibility (Manning, 1993). Levinas argues, rather, that meaning arises out of our (fundamentally ethical) encounter with the other person—or Other; an encounter that interrupts our conceptualized and lived meanings and ruptures our experiences (Levinas, 1951/1989, 1969, 1987). Levinas provides for a metaphysics that founds meaning in the ethical relationship with other people—a relationship that is prior to ontology and epistemology (Williams & Gantt, 1998) because meaning is given first (logically) in the ethical relationship.

## The Other and Meaning

Levinas maintains that our everyday experiences and concepts are ruptured by the primacy of the experience of the Other,<sup>5</sup> the concrete other person, who exceeds our experiences and concepts. For scientists, this rupture of everyday experiences and concepts includes rupture of the scientists' daily experiences with scientific concepts and theories. For Levinas, the experience of the other person exceeds meaning, is more than meaning, is the experience of what Levinas calls the encounter of the face. For Levinas, the process of comprehending and fixing meaning is called totalization. Levinas accepts much of the phenomenological notion of meaning outlined above regarding the ways in which humans act intentionally in the world, but also argues that meaning necessarily becomes fixed as humans act toward meanings in such a way that the meanings come to be rendered static (Levinas, 1969). This notion of fixed meaning—or totalization—does not require a fixed linguistic concept or definition; totalization can also occur as a person acts toward events as if the inherent meaning could not change even though the person does not linguistically define the events. For example, when the plumber comes to my house, I show her the leaky faucet without regard for further relationship with her. In this way, I totalize the plumber as a plumber even though there is more to her than being a plumber. Perhaps she plays the violin in the local symphony and hikes on the weekends. My actions toward her totalize her as a plumber when I direct her toward the leaky faucet for the sole purpose of stopping the leak. Totalization—whether through concepts or intentional actions—is the process of fixing meaning that results in my use of her for my own purposes (Levinas, 1969).

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<sup>5</sup> I will following the translations convention established by Alphonso Lingis in using the term *Other* to refer strictly to the other person and the term *other* to refer to otherness in general and the otherness, or alterity, of any other person. It is important to note that for Levinas, otherness does not exist apart from the Other: the terms are conceptually distinct but phenomenologically connected.

For Levinas, the Other resists totalization because the Other always overflows, or exceeds, any totalized meaning. The experience of overflow or rupture that occurs in the experience of the Other is due to a fundamental alterity—the otherness of the Other—that is prior to all experience (Levinas, 1969; see also, Manning, 1993; Williams & Gantt, 1998). For Levinas, the Other is beyond all totalization because the Other comes before meaning: “He [the Other] is neither cultural signification nor a simple given” (Levinas, 1987, p. 95). In this way, the Other ruptures our totalized meanings (Levinas, 1969). As Levinas (1969) argues in *Totality and Infinity*:

But the idea of Infinity is transcendence itself, the overflowing of an adequate idea. If totality can not be constituted it is because Infinity does not permit itself to be integrated. It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other. (p. 80)

The rupture of the Other does not come from any cultural signification of what it means to be an other person; neither, is the rupture solely due to the givenness, or sensory experience of another person as an object of vision, touch, etc., of the other person. Rather, the Other precedes both understanding and being, both epistemology and ontology, and indeed grounds understanding and being in ethics (Wyschogrod, 2000).

Totalization limits the possibilities of meaning because meaning, as fixed, becomes fully apprehended and, as such, no other meaning is necessary or relevant for an adequate understanding to take place or knowledge to be achieved. For Levinas “It [comprehension or totalization] does not invoke a being, but only names it, thus accomplishing a violence and a negation” (Levinas, 1951/1989, p. 127). The signification of something is not revealed by totalization. Rather, totalization is the process or act by which a label or category is affixed to

our experience—whether through actions or concept—and which limits and does violence to the experience. As fixed meaning, no new possibilities are available because new possibilities exceed the meaning that has been affixed. New possibilities, for Levinas, are only available in the experience of alterity. For Levinas, meaning as understood in phenomenology as presented here is totalized meaning. In contrast, he claims that meaning is given by the Other as the Other ruptures totalization.

There are two senses of meaning for Levinas: 1) meaning as totalization, which is the meaning discussed in the phenomenological tradition described and 2) meaning as given by the Other. Importantly, totalized meaning is dependent on meaning given by the Other in that the experience of alterity is logically prior to all meaning. Thus, fixed meaning closes off possibilities without opening new possibilities, and in this way does violence. For Levinas, this violence of totalizing is inescapable. Indeed, it may even be necessary in some ways, such as the totalizations that result in language or the example of the plumber above. However, the process of totalization and comprehension moves away from (logically) the experience of the ethical call of the Other, from ethical metaphysics, and becomes ontology because totalization results in concepts of being that are not the ethical call of the Other (Manning, 1993). For Levinas, the experience of the Other is unique from all other experiences because the Other is the ethical foundation for all meaning. In other words, the experience of the Other is alterity itself. As alterity, the Other is not reducible to the intentionality of the ego, and in this way, grounds meaning in the very reality of the possibility of the otherwise than self or the selfsame. The following sections address Levinas's philosophy of alterity and ethical obligation as the foundation for meaning.

**Ontology and ethical metaphysics.** For Levinas, the philosophical preoccupation with ontology is one way that totalization occurs (Levinas, 1969). As noted above, ontology is the study of being, that is what is fundamental, what exists. As the study of the foundation of reality, ontology is often fundamental to other questions—i.e., how we can know things (epistemology), what constitutes the good life (ethics), what is beauty (aesthetics), what is valid reasoning (logic), and what is society (politics). Furthermore, most work in ontology has relied on abstract concepts and processes or structures as the foundation for events and relations (Bishop, 2007; Slife, 2004; Slife, Reber, et al., 2005). By definition, ontological claims place these concepts as primary in that they are logically prior to all other events and objects in the world. In conjunction, ontology implies a fixed reality as the basis of all reality because static ontological concepts are typically thought to be the only viable foundation for reality. The foundation will never change from an ontological perspective, so reality becomes fixed according to the static ontological concepts.

For Levinas, this fixed reality is a central problem of ontology because a fixed ontology assumes the world is only one way without allowing for other possibilities. According to Levinas, though his actual critical analysis is primarily aimed at the ontology proposed by Heidegger, the majority of philosophers in the Western intellectual tradition have endorsed (more or less explicitly) ontologies committed to a fixed and, thereby, totalizing conceptual foundation (Levinas, 1951/1989, 1969). Levinas (1969) has relentlessly argued that his intellectual predecessors, even though they occasionally (at least in the case of hermeneutic-phenomenology) have attempted to avoid problematic and abstractionist ontologies, have nonetheless relied on fixed understandings of reality because they rely on static notions of being and the static nature

of meaning. Ultimately, a fixed ontology does not allow the face of the Other to rupture our experience because fixed ontology eradicates the possibility of any meaning other than that which is fixed by ontological concepts.

For Levinas, the rupture occasioned by the Other is a breaking through of our fixed concepts and preconceived notions – including the fixed concepts of ontology – and reveals ethical reality as the experience of the Other who exceeds capture in any totalized meaning. He said, “Totality and the embrace of being, or ontology, do not contain the final secret of being” (Levinas, 1969, p. 80). The revelation of the otherwise, the more than, or that which is beyond being, in the experience of the Other is the rupture that breaks through fixed concepts. For Levinas, the face of the Other is the revelation of an otherwise than which is before and beyond any ontological concept or category because the face is the alterity of the Other. In this way, the face of the Other as the event of alterity is the rupture of totalized meaning, including totalized ontology. Furthermore, the face resists totalization because it is the very phenomenon of alterity: any attempt at totalizing the face is ruptured because the face is always more than any totalization of it we might produce (Levinas, 1969). The experience of the face of the Other is prior to ontology, prior to totalization, and, as such, is the foundation for ontology because the Other is the *a priori* foundation for meaning.

Furthermore, the experience of the Other, because it deals with an other person, is primarily ethical—that is to say, reveals my obligation to the Other since alterity ruptures totalized meaning. A discussion follows about how the face of the Other ruptures ontology and is the ethical experience of obligation. Ultimately, Levinas claims that what is real is the ethical encounter with the Other. Edith Wyschogrod (2000) has termed this foundation for reality

“ethical metaphysics” because the foundation of the Other is ethical and “is turned toward the ‘else-where’ and the ‘otherwise’ and the ‘other’” (Levinas, 1969, p. 33).

**The saying and the said.** The rupture of ontology happens in the experience of alterity, the face, the experience of the other person as other. This experience of alterity is logically prior to all other meaning and is the foundation for meaning, including totalized meaning. Levinas elucidates alterity by making a distinction between the *saying* and the *said*.<sup>6</sup> The saying is *the event* of the other person as Other, such that we are called to ethical response by the rupture that results from the Other’s alterity. The saying is the particular experience of Other and reveals responsibility and, as such, does not necessarily occur in every experience with an other person. The saying breaks into and exceeds our experience. However, the saying is not limited to simple verbal utterance as if the only way to break into my experience is through verbal expression. Rather, any experience of the Other that breaks through my totalizing abstractions and concepts, and puts me in obligation to the Other is the saying. More than that, the saying is the revelation of the *a priori* ethical obligation to the Other (Manning, 1993).<sup>7</sup>

The said denotes how the saying is totalized and conceptualized by the use of concepts and abstractions. In other words, the said is the thematization of the saying (Manning, 1993). An analogy may be useful here: the saying is similar to face-to-face communication where the interlocutor can speak and give new meaning by rupturing my fixed meaning, conceptual categories, and established understandings. Analogously, the said is a dictionary that only recapitulates fixed meanings, each word referring only to other words in the dictionary and,

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<sup>6</sup> In “Otherwise than Being,” Levinas distinguishes between the saying and the pre-original saying. My discussion here is about the pre-original saying which is the experience of the Other. For simplicity, I am simply using the word saying instead of writing each time pre-original saying. The usage I follow is also the usage in “Totality and Infinity.”

<sup>7</sup> The ethical obligation to the Other will be addressed later in the text.

ultimately, returning to itself, such that there is no way to give new meaning to my understanding. However, this analogy must not be taken too literally: the saying and said are not simple speech acts but terms used to describe the ethical experience of the Other (saying) and the totalizing of the Other using concepts (said) (see, Levinas, 1969). In the said, the saying— analogously, the alterity of the Other—is stripped of its excess by confining or reducing the saying into definable concepts and abstractions. The violence done by totalization, the fixed meaning of the said, is unavoidable, though, perhaps, at times, necessary. For example, in order to ask for someone to pass the salt, there must be a totalized concept (said) of salt. Most experiences with salt, flavorless food, and a table with other people will be conceptualized and totalized in this way. Every experience is assimilated into the network of references experienced by a person, and, in this way, unavoidably made part of the said.

The saying is more than abstractions and concepts as the saying exceeds the meaning given in the said by breaking through and rupturing that meaning. The saying does this because the signification of the saying is more than the fixed meaning of the said. The saying can become fixed meaning because the saying is often incorporated into fixed knowledge to become another said. For example, imagine a Catholic priest reading a familiar passage from the Bible but suddenly experiencing a new meaning or set of interpretive possibilities in the text heretofore unimagined. This experience of new meaning—as the saying—is other than what was understood the last time the priest read the passage. This new meaning can be, and often is, abstracted and conceptualized to fit with the priest's other knowledge and, in so doing, becomes a said. Once the priest understands the experience of new meaning as a specific new meaning, fixed and comprehended within a set conceptual framework of understanding, then the event of

the saying has been reduced to the fixed categories of the said. For Levinas, the saying is the experience of alterity that cannot be thematized. This experience of meaning, or saying, can result in a said that is different than the other said before through totalization. Yet, even here the example inappropriately hints at simple speech acts: the saying is the experience of alterity, of the Other; and, the said is the totalization of the experience into abstractions and concepts. The experience of the Other can likewise be abstracted and conceptualized to fit with other knowledge.

In sum, new meaning is found in the saying because the saying can rupture the fixed said. Even then, the saying is turned into fixed understanding and thus made into the said. The saying exceeds the meaning given in the said. In the same way as the saying is always more than the said, the Other is always more than any conceptualization or understanding of the Other because the Other can speak to us (beyond simple verbal utterance) and, thereby, call us into obligation. The Other is always more than—and always prior to—conceptualization and, in this way, can break into and rupture totalization. Only the experience of the Other, of alterity and difference, can give new signification.

**Obligation to the Other.** The experience of the Other reveals the obligation to account for my actions and to be responsible for the Other in this accounting. The call to responsibility is a call to account for my existence, my choices, and my actions; the call comes in the form of a command to not kill the Other (Levinas, 1969). In the face to face encounter, I am called to not totalize or do violence to the otherness of the other person. My existence is called into question by the existence and revelation of the Other such that I must account for my existence in such a way as to respond to the existence of the Other. “The relationship with the other puts me into

question. . .” (Levinas, 1987, p. 94), puts my existence into question, and demands a response.

The obligation revealed in the face of the Other is that I must respond to the call and is one sense in which the call is infinite. The responsibility is infinite in this sense because any action I choose is a response to the call. Even if I choose to do nothing, I am still responding. The alterity of the Other calls me into question because it continually calls my understanding of the other person, based on conceptualizations and abstractions, into question in such a way that I am obligated to respond by recognizing the otherness of the Other in some manner. The experience of alterity obligates me to respond because it ruptures my understanding of totalization such that I must respond for existence other than my own. Furthermore, the obligation is infinite because it is revealed in every encounter of the Other in such a way that I must respond. I can respond with language but the response is prior to language in that I am obligated to respond before the use of concepts in language (Williams & Gantt, 1998).

For Levinas, this obligation to respond for my existence is the ethical obligation and comes before any ontology because the experience of the Other comes before any ontology. While totalization of the other person is possible, I am obligated to respond in an ethical relationship with the Other prior to any experience of being or conceptualized meaning, ontology or epistemology, because the Other is logically prior to totalization (Gantt, 1996; Williams & Gantt, 1998; Wyschogrod, 2000). The obligation is infinite because it precedes any other experience and is not confined by concepts and abstractions. Furthermore, I am called to obligation any time I experience the alterity of the Other, anytime I come face-to-face with the Other. As Levinas (1972/2003) says, “It is a matter of the subjectivity of the subject, his non-indifference to others in limitless responsibility, limitless because it is not measured by commitments going back

to assumption and refusal of responsibility” (p. 67). Moral injunctions or commitments to other people are not primary because the experience of obligation to the Other is logically prior to commitments and cannot be based on any assumptions of what the Other requires from me. The experience of the Other cannot be based on these assumptions because the obligation stems from the alterity of the Other that cannot be captured through assumptions. For Levinas, “a face imposes itself upon me without my being able to be deaf to its call or to forget it, that is, without my being able to stop holding myself responsible for its distress” (Levinas, 1987, p. 96-97).

For Levinas, the self is experienced as the obligation to the Other: “The ego from top to toe and to the very marrow is—vulnerability” (Levinas, 1972/2003, p. 63). The ego is vulnerability because it is always in obligation to the Other. The less the self is for-the-Other, the less of a self it is. To be a self means to be for-the-Other; in responding to the obligation, the I is given a meaning (Cohen, 2002; Kunz, 2002; Williams, 2002). However, this obligation to respond is never self-abnegation but completes the I (Kugelman, 2002; Williams & Gantt, 1998) in that the I receives meaning through the experience with alterity that separates the I from the Other. For Levinas, obligation is never self-abnegation in the sense that the I must give everything to the Other.<sup>8</sup> Even though the responsibility to respond defines the I, the I is not compelled to respond morally (i.e., do the right thing). The I can refuse the ethical command (but only after experiencing the ethical command) and do harm to the Other, can kill the Other (Kugelman, 2002). Again, this experience is not necessarily a reflective, deliberative experience but can be a lived, bodily experience. The experience of obligation to the Other is *inherently* ethical in that it

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<sup>8</sup> The nature of the I will be discussed more later.

is prior to all other experiences but nonetheless the I can choose to respond morally or not in a given situation (Manning, 1993; Manning & Chase, 2002).

**The Other gives meaning.** The Other grounds meaning for the I because the Other is more than totalized meaning such that new meaning is experienced in the experience of the Other. Totalization limits meaning because totalized meaning is fixed meaning. Totalized meaning is fixed because to totalize means to identify meaning with a determinate understanding: every conceptualized meaning has a fixed understanding. This fixed understanding, as discussed above, can be fixed through concepts *or* through a person's action in the world. Every totalized meaning, in order to be the meaning that it is, must match that specific, fixed meaning of the network of understanding or the meaning cannot be *that* meaning. It may be some other meaning but cannot be *that* meaning because that meaning is defined solely by the determinate, fixed understanding. In totalization, meaning calcifies into a rigid, unchangeable—hence, determinate—understanding. If meaning is determinate due to totalization, then it is not possible for any new meaning to be introduced or break through the totalization because totalized meaning must conform to the fixed understanding. Totalized meaning could not be otherwise; in that, meaning could not be anything other than the determinate, calcified totalization.

One consequence of determinate meaning is that learning new knowledge is not possible in that determinate meaning entails that the mode of interpretation is fixed. Every determinate meaning necessarily entails a fixed mode of interpretation because every meaning, to be a meaning, must already fit a specific mode of interpretation. This specific, fixed mode of interpretation results in a fixed and full expression of meaning because only the details need to

be worked out. However, these details are determined by the fixed mode of interpretation. No new knowledge is possible because totalized meaning includes the mode of interpretation as already understood. Perhaps some minor details need to be worked out, but genuinely novel knowledge is not possible since novel knowledge would have to be other than the totalized meaning, or fixed understanding determined by the fixed mode of interpretation. Genuinely novel knowledge would be knowledge that exceeds fixed meaning and breaks the totalization. In other words, if meaning is always totalized, then novel knowledge is not possible because totalized meaning is necessarily fixed understanding and cannot be otherwise. For Levinas, the alterity of the Other is the only meaning that is not totalized and, hence, determinate.

The alterity of the Other allows meaning to be otherwise because the saying is always more than the said, because the Other always overflows totalization. In other words, the experience of the Other ruptures totalization and provides more meaning than the original totalization entails. For Levinas, philosophy—by which he means ontology and epistemology—seeks to devour otherness, reducing difference to sameness in the guise of concepts, structures, and essences, eradicating the possibility of any genuinely novel meaning. As he notes, “Does not sense as orientation indicate a leap, an outside-of-oneself toward the *other than oneself*, whereas philosophy means to reabsorb every Other into the Same and neutralize alterity?” (Levinas, 1987, p. 90; see also, Levinas, 1969). Although philosophy seeks to reabsorb the Other into the Same, the ethical experience of the Other makes new meaning possible. For Levinas, the Other is a teacher in that the Other provides the meanings necessary for language. “[S]peech is a teaching” (Levinas, 1969, p. 171) indicates that the Other gives us what we did not have before, gives us meaning so that we can learn and know (Manning, 1993). In fact, language is given by

the Other because responding to the ethical obligation requires language. In order to respond, I must use language in that I must perform a totalization of the Other to respond. In other words, in responding to the call of the Other, I am acting toward an understanding of the other person. This understanding is fixed in that my response is limited to the current understanding of the other person. This fixed understanding is the totalization formed in responding to the other person. The Other provides the ground for meaning through alterity but my actions to the other person can only be based on my current, hence fixed, understanding of the other person. In this way, fixed concepts, including concepts fixed by my action and not just my words, are required to respond to the obligation from the Other.

### **The Elemental and Meaning**

For Levinas, although the Other occasions meaning for the I; the Other is not the only existent. While the Other grounds meaning, the physical world also exist independent of the Other and the I. The physical world exist for Levinas. He is not a radical idealist, nor would he claims that meanings are only constituted in relation with the Other. This section will discuss how the physical world contributes to the meaning of objects and events.

The term *elemental* carries the connotation of the elements, the physical constituents of the environment. For Levinas, the elemental indicates what is already *given* to experience in the world we inhabit; it indicates the things of the physical world that become objects as the Other occasions meaning for them.

We experience the elemental affectively in that we are surrounded by the physical world. For Levinas (1969), we bathe in and live from the elemental such that the elemental is prior to conceptualization. Furthermore, the elemental is prior to Heidegger's notion of ready-to-hand,

the instrumentality of tool use. For Levinas, the elemental is prior to Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world; in that, the elemental is simply the given world that we are submerged in, that surrounds us. The example Levinas (1969) uses is the food we eat that we experience affectively and sustains us. We do not in the first instance use the elemental, or the world and thereby create instrumental meanings out of the physical world. Rather, we live-from the world and enjoy the world without the world first being a tool. This is not to say that the world of the elements in which I find myself cannot be fashioned to my needs, that it cannot be or is never appropriately employed as a tool or instrument, only that in the first instance the world of the elements is not encountered as an object (or set of objects) that are ready-to-hand for my use. As Levinas (1969) argues, "The world I live in is not simply the counterpart or the contemporary of thought and its constitutive freedom, but a conditioning and an antecedence. The world I constitute nourishes me and bathes me. It is aliment and 'medium'" (p. 129). The world of the elemental is logically prior to thought, both as a condition and an antecedent. The elemental is prior to thought in that we experience the elemental affectively and not cognitively. Furthermore, Levinas (1972/2003) says, "There would seem to be a distinction between the reality *given* to receptivity and the signification it can acquire" (p. 9; emphasis added) between the world the I lives in and the meanings used to signify the world.

Levinas employs the image of food to discuss the givenness of the elemental. Levinas indicates that we live-from the elemental in ways epitomized by the food we eat (Levinas, 1969). Just as food sustains us and gives us life so, too, do we live-from the elemental; in that, it is necessary (not sufficient) for the meanings we experience. However, the elemental is not used, as a tool, for sustenance but experienced affectively. Also, just as we experience food

affectively, we experience the elemental affectively as well. In other words, we do not experience the elemental solely through cognitive or rational and reflective processes. Rather, we experience the physical world bodily through affective states much like we experience the taste, smell, and sight of food through the affective states of a corporeal body. As Levinas (1987) teaches, “In such a philosophy the body would be conceived as inseparable from the creative activity, and transcendence as inseparable from the corporeal movement” (p. 80). The body is inseparable from the creation of meaning (creative activity in the quote above) because the physical world is present as affective. Without the elemental, there is no world to make sense of, no world to have meanings.

Even though the Other gives meaning, the elemental constrains meanings such that meanings are tied to the elemental. In the same way that food is given meaning because the things of the physical world that constitute food are edible and provide sustenance, the physical world constitutes objects by limiting the meanings potentially given by the Other. For example, a fountain pen can be a weapon in the appropriate context, but never a dog or even a knife. The elemental makeup of a fountain pen is such that some concepts, like dog or knife, cannot be applied without completely altering the network of references. The meanings possible for a thing are restricted by the elemental character of the physical world such that it can be a fountain pen: the elemental constituents (in this case conceptualized as plastic and ink) are such that fountain pens as meanings are possible. The elemental constituents of course also lend to the meaning of a weapon that can be used to defend oneself. However, the plastic and ink as things of the physical world devoid of meaning can never literally be given in a legitimately way the meaning of the animal *dog* because the elemental constraints indicated by the concepts of plastic and ink

refuse the interpretation of dog.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the elemental makeup of pen cannot be interpreted as *knife* even though both can be used as a weapon because the elemental requirements of a knife include the ability to hold a sharp edge. The elemental contributes to meaning through constraints on meanings as in the above example. In this way, the Other cannot give “just any old” meaning to any particular thing because the physical world constrains the meanings to which it is susceptible through the constraints of the elemental itself. In short, the world has some degree of plasticity, but it is not infinitely plastic to our demands.

### **The I and Meaning**

Even though meaning comes to the I because of the experience of the alterity of the Other, the I is not consumed by the Other in the relation with alterity (Williams & Gantt, 1998). The relationship with the Other does not eradicate the existence of the I. Instead, the alterity of the Other requires that the I be separate from the Other so that the relationship can continue to be a relationship of alterity. After all, if the Other were subsumed by the I, there would be no alterity, there would be no Other. In other words, if the I were subsumed by the Other, than any difference, any alterity, would become sameness. Furthermore, the experience of the elemental also requires a separation of the I from the Other because the Other cannot eat bread for me.

The separation of the I, or the ipseity of the I, is an important starting point for Levinas’s analysis in so far as the ipseity of the I allows Levinas to draw particular conclusions about alterity, the Other, and the elemental. Levinas addresses alterity as the separation of the Other from the self such that the separation is necessary for an understanding and experience of alterity (Manning, 1993). The experience of separation is the very beginning of the self. Without the

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<sup>9</sup> Such meanings could be given metaphorically, however.

separation of the self from the Other or the elemental, consciousness would not be possible because there would be nothing new to think about, no meaning to contemplate.<sup>10</sup> Further, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas states that the experience of possession or ownership, which is the first step toward experience of separation from the elemental, also allows for the experience of otherness (Williams & Gantt, 1998). In other words, the Other does not give ipseity to the self since the self is separate in its work of existing apart from the elemental (Manning, 1993). Thus, in separation or distinction from the elemental, the self recognizes the separation from the Other because the self must account for possession in the face of the alterity of the Other. However, the Other is not a copy of the self, but is revealed to the self as alterity.

For Levinas, “the other, as other, is not only alter ego. It is what I myself am not” (as cited in Manning, 1993, p. 110). Here there is recognition that the self provides a basis for experiencing the Other as more than alter ego, or as more than another ego that is the same as the self. Levinas recognizes two options: either everything is sameness and the self, or there is alterity. If all experience can be reduced to sameness, then the self incorporates all into the self resulting in solipsism. For Levinas, the Other is alterity such that the self can be separate. This self, however, is not conceptual since the concept of the self is possible only after the obligation to respond to the Other because concepts are totalized meanings. The self as the experience of obligation is prior to conceptualization because the obligation is given to the self from the Other before totality. However, this relationship—the relationship to alterity—ties the Other and the I together because the experience of alterity is possible only within relationship. In other words,

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<sup>10</sup> See the subsection entitled “The Other Gives Meaning” above.

the Other and the I are in relation, and in such a way that the Other and the I are not atomistic entities inter-acting but are already in relation through the experience of alterity.

### **The Other, the Elemental, the I, and Constitution of Meaning**

Even though the elemental and the I contribute to meaning, for Levinas, the relationship with the Other is primordial (Levinas, 1969). The asymmetry of the relationship with the Other that he articulates differentiates Levinas from many others in the phenomenological tradition because for most phenomenological thinkers meaning is that which is co-constituted by the intimate relationship that attains between self and other or self and world. Each contributor to meaning is just as important as the other contributors to meaning because each contributor participates concurrently. In contrast, Levinas argues that the Other is prior to all experience and grounds meaning. The elemental and the I do contribute as discussed above, but the relationship with the Other is asymmetrical in that first (logically) comes the experience of the alterity of the Other.

For Levinas, the constitution of meaning is embodied in his analysis of fecundity. Though Levinas uses the notion of fecundity in a metaphorical way, he does not intend fecundity to be understood only as a metaphor. Rather, as I will show, fecundity is, for Levinas, the prototypical example of creation. In short, just as a relationship can occasion reproduction, a relationship is required for meaning. In each, what is created is new, or other than, but not completely detached from the constitutors. The child is different but not completely separate from mother and father because the child is a new person but has characteristics from the mother and father. For example, common sayings are things like, “He has your eyes but my nose” or “You are just like your Mom.” These comments recognize the connection to mother and father that the child has.

Likewise, meaning is different but not completely separate from the Other, the elemental, and the I. However, the sexual relationship does not destroy the experience of the other person as alterity (Manning, 1993). For Levinas, the fecund relationship is always experienced as a relationship with alterity, with the Other because this relationship, by its nature, must recognize the otherness of the other person. So, the fecundity of the relationship with the Other produces something new but without destroying the otherness of the Other by absorbing that otherness into either the I or into that which has been created. As Levinas (1969) says, “the same and the other are not united but precisely—beyond every project, beyond every meaningful and intelligent power—engender the child” (p. 266). In the fecund relationship, the same, or I, and the Other are not united, do not become one so that the Other is totalized. The result of fecundity is something new—the child.

In the same way that fecundity resurrects something new, the constitution of meaning creates something new while still being connected to the Other, the elemental, and the I. Meaning is more than the constitutors of meaning themselves but is never completely divorced from them. Likewise, meaning does not necessarily destroy the otherness of the Other. In fact, just like the sexual relationship of fecundity, the alterity of the Other is required for meaning to be possible. Objects and events only have meaning because the Other constitutes it with the I and the elemental. Like the child is something new but not totally separable from the parents, meaning as occasioned by the Other is new but cannot be completely separated from its constituents. The Other, the elemental, and the I engender new meaning without destroying the alterity of the Other. The alterity of the Other is not destroyed because the experience with the Other is prior to all other experience and breaks into totalized meaning. Just as the difference of

the child is given by the other person, the new meaning is given by the Other. A new being is occasioned by the encounter with the other person in the sexual relation just as new meaning is occasioned by the encounter with the Other. Meaning is given by the Other and, in this way, the constituting relationship is asymmetrical: the elemental and the I constrain meaning, but the Other occasions new meaning.

### **Metaphysics, Ontology, and Epistemology**

I must distinguish from this point onward my own thought from that of Levinas's. Up to this point, I have focused on what Levinas has said in his philosophy. From here forward, I apply Levinas's philosophy to the concepts of philosophy of social science, in particular epistemology, method, and truth. As such, these implications are not part of Levinas's thought; instead, they are my application of Levinas to the philosophy of social science.

As mentioned above, ethical metaphysics is turning toward the otherwise, toward the Other. For Levinas, the experience of the alterity of the Other comes before ontology and epistemology. However, the ethical experience can, and often is, totalized by the I such that ontology and epistemology are possible from a Levinasian perspective because ethical metaphysics does not discount the relevance or importance of either ontology or epistemology. Ontology is one way in which philosophical/scientific thought totalizes the experience of the Other (Manning, 1993). The saying as the experience of the Other calling the self into responsibility can become the said of ontology through totalization. Analogous to the relationship between the saying and the said, ethical metaphysics can become ontology when alterity is denied or totalized. Furthermore, from a phenomenological perspective, ontology cannot be separated from epistemology so ethical metaphysics also implies epistemology.

Ontology and epistemology cannot be neatly separated primarily because the distinction between the subject and object—or knower and known—does not correctly represent the reality of experience for phenomenologists. Rather, for the phenomenologist, the knower and the known constitute each other in fundamental ways. As such, the knower—and by implication the many ways of knowing—cannot be neatly separated from the known. Just as meaning, in the phenomenological tradition, is constituted in the intentional act, that which is known and ways of knowing constitute each other, and, thus, ontology and epistemology constitute each other as well. From the phenomenological perspective discussed, the intentional act is both the way knowledge is gained (epistemology) and what is to be known (ontology). From a Levinasian perspective, the experience of the Other as totalized object is both what is (ontology) and how it is known (epistemology) (Williams, 1990). Furthermore, as I will show, the encounter of the Other provides the language necessary for ontology and the experience of (ethical) truth necessary for epistemology.

For the human sciences, a Levinasian perspective suggests that scientific accounts (especially those involving universal laws and claims) are abstractions from the ethical experience to an ontological perspective that ultimately serve to obscure or “cover over” the foundational reality of ethical obligation. Mainstream scientific approaches are ontological endeavors because they deal with conceptualized objects, with what is and not with how it is as experienced (Faulconer, 2005). Furthermore, for specific disciplines within human science, an epistemological method often seen by human scientists as a proscription for gaining knowledge such that no other method is adequate (Clegg & Slife, 2005; Slife, Reber, et al., 2005; Slife, Wiggins, et al., 2005; Williams, 2005). For example, it is common to see textbooks and

scholarly articles in psychology refer to “the” scientific method, rather than to *a* or *one* scientific method (see, e.g., Beatty, 2001; Heiman, 2001; Kazdin, 1998; Myers, 1995), which approach would acknowledge the possibility of a plurality of possible approaches for scientific inquiry. By narrowing scientific endeavors to only a single formalized method, other viable approaches to scientific inquiry are rendered illegitimate, suspect, and unexplored. In this way, a particular method is reified as “the” way to approach the study of the world, and, in so doing, the possibility of rupture as a central feature of scientific method is negated. Ultimately, then, psychological science—in both its search for ontic entities and development of methods—operates in a totalized realm where genuine ethical encounter via the rupturing alterity of the Other is ruled out of conceptual and methodological bounds at the outset.<sup>11</sup>

From a Levinasian perspective, however, science as an ontological and epistemological endeavor is not necessarily a problem because totalized meanings can be useful when such meanings are not allowed pre-eminence over ethical reality and obligation. However, as many scholars have pointed out, the strong trend in human science has been to reify ontological and epistemological concepts (Slife, 2004; Slife, Reber, et al., 2005; Yanchar, et al., 2008), which is the very practice that a Levinasian perspective seeks to discourage. In contrast, a Levinasian approach to psychological science recognizes the ethical foundation of ontology and epistemology such that scientific concepts and methods cannot be adequately understood as reifications, but rather only as abstractions from ethical experience. Scientific concepts and

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<sup>11</sup> This understanding of science is only one conception of science but it is the dominate conception in psychology and the social sciences. Typically, social scientists understand their science as mapping reality and using methods that reveal reality (see, e.g., Bishop, 2007; Robinson, 1995; Slife, 2004; Slife, Reber, et al., 2005; Slife, Wiggins, et al., 2005; Yanchar, et al., 2008).

methods are totalizations that are useful for human science, but only so long as ethics retains its foundational priority over the ontological and epistemological concerns of science.

As will be shown, any discussion of what is as totalized objects (ontology) and how we can know (epistemology) is derived from, and given direction by, the ethical experience of the Other (Manning, 1993). Ethical metaphysics is prior: ontology and epistemology can only happen as meanings grounded in ethical relationship. Thus, in much the same way that language is occasioned by the Other, the language of science—ontology and epistemology—is occasioned by ethical metaphysics. Additionally, just as the Other ruptures my totalizations and resists my reifications of the Other, the experience of the alterity can rupture my scientific conceptions, explanations, and theories. Indeed, the rupture in the face-to-face encounter with the Other is what provides scientific conceptions with meaning because, as argued above, meaning is given by the Other. Scientists, particularly those in the human sciences, must constantly be aware that their scientific conceptions are abstractions and, in this way, maintain contact with the ethical origins and groundings of their conceptions. The following subsections discuss possible ontological/epistemological implications of Levinas's ethical metaphysics and, as such, constitute a possible Levinasian approach to human science.

### **Encounter, Meaning, and Hermeneutic Epistemology**

As discussed above, meanings are constituted by the Other, the elemental, and the I such that the encounter with the Other in the context of the elemental ultimately grounds meaning (Faulconer & Williams, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1990). Since meaning arises in and is occasioned by the ethical encounter with the Other in the context of the elemental, knowledge gained in the encounter is of a different order than knowledge apparent in totalizations such as abstractions

and concepts. Knowledge given in the ethical encounter is perhaps better understood using the biblical use of ‘know,’ in which knowing is an event of encounter or welcome (Faulconer, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1990).<sup>12</sup> In this sense of the word *know*, the encounter of the Other in the context of the elemental and rupture of totalizing meaning is brought to the fore. Knowledge as encounter is another way of speaking about lived experience from a Levinasian perspective. For Levinas (1996), the encounter “describes my relationship with the neighbor, a relationship whose signifyingness is prior to the celebrated ‘sense bestowing’ [totalization]” (p. 81). The relationship with the Other, or neighbor, signifies meaning because meaning is grounded by the face-to-face encounter with the Other. This meaning is, however, before signification (i.e., sense bestowing) as abstraction because it is before totalization. Instead, meaning is the signifyingness of lived experience as encounter with the Other who exceeds my capacity to adequately capture or totalize.

Thus, for Levinas, there are basically two ways to know the world: 1) the biblical sense in which I know the world through encounter with the Other in the context of the elemental, and, 2) totalization, in which such encounters are reduced to abstractions and conceptual knowledge. These two ways correspond, in a general way, to the saying and the said discussed above. More importantly, just as the said is dependent on the saying for its possibility, knowledge as totalization is dependent on the encounter with the Other in the context of the elemental. In other words, all our experiences—including scientific experiences—are meaningful in light of the encounter with the Other in the context of the elemental that provides the possibility of meaning to every experience *qua* lived experience (Faulconer & Williams, 1990). This Levinasian

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<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew use of this word connected with the biblical use also denotes the sexual encounter. This use of the word connects with Levinas’s understanding of fecundity as well. In fact, the Hebraic background of Levinas cannot be ignored as the use of know in the bible also intends a covenant relationship.

perspective advocates a return, similar to a hermeneutic approach, to the encounter with the Other in the context of the elemental.

The return to encounter is similar to one aspect of a hermeneutic epistemology because it involves a circular approach to knowledge much like the hermeneutic circle. The concept of the hermeneutic circle is grounded in the process of returning to the object of study from a new perspective or context, one that is now informed by one's study of the object of interest, such that new meaning is occasioned because of the new perspective. In turn, this new meaning or understanding of the object of study provides for new avenues of understanding and inquiry as one returns to the object of study to once again be informed by it and have one's perspective again revised and expanded in light of this new inquiry. Similarly, the ethical encounter returns the scientist to lived experience in that the scientist must be willing to be ruptured and recognize the foundation of meaning revealed in the face-to-face encounter with the Other. The I does not consciously return to the encounter but, when the totalizations of the I are ruptured, responds to the new meaning occasioned by the Other. Importantly, the circle denotes that there is no separation, or temporal sequencing, in the encounter. Science grounded in lived experience responds to the rupture of encounter where new meaning can be given in the encounter of the Other and attempts to conceptualize this new meaning. Levinas (1951/1989) says, "We exist in a circuit of understanding with reality. Understanding is the very event that existence articulates" (p. 123). Existence and the event of meaning articulate understanding, first as lived experience and then as totalized knowledge, in that encounter with and response to the ethical command of the Other provide knowledge. It is this circuit of understanding that can ground an epistemology similar, though not identical, to the hermeneutic circle. From a Levinasian

perspective, traditional human science grasps at concepts and tries to totalize or control. A Levinasian science, on the other hand, seeks to approach the object of study in encounter—which recognizes the hermeneutic—and would be amenable to rupture even though the discourse of science is conceptual (Clegg & Slife, 2005; Faulconer, 2005).

There is, however, one key difference between a hermeneutic approach and the Levinasian perspective being proposed here: the foundation for a Levinasian hermeneutic is the ethical experience of the Other. Thus, while understanding reflects a circular relationship with the world, this relationship's foundation is the ethical experience of the Other that gives meaning. In other words, no meaning, no understanding, hermeneutic or otherwise, would be possible without the experience of the Other. This foundation is drastically different than a hermeneutic foundation that allows for objects to rupture experience. Rather, from a Levinasian perspective, only the encounter with the Other can engender new meaning.<sup>13</sup> Levinas (1987) claims that “Experience is a reading, the understanding of meaning as exegesis, a hermeneutic, and not an intuition” (p. 78), indicating the relation of his thought with the hermeneutic circle. Yet, he is careful to delimit the experience of the Other as independent of the circle. For example, Levinas (1987) writes:

The manifestation of the other is, to be sure, produced from the first conformably with the way every meaning is produced. Another is present in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this whole, as a text by its content. The manifestation of the whole ensures his presence; it is thus a hermeneutic and an exegesis. ... But the epiphany of the other involves a signifyingness of its own independent of this meaning received from the world. (p. 95)

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<sup>13</sup> The outline of the Levinasian perspective advocated here does not explicitly address the discussion about objects as grounds for rupture, a common discussion in hermeneutics, and how that discussion relates to Levinas's perspective. This discussion requires more space than provided here and is an important direction for future work.

The manifestation of the Other is, thus, prior to the cultural whole that participates in the hermeneutic. The rupture of the Other grounds meaning such that the rupture is the foundation for the hermeneutic circle. In other words, meaning is not originally or ultimately constituted through the hermeneutic circle. Rather, the experience of the face-to-face encounter is the foundation for the hermeneutic circle because the Other grounds meaning of the hermeneutic circle.

Particularly for the contemporary science of psychology, a Levinasian hermeneutic implies that researchers must be more aware of the encounter with the Other that founds the circle of meaning because psychology is the study of behavior and mental processes (Myers, 1995). For many social scientists, psychology differs from the other disciplines within the social sciences (such as sociology or economics) because psychology studies the individual. While psychology deals with the behavior and mental processes of any individual organism, the focus is typically on the individual person (see, e.g., Myers, 1995). This focus indicates that psychologists experience the other person in research and therapy sessions which may engender the face-to-face encounter with the Other. Furthermore, for psychologists, since all meaning is given in the ethical experience of the Other, the data and methods used are ontological or epistemological claims that are abstracted from the ethical experience. However, rupture is always possible. The implication for the human sciences, particularly psychology, is that these sciences must proceed through the (Levinasian) hermeneutic approach of work and interpretation amenable to rupture because scientists in these sciences encounter people in research and conceptualize people in theories (Faulconer, 1990).

The claim that science cannot adequately totalize or capture meaning, otherness, or personhood because the Other exceeds meaning does not mean that there is no possible or worthy truth claims to be made in the human sciences (Manning, 1993). Rather, truth is grounded in the constitution of meaning that is possible in the ethical encounter that cannot go beyond the constraints of the elemental (Faulconer, 1990; Williams, 1990). In the next section, I discuss this Levinasian notion of truth and explore a possible methodology to reveal it.

### **Truth and Method**

The knowledge described in the previous section is fundamentally non-static, ethically constitutive knowledge that can nonetheless still provide a ground for the rationally defensible evaluation of truth claims because the epistemology entailed here is not a mere constructionism that would hold that people construct all meanings solely amongst themselves via various ephemeral social, political, and historical processes of knowledge negotiation. As discussed above, knowledge as constituted by the ethical encounter with the Other in the context of the elemental and the I allows knowledge to have genesis partly in the elemental. One important distinction necessary for understanding the discussion that follows, however, is the nature of the revelation of the Other. The rupture of the Other is not a universal dictate (even though language makes it difficult to avoid this connotation) in that the experience is not abstracted from the encounter, but a lived experience. In other words, the experience of the Other cannot be understood as a universal declaration of truth because the truth of rupture is experienced in rupture, in the encounter with the Other, and hence is constituted in an ethical experience that is revealed in the encounter and not in any declaration of truth. From a Levinasian perspective, then, static knowledge is not the only way to conceive of the nature of truth or the only standard

by which to judge truth claims. Rather, truth claims can be, and are, constituted in communal (in response to the Other) and contextual (including the elemental and the I) ways that are grounded in the reality of experience, ethical relationship, and concrete and physical constraints.

Thus, while Ethics is logically prior, the elemental contributes to meaning in such a way to permit the possibility of the adjudication of truth claims through a Levinasian hermeneutic approach. For example, the elemental constraints of depressions allow scientists to defend truth claims about the nature of depression, even though the meaning of depression is occasioned by the Other. Furthermore, the phenomenological experience of the Other also provides grounds upon which to adjudicate truth claims because it is the Other that grounds meaning and demands accounting. Truth claims from a Levinasian perspective are not truth claims in the traditional human science understanding (i.e., universal and static) because they are dependent on context. Truth claims from a Levinasian perspective are communal and contextual, though, still adjudicative due to the constraints of the elemental.

Since the Other can still rupture totalized meaning, these communal and contextual truth claims are not antithetical to, nor do they negate, rupture. The Other ruptures meaning as the communal constituent of truth claims, but the contextual constituent, including the elemental, can still ground meaning in the real because the elemental constitutes a constraint on the meanings that are possible. There are some implications for scientists in this contextual, communal understanding of truth claims, the latter addressed in final subsection (“The Scientific—and Ethical—Community”). In this section, however, I primarily address implications for the contextual nature of truth claims, though it must be recognized that all scientific knowledge is fundamentally communal in that science proceeds in a community of scientists. Knowledge as

contextual means that scientists must continue to study topics as context changes—because of the Other, self, and/or elemental—to avoid dogmatic totalization, or totalization that becomes reified. Knowledge cannot be fixed because rupture and changing context are always possible. As discussed above, fixed knowledge curtails change because rupture is not likely. Rupture is not likely with fixed knowledge because fixed knowledge implies complete knowledge. While most scientists consider scientific knowledge to be provisional, many still endorse fixed knowledge because of the abstract nature of science (Bishop, 2005; Clegg & Slife, 2005).

In contrast, from a Levinasian perspective, scientists must conduct science in such a way as to be open to contextual knowledge that cannot always be adequately distilled into abstract concepts. For this reason, scientists must be more attuned to contextual changes and what these changes can tell scientists about their research. Furthermore, the return to encounter discussed here implies and engenders humility since there is no static knowledge. The contextual nature of knowledge implies that scientists cannot assume static understanding (which would be reification) because rupture is possible (Clegg & Slife, 2005; Faulconer, 2005; Williams & Gantt, 2002). A sense of humility that truth claims are subject to revision (but not merely subjective) is necessary so that abstractions do not become static.

This notion of contextual meaning and knowledge implies that context should guide the selection of research methods because context constrains truth claims. If meanings can be, and are, constituted by context, then context should also guide the methods one employs to understand meaning. While Levinasian hermeneutics encourages an epistemology that grounds methods in meaning, the particular method chosen for research should depend on the context of the research. For example, to determine if leg strength has any effect on marathon time, a

researcher should choose a method that is amenable to test both leg strength and time such as pounds per number of repetitions and minutes spent running (quantitative measures). The context of one's research question determines the appropriate method to be used. Different contexts (because of different meanings encountered from the Other and elemental) would require different research methods (Gantt, 2002). A single method—which the majority of psychologists presume (Bishop, 2005; Clegg & Slife, 2005; Slife, 2004; Slife, Wiggins, et al., 2005; Williams, 2005)—is not acceptable because there is more than a single context in which experience and research occur. Several different methods could contribute uniquely to research on the vast majority of psychological topics because various methods can approach a given topic from various perspectives. In other words, the Levinas-inspired hermeneutic epistemology being advocated here encourages continued research on a given topic using a variety of different methods so that the encounter with the Other and elemental can be understood from different perspectives.

The notion of contextually-contingent methods suggests a particular methodology which I, and others (Slife, Wiggins, et al., 2005), have called object-driven methodology. Object-driven methodology focuses on the object of study as determinate of the method and requires an understanding of object as contextually-determined by the history, culture, and purposes of the scientist. Furthermore, context also includes the purpose of the research because the purpose of the research is revealed as the object of study is constituted by the context. In other words, since the context includes the purpose of the study and the context constitutes the object of the study, the purpose of the study is revealed in the object of study. If we consider methods as tools, an analogy may be helpful: a carpenter assesses her project before deciding on a tool. Suppose the

project demands that the carpenter put a nail into a board. She will choose the tool best suited for the project—a hammer. However, there are other tools that may get the job done, such as a screw driver. The screw driver may be able to pound the nail in even if not as adequately as the hammer. In fact, this use of the screw driver will most likely tell the carpenter something about the nail, the board, and the screw driver (Slife, Wiggins, et al., 2005).

Analogously, a scientist would first assess the research questions and the subject matter of interest and then determine which method would be most appropriate to study the subject matter. Also, even if other methods were chosen, some knowledge would be gained about the project *and* the method. In this way, multiple methods could be used to understand a single project, or research topic. So, leg strength and marathon time might best be understood using quantitative methods, but interviews and case studies might also provide important information. No method is inherently superior in the example: the object of study determines which method is appropriate. And, each method can provide useful information. Importantly, the scientist must justify his or her decision about methods as appropriate for the object of study. For psychology, the topic of research is the individual so the methodology may be more appropriately called Other-centered methodology. In sum, the researcher should first stipulate what objects he or she is studying and *then* a method for how to study those objects (Faulconer, 2005; Slife, Wiggins, et al., 2005). A reminder that methods are within the realm of epistemology and ontology and, as such, only point to the experience of the Other and the elemental—researchers must remember not to reify the topics of study *or* the methods. Just as the experience of the Other is phenomenologically justified, the choice of method is phenomenologically justified in the experience of research and should not be reified.

Much of this discussion is similar to discussions presented by social constructionist and hermeneutic writers (see, e.g., Gergen, 2009; Heidegger, 1962) but I want to briefly distinguish the approach advocated here from these approaches. The social constructionist claims that all meaning is interpretative as well but the foundation for interpretation is the culture (Gergen, 2009). The Levinasian perspective advocated here finds meaning in the revelation of the Other in the context of the constraints provided by the elemental. From such a perspective, meaning cannot be constructed in any way—or even any way society happens to deem appropriate—as the social constructionist argue. For the hermeneutic thinker, the hermeneutic circle is the process of meaning interpretation. From a Levinasian perspective, however, the circle is an inadequate explanation because of the asymmetry of the relationship with the Other. The Other gives meaning and thereby is beyond the contextual and elemental constraints that constitute meaning. Levinas addresses the same issues in ways that are somewhat similar to those of various social constructionist and hermeneutic thinkers. However, Levinas goes beyond these two traditions in so far as he grounds meaning and knowledge in the fundamentally ethical encounter with the Other. So, while much of this section is superficially congruent with the social constructionist and hermeneutic traditions, the foundation—the ethical relationship with the Other—is nonetheless dramatically different in ways that radically alter the understanding of the other, more similar aspects of the Levinas's thought.

Other-centered methodology allows for traditional experimental methods and broader empirical methods, such as ethnography and case study, to be used in combination without contradiction between methods because of the contextual nature of meaning (Faulconer, 2002). Other-centered methodology connects the different scientific methods under a single, unified

philosophy of science, and hermeneutic epistemology provides rational for the methodology. Even though Other-centered methodology does allow for different methods to be used in research it is not the same as eclecticism because there is a unifying methodology and epistemology. In other words, not just any method can be used without consideration of the theoretical background of that particular method as advocated with eclecticism since the method is Other-centered. The difference between eclecticism and Other-centered methodology is that for Other-centered methodology the method must be justified under a unified epistemology as appropriate to the object of study whereas for eclecticism disparate epistemologies justify disparate methods without concern for unification.

### **The Scientific—and Ethical—Community**

While the methodology advocated by a Levinasian approach to science is Other-centered, the scientific community still adjudicates truth claims. This community consists of many people, each of whom can be encountered as the Other. However, scientific communities consists of more than one Other. Levinas recognizes the Other as before yet others in his philosophy when he discusses the *Third* (Levinas, 1969). For Levinas, the relationship with the Other is an ethical relationship prior to any prescriptive mores or rules: the experience of the Other is the experience of obligation. However, when Levinas introduces the Third as the child engendered in fecundity, then justice as prescriptive rules and mores is required because justice is the way to adjudicate obligations to many Others. Furthermore, the introduction of the Third recognizes that in the experience of obligation to the Other, we also experience an obligation to the other as before yet others. As members of communities, scientists have an obligation to the others of the Other—

which includes other researchers, government officials, research participants, and research consumers (Clegg & Slife, 2005).

From a Levinasian perspective, the communitarian nature of science means that all knowledge within these communities requires adjudication by the community because science falls within the realm of justice (Faulconer, 2005). Scientists could and should adjudicate truth claims through scholarly work and interpretation. More importantly, scientists should explicitly adjudicate methods and codes of conduct. The communal nature of science becomes important as a forum that provides many contextual viewpoints moving toward a (non-reified) consensus (Cohen, 2002) because of the ethical (and juridical) nature of the encounter. The scientific community provides opportunities to discuss topics of study *and* approaches to sciences from different viewpoints. In other words, truth claims and issues about the appropriate means and methods to arrive at truth claims can be addressed within these communities as response to the ethical demands of the Other and in responsibility for the Third.

This ethical community would require scientists to be upfront about their specific approach by recognizing their foundational assumptions and biases. Scientists need not jettison these assumptions and biases in the attempt to achieve the “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986). Rather, these assumptions and biases would be included in the discussion regarding truth claims such that they could inform the process of adjudication through the Levinasian hermeneutic. In fact, different assumptions provide different contexts of interpretation and research topics from different perspectives. In this view, different assumptions and biases are important because they provide alternative understandings of research topics. In other words, scientists with different

assumptions and biases provide alternate (new) meanings concerning the research topics that can be adjudicated by the scientific community.

The discussion of fecundity takes on new meaning in this approach to science. Through our experience with the Other—here the other scientist—new ideas come about and new discoveries can be made. Just as new meaning is found in the relationship with the Other, new scientific meaning is only possible in response to another scientist's ideas and innovations. The “saying” of research articles, presentations, and books can rupture the “said” of current or traditional understanding to generate new meaning. Importantly, just as in fecundity, the result is not simply a hybrid of two ideas. Rather, the response to the Other generates something new but not completely separate from the original ideas because of the asymmetrical nature of the encounter with the Other. It is in this way that scientific ideas can change—and maybe even progress. This change will occur only in response to the Other that gives meaning.

From a Levinasian perspective, alternate meanings are imperative otherwise totalization happens and results in fixed, determinate understanding. The scientific community should include many voices in the discussion as long as each voice expresses assumptions and biases. Furthermore, the scientific community should strive to hear the voice of the Other, the saying, that irrupts the said of formal knowledge. While the adjudication of truth claims is a very important task for scientists, the ethical obligation and rupture cannot be forgotten because adjudication depends on these. Scientists must always remember there is a face behind the voice. This ethical science truly considers the face of the Other by opening discourse and interpersonal instruction within the community (Gantt, 2002) in the form of a unifying ethos

(Clegg & Slife, 2005). The unifying ethos is our responsibility, particularly as human scientists, to the Other we study.

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