

**Something Other Than Me:  
Levinas and The Revelation of Objectivity**

Patrick Cheatham

2007

What is real, and how does one know this? Objectivity has an exasperating history in Western culture, and a comprehensive discussion of this would be far beyond the scope of this paper. At the risk of simplifying the matter too much, conceptualizations of objectivity tend to gravitate toward two currents of thought, absolute objectivity and relative subjectivity. Absolutism can be seen in the positivistic, scientific view; reality is ordered and appears the same regardless of who sees it or even if anyone sees it. The material, external world then constitutes objectivity. Relativism can be seen in more post-modern views; reality depends on the viewer's distinct perspective. In some sense, a person's unique subjectivity constitutes its appearance. While most conceptualizations fall somewhere in the middle, they do tend to emphasize one view over another. Also, almost all overvalue the representational power of the ego in regard to objectivity. One obtains objectivity in an act of cognitive strength. Phenomenology in general tries to undercut the oppositions of absolutism versus relativism and objectivity versus subjectivity. However, many writers still implicitly make distinctions between subject and object and strongly emphasize the representational ability of the ego. Husserlian intentionality exemplified this dynamic. In *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas (1969) presented a continuation yet radical departure from the phenomenology of Husserl, and in doing this, he provided a fairly distinct notion of what it means to be objective, both undercutting the dichotomy between subject and object and subverting the representational power of the ego.

Even though he did not elucidate clearly distinct stages or movements, Levinas (1969) can be seen as generally describing the self's movement toward objective reality, and it loosely mirrored some of the developmental views that Merleau-Ponty (1964) offered in his essay "The Child's Relation To Others." Merleau-Ponty described the phenomenon of a child moving from an incipient and pervasive solipsism to a realization of the independent existence of other people. Levinas did not discuss such an explicit developmental progress, but with some explication, one can glean a quasi-developmental progression in his writings.

Levinas described the self as initially consisting of psychic egoism. The self begins existence in a nearly solipsistic state, as metaphysical separation defines its relation to the world (Levinas, 1969, p. 102). This does not mean, though, that the self completely encloses itself in regard to the outside world. The self relates to the world in the fashion of spontaneous enjoyment and nourishment. This involves a movement into what could prosaically be termed the objective world, the elemental. Levinas described the elemental as "the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped" (1969, p. 131). The air around us, the sky, and the earth: all these exemplify the elemental. However, this spontaneous enjoyment of the elemental, predicated on an existence independent from the one who enjoys it, distinguishes itself as a self-referential act. Even though the self maintains distance from the elemental, the very act of enjoyment and nourishment relates back to the furthering of the self.

From this psychic egoism and enjoyment of the elemental, the self creates a home, the place from which ipseity, selfhood, enters the world. He stated,

The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement. The recollection necessary for nature to be able to be represented and worked over, for it to first take form as a world, is accomplished as the home. (Levinas, 1969, p. 152)

The home distinguishes the self as interiority. It indicates both residence in the elements, the medium from which ipseity enjoys, and a withdrawal from it. Levinas did not equate one's dwelling in the elemental as being within objectivity, though. He wrote, "Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling" (1969, p. 153).

Levinas stated that this self-referential and circumscribed existence does not open until the encounter with the face of the Other, another person. The self encounters in the Other something absolutely separate and unable to be subsumed in an act of enjoyment or egoic representation. The Other infinitely overflows any conceptualizations of it; "his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us" (Levinas, 1969, p. 194). The Other presents as always more than what the self can perceive and understand. The Other as infinite and absolute calls the self's enjoyment of the elemental world into question. This encounter with the Other erects an obstacle to the free and self-interested movement in the elemental and makes the self pause within its spontaneity. This pause provokes the self into questioning its prior sense of freedom and acknowledging its weakness, its radical unworthiness in the task of understanding the face of infinity. It ultimately forces the self to recognize the primacy of the Other as a being in the world, one that holds a position of transcendence in regard to the self.

This, though, does not mean that the self cannot try to see the Other as less than transcendent. The self always has the option of attempting to reduce the infinite nature of the Other to that of an object. Through totalization, the Other can be experienced in a fairly static and objectified manner. It could essentially be regarded as part of the elemental. In this sense, the self's ipseity would not be ruptured or questioned. However, the infinite face of the Other always exceeds the self's attempts at totalization.

It is at this point that one can begin to see Levinas's notion of objectivity. The encounter with the Other ruptures the self-referential world of ipseity and posits another who cannot be subsumed into the self. If the Other cannot be consumed and violated in this way, then the only response to the Other must be an innately ethical one. Levinas found that this response forms the basis for the commandment "Thou shall not kill." Ethical responsibility, as founded on the encounter with the Other, is essentially recognition of a world outside of the self, a world from which one cannot ultimately take enjoyment or possession.

Levinas's notion of the Other as teacher enters here. What cannot be comprehended and does not exist within the self can be taught through revelation by the Other. This teaching through revelation occurs through the act of discourse, through language. While the Other cannot be thematized, the world of the elemental can. For Levinas, what exists does so for the Other. Indeed the thematic elemental exists as a gift for the Other, and furthermore the Other finds my understanding of this gift. Levinas said, "The Other, the signifier, manifests himself in speech by speaking of the world and not himself; he manifests himself by proposing the world, by *thematizing* it" (Levinas,

1969, p. 96). For Levinas, objectivity occurs within the language of discourse between the self and the Other, not in a relationship between the self and the mere surrounding objects. Levinas wrote,

The objects are not objects when they offer themselves to the hand that uses them, to the mouth and the nose, the eyes and the ears that enjoy them. Objectivity is not what remains of an implement or a food when separated from the world in which their being comes into play. It is *posited* in a discourse, in a conversation [*entre-tien*] which *proposes* the world. This *proposition* is held between [se tient entre] two points which do not constitute a system, a cosmos, a totality. (1969, p. 95-96)

This recognition of a world outside of the self, objectivity, can be of particular importance in understanding Levinas's idea of freedom as invested by the Other. In one regard, the encounter with the Other seemingly limits one's freedom as it halts the self's spontaneous movement in the elemental world. Perhaps this notion of the Other restricting freedom can best be surmised by Sartre's famous quote, "Hell is other people." Conversely, though, the encounter with the Other erupts the self's interior egocentrism and reveals the existence of a wider and more objective world. In effect, it opens the self's world instead of limiting it. With this background, the Other truly does invest freedom, since this escape from the self cannot happen without the Other's calling ipseity into question.

In regard to language, Levinas created a distinction between the said and the saying. For him, the said refers to the content of discourse, what the self says to the other and vice versa. The saying, though, grounds the said. The saying is not some pre-linguistic knowledge that takes precedence in regard to interpretation, a point easily misunderstood by some (Kogler, 2005). This would establish a hierarchy of meanings, with the said and the saying possessing different values and possibly contradicting each other. The pre-linguistic would be regarded more important than the linguistic, the said. For Levinas, the saying indeed took precedence over the said, but only in a metaphysically ethical sense. The saying of the Other essentially means "Here I am," an assertion of independent, absolute existence and a plea for ethical, non-violent response. One could certainly refer to this as a level of knowledge, but it in no way negates any sort of meaning from the content of the said.

Levinas is not alone in his conception of language's intimate relationship to objectivity. This brings the discussion to some interesting similarities between hermeneutic thought and Levinas's use of language as the ethical and objective bridge between the self and the Other. Both Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer conceived language and discourse as the objective medium by which people relate to each other. This relational dialogue involves what Gadamer termed the fusion of horizons, "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 302), essentially one's historical perspective and context. Gadamer further stated, "To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete" (2004, p. 302). To gain a more complete understanding of the world involves that previously mentioned fusion of horizons, which can only be accomplished with some encountered other, an instance of a different horizon. In creating dialogue with another person, the two separate horizons meet and genuine understanding can potentially take place. In this, knowledge becomes de-centered and something new and

more encompassing than before develops, a more truthful understanding. Objectivity in this vein involves productive discourse, and otherness becomes paramount for this. As Martin Buber stated, “Genuine conversation, and therefore every actual fulfillment of relation between men, means accepting otherness” (1998, p. 59).

It is tempting to say that an objective perspective develops through the hermeneutic process, as it would theoretically be a matter of fusing multiple horizons. To say that the hermeneutic circle, the continual interplay of understanding and interpretation, produces a final and complete objective knowledge, though, misses the point of historical understanding. One cannot get completely outside history and hold a complete picture of it. This places severe limits on objective knowledge, as it must always know itself from within and involves a circular progression. Heidegger, who first explicated the ontological aspects of hermeneutic understanding, wrote,

. . . if interpretation always already has to operate within what is understood and nurture itself from this, how should it then produce scientific results without going in a circle, especially when the presupposed understanding still operates in the common knowledge of human being and world? But according to the most elementary rules of logic, the circle is a *circulus vitiosus* [vicious circle]” (1996, p. 143)

Objectivity, or developing a picture of truth, does not involve deconstructing the vicious circle and creating a more linear structure in which knowledge would accumulate in a piecemeal fashion. As Heidegger further stated, “What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way” (1996, p. 143).

Hermeneutics, though, deals with the inherently interpretative characteristic of understanding. While Levinas’s project has an obvious affinity for hermeneutical understanding, he spoke about matters on a much different level. Some writers (Kogler, 2005) contended that Levinas’s insistence on the primacy and immediacy of the face of the Other runs counter to the hermeneutic process, as knowledge of other people always involves the usually long process of contending with one’s biases. This argument appears to rest on a misreading of Levinas, though. Levinas asserted that the encounter with the face of the Other always brings the self’s world into question through criticism of its ipseity. This encounter with the Other does not, at least initially, involve an epistemological movement toward the Other; it does not engender any sort of knowledge of the Other. If any contradiction occurs in this matter between Levinas and hermeneutics, Levinas explicated that the self cannot critique its prejudices by itself and under its own power. Self-criticism necessitates the face of the Other.

His emphasis on the complete separation between the self and the Other makes the idea of a fusion of horizons questionable as well. Levinas would consider a fusion of horizons as an act of totalization and comprehension. Even Buber’s (1998) idea of discourse requiring acceptance of otherness implies that alterity need not present a challenge to preconceptions and can even complete a theoretical lack in the self. In his article “Toward An Ethical-hermeneutics,” Jeff Warren (2005) stated, “The hermeneutic model has only one way of understanding, and Levinas states that it fails because it cannot understand the other as Other” (p. 22). If anything, Levinas’s elucidation of an objective stance toward reality as founded in the Other described the conditions that make hermeneutical understanding necessary and even possible. Only two metaphysically absolute beings can produce anything new.

Levinasian objectivity never reaches a final point. For Levinas, one does not reach an end stage of an objective relation to the world, and this can be gleaned from Levinas's notions of works as an absence of presence and the face as infinite. Work, be it artistic or utilitarian, bears the mark of its maker but the presence of the maker has already left. One encounters work as absent and concrete; the Other cannot come to its own assistance in this encounter. Similarly, the face of the Other always presents as more infinite than what the self can know, and infinity overflows the static form of thematization. With these two notions in mind, that people are absent in their works and infinity overflows thematic forms, we can see that an objective stance must always be incomplete. It requires continual reconfirmation. Objectivity is necessarily a work of repetition.

This is not to say, though, that this work of repetition relies solely on the ability and skill of the self. Levinas asserted that objectivity does not result from the self's intentional act, and it definitely does not involve a matter of the self co-constituting its world. If anything, the self's intentionality sabotages itself when applied to this task. Intentionality first reduces the Other to an object of consciousness and then tries to know the other in a comprehensive and essentialist fashion. Is this not the manner of the phenomenological epoche and reduction? The self, though, would be unable to "keep up" with this egoic representational effort. After all, how can the self keep pace with infinity or work through the absent forms of the Other's work? Objectivity through the Other relies on the Other's revelation, on inspiration. It presupposes a movement toward the self, not from the self.

With all this in mind, what does this new conception of objectivity as established by encounter with the Other have to offer us? The growing interest in Levinas for psychotherapy can provide us with one avenue of application. In *The Art of Existential Counseling*, Adrian Van Kaam (1966) offered a conception of therapy that easily leads toward Levinas. When discussing the client's willful attitudes, Van Kaam avers that the final goal of treatment would be to dispel the distorting effect on reality of these attitudes. He wrote, "Willfulness, thus, perceives reality in a categorical way. This means it does not perceive reality in its individual unique appearance, but it forces unique appearances into its prefabricated categories" (Van Kaam, 1966, p. 81). Considering Levinas with this, one can certainly see that willfulness toward reality would entail a totalization and reduction of the Other and a de facto illusion of reality. A truly objective stance toward reality would necessarily involve ethical response to the Other, and therapy informed by Levinas would emphasize this.

This concern for being true to reality, in effect being objective, is by no means the exclusive domain of phenomenology or more humanistic schools of thought. Even family systems theory, a line of thought that tends toward scientific reductionism, contends with fostering an attitude of objectivity. Family systems theory uses the idea of differentiation of self as its centerpiece. Differentiation of self refers to the ability to consider oneself primarily as an individual while still retaining emotional contact within a group such as the family (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). One obvious limitation to this idea involves family system's absolutist idea of objectivity. How does a person become objective about a process in which he or she plays such an integral role? This could benefit from integration with hermeneutics, and as discussed earlier, Levinas's absolute separation effectively established the conditions for hermeneutics.

Finally, Levinas's phenomenology of objectivity could particularly benefit the overall practice of psychology as the scientific study of human beings. While other social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology, have grown to acknowledge how objective understanding cannot happen outside of linguistic understanding, psychology often appears to be moving into the opposite direction. It ignores the linguistically constructed nature of concepts and ideas, and becomes vulnerable to creating wonderfully articulated, yet ethically inhumane systems. Levinas can directly point to this weakness and propose a new standard for practice. In this regard, James Faulconer (2005) wrote,

. . . a good psychological theory will not only make explicit the objects that it deals with and stipulate its method without looking to some other science for its model, it will also remain revisable and it will remember that the point of objective knowledge is justice. (p. 57)

In conclusion, deconstructing Levinas's ideas into a linear and fairly distinct progression gives the advantage of understanding the movement from interiority to exteriority as well as the gift of objectivity from the Other. In doing so, though, a major misconception arises. Levinas did not posit the progression from interiority to exteriority as an explicitly temporal matter, and doing so unavoidably totalizes his writings. For understanding Levinas, though, brief totalization may be unavoidable, and it could possibly be a necessary hermeneutic step. Levinas did not describe a linear temporal event. Exteriority and interiority exist contemporaneously; the self exists as both interior and exterior. The self, no matter how engaged with the absolute Other, cannot escape itself; it can never be wholly exterior. At the same time, the self cannot close itself from the rupturing call of the other; it can never be wholly interior. When he described the unique situation of love as a "dual egoism" (Levinas, 1969, p. 266), one can glimpse the complexity his study of human relations. Levinas's distinctive writing style and use of language invariably compounds the difficulty of digesting and representing his ideas. One can easily take him on both a metaphorical and a literal level. For instance, his description of the face of the Other portraying infinity seemingly begs for a metaphorical understanding. However, Levinas wrote about a real and very literal phenomenon, perhaps the prime ethical phenomenon that makes all other phenomena possible.

## References

- Buber, M. (1996). *The knowledge of man: Selected essays*. (M. Friedman & R.G. Smith, Trans.). Amherst: Humanity Books.
- Faulconer, J. E. (2005). Knowledge of the other. *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counseling, and Health*, 7(1-2), 49-63.
- Gadamer, H. (2004). *Truth and method* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed.). (J. Weinheimer & D.G. Marshall, Trans.). New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group. (Original work published 1960).
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time*. (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). New York: State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1953).
- Kerr, M., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen Theory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Kogler, H. (2005). Recognition and difference: The power of perspectives in interpretive dialogue. *Social Identities*, 11(3), 247-269.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. (Original work published 1961).
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). The child's relations with others. (W. Cobb, Trans.). In J. Edie (Ed.), *The primacy of perception*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1960).
- Van Kaam, A. (1966). *The Art of Existential Counseling*. New Jersey: Dimension Books.
- Warren, J. (2005). Toward an ethical-hermeneutics. *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counseling, and Health*, 7(1-2), 17-28.