*European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Health*,
Month?? 2005; ??(?): 1–13

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Epistemology and the hither side: A Levinasian account of relational knowing

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*(Received ■■■; revised ■■■; accepted ■■■)*

**Abstract**
In this paper, we argue that the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is inconsistent with the ideological and economic dogmatism of psychology. His philosophy denies the adequacy of all rational, thematic accounts of human beings and thus undermines psychology's dogmatic adherence to the methods, institutional procedures, and economic practices of empiricistic, positivistic psychology. His philosophy demands that we ground our research in ethical relations and not abstract formulations. This fundamentally ethical approach to epistemology provides us with a clear, though non-rational, frame for adjudicating between different approaches to research in psychology. His philosophy allows us to judge (to qualify and disqualify) contributions to psychological research in terms of their relational, rather than their abstract or instrumental, adequacy.

**Keywords:** *Levinas, relational, epistemology, dogmatism, psychology, research*

In general, the methods of psychology are tied to a single, ideologically dogmatic way of conceiving both knowledge and practice. They reduce knowledge to prediction and control and enshrine empiricism and its derivatives as the ideal research practices. Examples of this philosophy of science bias can be seen in the empirically supported treatment (EST) movement, in the review process for major psychological journals, and in the centralized power and granting structures of the discipline.

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ISSN 1364–2537 print/ISSN 1469–5901 online © 2005 Taylor & Francis Group Ltd
DOI: 10.1080/13642530500087245

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, however, argues against this rationalistic and ideological dogmatism. His philosophy, in fact, has often been interpreted as entirely anti-systematic and so little effort has been expended to consider the particular epistemological implications of his work (especially for psychology). While we agree that the work of Levinas does not lend itself to ready systematization, we believe that it provides an epistemological and ethical basis for arbitrating between the various claims of psychologists. In this paper, we will briefly address the dogmatic stance of psychology and Levinas' critique of any dogmatism, and then outline a proposal for an ethical epistemology consonant with Levinasian thought.

## Contemporary psychology is ideologically and economically dogmatic

The dogmatism and scientism of psychology have long been well-documented features of our discipline (Bohman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1983; 1988; Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1999; Rychlak, 1988; Slife & Williams, 1995), but the practical consequences of this bias have become clearer in recent years. The empirically supported treatment (EST) movement, for example, has begun to institutionalize the values of naturalistic science (e.g. empiricism, determinism, reductionism, etc.) as the only justification procedures for the mental health field (see, for example, Bohart, 2000). The EST movement seeks to eliminate all treatments that do not conform to the experimental ideal – that is, whose values and essential characteristics cannot be observed by the senses or manipulated and controlled in the laboratory. This movement represents not only an ideological dogmatism but also a practical and economic one in that these epistemological values are increasingly being adopted by the professional, legal, and corporate institutions that govern the mental health field (see Slife, Wiggins & Graham (in press) for a discussion of the EST monopoly).

This bias toward naturalistic, positivistic philosophy of science is also evident in the review process for many of the major journals in psychology. Here the gatekeepers, or journal editors, are the often unknowing epistemological police, enforcing the method-driven rules of this disguised ideology. The APA format, required for all psychological publication submissions, is an instantiation of this epistemological ideology with its recipe framework, lack of true historical situatedness, and exaltation of so-called objective p-values and static research design (for a fuller discussion, see Slife et al., 2005; Williams, 2005).

The funding procedures of major granting institutions also evidence this dogmatism. Not only do these institutions reinforce and enforce positivistic rules and linguistic formats, they have become the economic engine of

empiricism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the neuroscientific and pharmacological research on anti-depressants, where the pharmaceutical industry controls the vast preponderance of such research. As has been well documented, non-significant differences between antidepressant experimental groups and placebo controls are published only when the research is independently funded, i.e. not funded by the pharmaceutical industry (Slife et al., 2002). In fact, the highest correlations in this literature are not in the research data *per se* but in the relations between research sponsor and research result. Freemantle, Anderson and Young (2000), for example, have shown in a meta-analysis of comparative studies that a sponsor's funding is the best predictor of whether studies will show the sponsor's drug to be effective. In other words, if the sponsor of the research is the pharmaceutical industry, the research is more likely to find support for the drug being studied.

Because research funding is, in this way, centrally controlled, research methods are also centrally controlled. It is only experimental and naturalistic research that is funded – the very theoretical approaches upon which the biological and medical models of anti-depressant drug therapy depend. It is evident, then, that psychology's bias towards the ideologies of empiricism and materialism extends not only to its methods and assumptions but to the very economic practices that drive the discipline.

## A Levinasian analysis precludes strict dogmatic assertions about human beings

Admittedly, this centralizing (perhaps 'totalizing') tendency in American psychology does not seem worrisome to many psychologists. Indeed, many consider a methodological ideology to be *the* unifying framework for the discipline (cf. Yanchar & Slife, 1997). Still, there is considerable evidence that such disguised ideologies are not only anti-intellectual but fraught with real peril for both the discipline and the consumers of psychology. The obvious materialistic bias of neuroscience is only one such indicator (other indicators include biases toward reductive naturalism (Slife, 2004), liberal individualism and/or instrumentalism (Richardson et al., 1999), hedonism (Gantt, 2000), rationalism (Polkinghorne, 1983), and atomism (Yanchar, 2005) – just to name a few.).

It is our view that the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas provides an important counterpoint to these totalizing trends – that his philosophy precludes all such dogmatic adherence to propositional ideologies. The philosophy of Levinas is inconsistent with the ideological dogmatism of our discipline because, for Levinas, knowing and the categories of being are always insufficient fully to capture either the irreducible other or the inarticulable self. The other is beyond fully adequate thematic knowledge because 'the face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows

the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure' (Levinas, 1969 [196l], p. 51). Indeed, the face of the other:

> does not manifest itself by these qualities .... It *expresses itself*. The face brings a notion of truth which, in contradistinction to contemporary ontology, is not disclosure of an impersonal Neuter, but *expression*: the existent breaks through all the envelopings and generalities of Being.
>
> (Levinas, 1969 [1961], p. 51)

The face of the other, then, calls to us from beyond being; it breaks apart all ideological themes and renders them inadequate. Consequently, all accounts of the other, including the accounts produced through the methods of psychology, are by their very nature limited, insufficient, inadequate – in a word, provisional – and certainly do not admit of a dogmatic adherence to any one particular interpretative scheme.

Just as the face of the other undermines ideological dogmatism, the irreducible singularity of the self, or what Levinas calls the 'oneself', also resists totalizing themes. The oneself of Levinas is not the self-reflexive, self-conscious identity of a cognized self. Indeed, 'the *hither side* of identity is not reducible to the *for itself,* where a being recognizes itself in its difference beyond its immediate identity' (Levinas, 1996, p. 86). The oneself is an 'absolutely individual identity of the interior, in itself, without any recourse to a system of references' (ibid.: 88). Self, then, is not any more reducible to the generalities of being than is the other. What we (we psychologists) think of as the self is a thematized self, the 'for itself', that is only an after-the-fact generalization. This self seeks '*to possess itself* by showing itself, proposing itself as a *theme*' (ibid.: 80), a practice central to contemporary empiricist psychologies of the self. This thematizable 'for itself', however, should never be mistaken for the oneself, just as the face of the other should never be permanently (i.e. dogmatically) fixed into the crystallized sepulcher of the said, another wont of positivistic psychology.

Because the self-and-other-in-relation is beyond thematic 'being', rational and ideological approaches to knowing can never serve to tell us what is fully and indubitably true about (and behind) self and other because they cannot fully contain self and other – they can only articulate the reflexive self and the generalized other of thematized being. The ideological focus of psychology, however, ignores these inherent limitations of the categorical and thematic and it thus renders our accounts of human beings contextless, thin, and disconnected. In thematization, according to Levinas, 'the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought' (1969 [1961]: 42). The categories of being replace the face of the other with a generalized other – a generalization that will always be inadequate to the living face of the other.

It should be noted here that the Levinasian account of the self-and-other-in-relation, or what he calls the 'hither side' of being, is not another unverifiable metaphysical reduction. The inaccessibility of the hither side does not mean that this hither side is beyond experience (or relation), and thus beyond some form of 'knowing'. It only means that it is beyond the realm of the fully articulate. We experience what Levinas calls 'proximity' and 'caress' in ways that cannot be adequately reduced to theme or consciousness: 'In starting with *touching*, interpreted not as palpitation but as caress, and *language*, interpreted not as the traffic of information but as contact, we have tried to describe *proximity* as irreducible to consciousness or thematization' (Levinas, 1996, p. 80). These experiences (caress, contact) are prior to, and beyond, the essences of being, the categories of articulation, and so demand humility and uncertainty when we apply to them our limited methods – uncertainty but not ignorance or blindness because we do in fact experience them: '*Anarchically*, proximity is a relationship with a singularity, without the mediation of any principle or ideality. In the concrete, it describes my relationship with the neighbor, a relationship whose signifyingness is prior to the celebrated ''sense bestowing'' (ibid.: 81). Our face-to-face relations 'signify' before they are ever transmuted into signs. We experience proximity, caress, and desire in ways that precede, and reside beyond, the categories that we produce to explain them. The Levinasian account of the hither side is thus not a reformulation of a Kantian noumenality. The hither side is not, like the noumenal world, assumed but unexperienced; it is experienced but beyond fully adequate articulation within the categories of being. The hither side is 'an anteriority that is older than the a priori' (ibid.: 81).

For Levinas, then, self and other express themselves in an ethical relation that is 'not the thematization of any relation but that very relation which resists thematization inasmuch as it is an-archic. To thematize it is already to lose it and to depart from the absolute passivity of self' (Levinas, 1996, pp. 92–3). This relation comes before all thematization and is, indeed, foundational to thematic consciousness. All themes, including those of psychology, are grounded in the ethical relation, are ethical in their very character, and so require an abandonment of the dangerously comfortable illusion of objectivity. The ethical relation denies neutrality and eschews certainty:

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> This relation is not simply another quest for certainty, a self-coincidence paradoxically claimed to be the basis of communication. Consequently, all one can say of communication and transcendence is their incertitude. As an adventure of subjectivity which is not governed by the concern to rediscover oneself, an adventure other than the coinciding of consciousness, communication rests on incertitude (here a positive condition) and is possible only as deliberately sacrificed. Communication with the other can be transcendence only as a dangerous life, as a fine risk to be run.
>
> (Levinas, 1996, p. 92)

In the ethical relation, knowing is not about certainty, about indubitable necessities. These are the province of positivist ideologies, ideologies of power, prediction, and control. The ethical relation resists any kind of rational certainty, any kind of unitary dogmatic ideology. It also resists the instrumentality of the scientific enterprise – the notion that science is primarily intended to be the instrument of the masterful, bounded self, the discoverer of techniques for controlling the other. The ethical relation rests, instead, on uncertainty and the perilous adventure of forever insufficient knowers sacrificing their certainty and even their control for understanding.

## The uncertainty of knowing does not undermine the possibility of knowledge

Though there is, for Levinas, no certainty in ontological or epistemological accounts of self and other, we do not believe that a Levinasian analysis of human understanding precludes all means of distinguishing truth from error. The Levinasian project should not be misunderstood as a purely negative deconstruction of all knowledge or system. Levinas addresses this common interpretation of his philosophy in *Otherwise than Being*: 'But is it necessary and is it possible that the saying on the hither side be thematized, that is manifest itself, that it enter into a proposition, a book?' (Levinas, 1997 [1981], p. 43). His answer is succinct: 'It is necessary' (ibid.: 43). Not only can we thematize the hither side, we must thematize it. The hither side:

> must spread itself out and assemble itself into essence, posit itself, be hypostatized, become an eon in consciousness and knowledge, let itself be seen, undergo the ascendancy of being. Ethics itself, in its saying which is a responsibility, requires this hold.
>
> (Levinas, 1997 [1981], p. 44)

The hither side requires theme because 'the subjective and its good cannot be understood outside of Ontology' (ibid.: 45). If we wish to say anything about the hither side, to know in any conscious expressible sense, then we require the reductions of words, themes, and consciousness. Indeed, it is our obligation to face the other, to engage in the ethical relation, and such engagement requires reduction though not colonization, thematization but not totalization.

Levinas's project, then, is not to undermine the possibility of all systematic knowledge, because his project, like all philosophical projects, depends on that very possibility. His project is, rather, to undermine fully adequate, or apodictic, conceptions of rational knowledge. Knowing requires themes 'but it is also necessary that the saying call for philosophy in order that the light that occurs not congeal into essence, and that the hypostasis of an eon

not be set up as an idol' (Levinas, 1997 [1981], p. 44). We cannot help but engage in knowing but we must always be careful to undermine our own enshrined idols – idols like empiricism that, through movements like EST, congeal (i.e. institutionalize) the methods of psychology into a single class. Any approach to knowing, then, any epistemology, if it is to be an ethical epistemology, must be capable of simultaneously making necessarily reductive assertions about the self-and-other-in-relation and 'despite the reduction, retaining an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity' (ibid.: 44). An ethical epistemology must recognize the necessity of saying something while never allowing that said to be reified, crystallized, or dogmatized 'for the saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said' (ibid.: 44).

Of course, though epistemology requires theme, it may be that epistemology, or any kind of rational or systematic knowledge, is itself unnecessary. Levinas expresses this doubt: 'Why know? Why is there a problem? Why philosophy?' (Levinas, 1997 [1981], p. 157). Levinas' answer to this question is that because every face obligates me infinitely, it becomes necessary to find a way to face those multiple obligations, to compare the incomparable and:

> In the comparison of the incomparable there would be the latent birth of representation, logos, consciousness, work, the neutral notion *being*.... Out of representation is produced the order of justice moderating or measuring the substitution of me for the other, and giving the self over to calculus. Justice requires contemporaneousness of representation. It is thus that the neighbor becomes visible, and, looked at, presents himself and there is also justice for me. The saying is fixed in a said, is written, becomes a book, law and science.
>
> (Levinas, 1997 [1981], p. 158)

The face of a third interlocutor creates not only obligation (as in the face-to-face relation), but the need for justice and justice requires system. It is in the multiplicity of obligating others that we find 'the reason for the intelligibility of systems. The entry of a third party is the very fact of consciousness' (ibid.: 157). In this sense, epistemological implications are not only possible within Levinasian philosophy but also demanded by it – an often overlooked, or at least minimized, aspect of his work.

The Levinasian account of knowing is, to be sure, non-rational and non-ideological, but it is still an account of knowing. It does not so much disqualify knowing as subjugate it to the ethical. This account, then, does not prevent us from making claims about self, other, and the methods that may relate them. It simply prevents us from considering those claims fully to contain self and other. These claims bear an inevitable, fundamental uncertainty but this uncertainty should not be confused either with falsehood or with a lack of knowledge. It is the positivist who confuses certainty with truth and knowledge, not Levinas. For Levinas, uncertainty is a positive condition, representing not the futility (because of their uncertainty)

of all claims but the ascendancy of the ethical relation over rational necessity – the inception of knowing in ignorance rather than its termination in surety. An ethical epistemology does not deny knowledge; it simply affirms the priority of the ethical relation. It is our argument that such an ethical epistemology is not only consistent with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas but also capable of providing psychology with a means for adjudicating between the disparate knowledge claims and knowledge practices of our discipline.

## A proposal for an ethical epistemology consistent with Levinasian phenomenology

At this point in our development, psychology has no clear, universally recognized context of justification that would allow us to adjudicate between the claims of the various practical and theoretical traditions that gather themselves under the broad psychological umbrella. Despite this apparent difficulty, our discipline still manages to develop communities and traditions of practice where widely differing viewpoints are integrated over some diffuse but powerful shared praxis. Somehow we come together and harbor the (at least logically) unjustified belief that our different approaches can complement each other, that our discussions and debates can lead to some kind of shared understanding. This arena for productive argumentation, this ground for genuine community, is, we want to argue, ethical relationship. We argue, with Levinas, that our knowledge communities arise first from the ethical ground of the face-to-face encounter – that 'responsibility for the others, or communication, is the adventure that bears all the discourse of science and philosophy. Thus this responsibility would be the very rationality of reason or its universality, a rationality of peace' (Levinas, 1997 [1981], p. 160).

To practice what we call epistemology (or science) is to take an ethical stand, to enter into ethical relationships. Indeed, the very origin of any kind of discourse, scientific or otherwise, is the face-to-face relation. For Levinas, truth is 'a modality of the relation between the same and the other' (Levinas, 1969 [1961], p. 64). 'Truth is made possible by relation with the Other our master' (ibid.: 72) because it is only in relation that the occasion for knowledge arises. It is only the mysterious, unknowable face of the other that provides me with the ignorance that is the original condition for all knowledge practices. Thus 'truth arises where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him' (ibid.: 62) and knowing only 'appears within a relation with the Other' (ibid.: 93). All questions of epistemology, of science, follow in the wake of the ethical relation, forever a step behind the lived encounter.

This encounter – lived out in our shared praxis, the ethos of our communities – is populated by practices, by ways of relating, by ethical encounters,

and it is at the level of the ethical and relational that they are adjudicated. These practices cannot be justified in terms of their abstract adequacy or instrumental utility (as some specific knowledge *claims* are) but, rather, in terms of their relational adequacy – in terms of the degree to which they contribute to the *ethos* of shared inquiry and not simply to the prediction or control of the natural world. Because knowledge practices are essentially ethical in character, their value – their truth value – is judged not from within an abstract and rational logos but from within a communitary, concrete, relational ethos. Knowledge practices *are* ethical relationships – from their inception in the primordial face-to-face encounter through to their resolution in conversation; they flow from relationship and it is toward relationship that they aim and it is thus in the ethical relationship that they must be understood and adjudicated.

This emphasis on a shared ethos rests on the ethical relation and points to community but it should not be confused with another truth-by-committee proposal. Neither agreement between interlocutors nor agreement between the subjective and objective is foundational to a relational sense of truth. As Levinas puts it, relational knowledge is 'not governed by the concern to rediscover oneself' (Levinas, 1996, [1961], p. 92). Indeed, genuine relation not only allows but requires divergent viewpoints, though, of course, it also allows and even encourages agreement. Institutionalized agreement, however, can be a kind of monological synthesis of multiple viewpoints that issues only in totality. The authoritative synthesis of divergent perspectives ultimately aims at the destruction, and not the cultivation, of genuine community. In a community of knowers, the interlocutors can disagree profoundly about essentially every issue but the valuing of the discursive community.

This proposal should also not be confused with a relativistic account of truth. A community ethos is a clear ground (though not a rationalistic or abstract ground) for adjudicating and disqualifying contributions to a knowledge community. The values, biases, and emphases of a community of knowers are the most fundamental grounds for any kind of arbitration, whether it be ethical or epistemological. In addition, though the ethos of a community of knowers is intimately tied to the particular context and constitution of that community, community itself entails certain general limitations. A relational approach to the arbitration of knowledge practices must necessarily be carried out in and through relationship and thus interlocutors (and interlocutions) that undermine relationship are among those that must be disqualified. For example, faithless, arrogant, or dismissive approaches undermine relation and sabotage the community at which it aims. These approaches to knowing can issue only in solipsistic and monolithic dogmas and not what Levinas calls the 'commonplaces' of relational knowing and, as such, cannot constitute truthful knowledge practices.

## Explication of the proposal

If we take seriously the possibility of a psychology based on an ethical epistemology – an epistemology grounded in a communitary ethos rather than a unitary logos – it seems reasonable to wonder what form such a discipline might take, to wonder what, concretely, is meant by ethos and how one arbitrates knowledge claims on the basis of such a notion. In general, we employ the term ethos in a rich sense, implying the intimate relationship between truth and the ethical character of knowledge practices, practitioners, and ends as well as the ethical relations within a community of knowers (and known). Though it is difficult to thematize something as ineffable as an ethos, a research group known to the authors should serve to illustrate this notion. This group, known as the SEC (social, evolutionary, and cultural psychology) forum, is composed of researchers with vastly diverse backgrounds and assumptions. One researcher is a phenomenologist and action researcher, while another is an experimental social psychologist; one is a behavioral and physiological researcher while his colleague is an evolutionary theorist. Some in the group advocate holism while others are atomistic and reductionistic. Some emphasize numerical analyses while others prefer qualitative (and some a bit of both). This is a group with clearly different axiomatic assumptions, a group constructed for discord, and yet one whose members regularly discuss and collaborate (though not entirely without discord).

It should be clear that this collaboration is not possible because of explicit, shared logical assumptions. The members of the group connect, rather, across an unspoken shared ethos that binds together their incommensurable claims. To be sure, some of that connection is a purely institutional artifact, the result of disparate views being tossed into the same administrative stew. But, even more, the members of the group come together through very concrete ethical relationships. The members of the group value collegial relationships and so they try to minimize personal attacks. They value consensus and so they skirt (or at least temporarily put out of play) dogmatic rhetoric. They value collaboration and so they find ways to meld very different interests and methods. The values of the group members also color the work that comes out of their collaborations. They value practice over theory and so often emphasize empirical data and de-emphasize theoretical explication. They value the experimental paradigm (broadly conceived), naturalistic accounts, and empirical methods, and so their collaborations tend to remain within these limits. These values, however, are not valued beforehand or valued explicitly. Few group members could specify these values in advance of the group, nor could these values be successfully legislated through a 'group constitution'. Instead, these values are constituted as the members of the group 'face'

one another. The values emerge from the specificity and particularity of the 'others' in the group.

Just as the SEC group can coexist by virtue of an unspoken ethos, an axiomatic orientation toward logos can be deeply destructive of both relation and the truth that flows from relation. A clear, though somewhat dramatic, example of a research endeavor that conflicted with, undermined, and damaged a community ethos, all in the name of science (the ultimate logos), is the famous Tuskegee syphilis study (Jones, 1993). In this project, initiated by US government researchers in the early part of the twentieth century, African-American males infected with syphilis were kept ignorant of their disease and were prevented from receiving treatment. Such disregard for the humanity of the participants was a faithless act that denied and undermined the community between researcher and participant, thus damaging the reliability of all future research, and that profoundly damaged national racial communities.

On ethical grounds alone, these kinds of practice could never be considered truthful in a community that faces the primacy of the ethical relation, but such faithlessness also directly affects the instrumental quality of the research. The ecological validity of the study, for example, was compromised by the researchers' actions. In a real-world situation, a patient seeking treatment for syphilis would rarely, if ever, be deceived or prevented from receiving treatment. These researchers were not investigating a real-world phenomenon – i.e. the course of untreated syphilis in the African-American community. They were investigating the effects of their own rather arrogant deceit. These researchers justified their behavior through an appeal to the advancement of knowledge, but knowledge flows out of the ethical relation and to undermine that relation is to undermine knowledge.

In an ethical epistemology, then, it still makes sense to talk about truth and falsehood. Any knowledge practices that undermine ethical relations can only be considered false. Besides the more dramatic example cited above, there are many ways in which truthful relation can be compromised. Falsifying research findings and compromising the rigor of an investigative endeavor, for example, undermine the ethical relation. We cannot keep faith, either within the community of researchers or with the larger communities of research participants and research consumers, if we intentionally misrepresent the voices of those for whom we presume to speak. We cannot engender trust and communication through self-serving dishonesty. Likewise, sloppy, lazy, or careless research practices break faith with our communities of knowing and undermine, in an essential way, the community ethos that binds us together.

Finally, the ideological dogmatisms of contemporary psychology represent perhaps the greatest threat to any kind of binding ethos at the disciplinary (or even more local) level. The heart of the ethical relation is to

face one's interlocutor, to stand in a relation of humility before the other. One comes before the other in supplication, without certainty and in the attitude of pupil rather than master. Dogmatism, however, reverses that relationship and is thus false. Dogmatic ideologies take up the position of authority; they deny all other approaches, all other possibilities; they master and contain the other within the certainties of fact. Movements like EST provide a forced unity based on a particular, local ideology that can never permit genuine community. In such movements, divergent perspectives are sheared away and discourse is obviated. Arrogant certainties replace tentative communities and the adventure of knowing becomes only brute orthodoxy.

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, however, points towards a more open and fruitful conception of psychology. His account of the face reveals a human subject beyond all of our easy, self-assured pretensions to certainty. It shows us the profound ethical roots of our discipline and directs us toward a practice that acknowledges those roots and grounds itself in them.

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