

## **From the Violence of Positivism to the Ethics of Encounter: Restoring Relationality to International Relations**

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### **Abstract**

*This article argues for the need to move beyond the violence of positivism and toward an ethics of encounter. It considers, first, the historical statement of positivism as seen in J.S. Mill and its contemporary application in Ronald Inglehart. Second, it presents an alternate reading of the legacy of positivism as elaborated in Emmanuel Levinas's interpretation of the path from Enlightenment to Holocaust. On both historical and philosophical grounds, Levinas challenges the violence permitted and at times caused by the practice of scientific rationalism. Third, in view of an ultimate concern with political ethics and justice, it explores an alternate epistemology – the phenomenology of the face-to-face relationship – and how such might be used to rethink the ontology of the State. Finally, it observes how the discipline of international relations is complicit in the violence of positivism and offers suggestions for changing its modes of scholarship and standards for tenure.*

The macabre picture on my screen was unusual, even for a newspaper like *The New York Times*, which regularly features photos from conflict zones around the world. A young man, my age in fact, was sitting on the floor in an orange jumpsuit, hands tied at his back. Behind him stood several masked men, at least one of whom held a weapon – a large knife. Moments after that image was captured on video, the knife was used to decapitate the man on the floor, not with the single chop of a practiced executioner, but slowly, with a sawing motion that afforded its recipient time and breath enough to scream.

This is politics on the ground, its darker side to be sure, but political in context and implication nevertheless. As a scholar of politics, I should be able to speak meaningfully about political action in its moments of great triumph alongside its moments of deep horror. But as a political scientist, I am bound by methodologies that are far too often incapable of addressing the complex and sometimes malevolent

manifestations of power. The picture on my screen commands a response; what one may I give?

Years ago, I embarked on graduate studies because I believed in the importance of ethics, in a vision of politics as the pursuit of justice. It had never occurred to me, at least not seriously, to think of politics foremost in terms of institutionally-mediated conflict or resource distribution, norms divorced from truth or sources of meaning as explanations of interest formation. I have spent much of the time since in a fog trying to understand how the study of politics could proclaim itself to be predictive, engaged or even emancipatory, and yet have become something too frequently irrelevant, impotent and (self-)isolated from reality.

Part of the answer lurks in the philosophy of social science as contemporary academia understands it, in the epistemologies (and, ultimately, the ontologies) upon which its methodological structures are erected. At least two features of this intellectual enterprise are important for understanding the fundamental stakes in these debates: first, each epistemological tradition bears important theological implications, whether or not they are directly admitted (usually, they are not); second, and by extension, each makes certain claims about the nature of power, as well as how we come to know and experience it. A full analysis of these dimensions is beyond the scope of this article. Here, then, I will focus my discussion on one epistemology – positivism – and the violence of its legacy. This is not as limiting as it may appear, however, for I contend that many of the leading alternatives to positivist international relations theory have privileged fundamentally positivist modes of scholarship and standards for tenure, thereby preventing them from achieving/embodying truly emancipatory alternatives.

Motivated by the desire to restore/introduce much needed relationality to international relations, this argument proceeds in four parts. First, I consider the historical statement of positivism as seen in J.S. Mill and its contemporary application in the work of Ronald Inglehart. These two authors illustrate the supposedly innocuous embrace of positivist social science. Second, I present an alternate reading of the legacy of positivism as elaborated in Emmanuel Levinas's interpretation of the path from Enlightenment to Holocaust. On both historical/empirical and philosophical grounds, Levinas challenges the violence permitted and at times caused by the practice of scientific rationalism. Third, in view of my ultimate concern with political ethics and justice, I present an alternate epistemology – the phenomenology of the face-to-face relationship – and explore how it might be used to rethink the ontology of the State. Finally, I conclude with some brief observations about how the discipline of international relations is implicated in and by the violence of positivism, alongside suggestions for changing how we work and what we reward.

### **I. Innocuous Positivism: The Social Science of Mill and Inglehart**

Broadly speaking, the Enlightenment movement toward modernity marked a pivotal transition away from mystery and knowledge rooted in faith (or at least compatible with it, as in Thomism), and toward certainty and knowledge grounded by unencumbered reason. Whether in the realm of science or philosophy, this generated (perhaps was defined by) the quest for universal laws of natural and human behavior. The latter is exemplified by the writings of J.S. Mill, whose attempts to construct a science of human society foreshadow the political project of Ronald Inglehart. In this section, I

consider each of these authors in turn, paying particular attention to the epistemological foundations of their work. Ultimately, I argue, the epistemic structures upon which their ideas are predicated falter because they are tautologically constructed and ignore important aspects of human life.

### ***Mill's Laws in Relation to Society and the Individual***

In *The Logic of Moral Sciences*, Mill attempts to create a rigorous and systematic science of society, one that approximates and possibly achieves the scope and surety of the natural sciences.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, he seeks to do so with an appreciation of human complexity, recognizing that any laws pertaining to the behavior of human beings must take serious account of the nuances of their character. Collectively, these two goals drive his desire to capture the laws of human nature, not in the Aristotelian sense of knowledge prudentially acquired and transmitted, but in the tradition of science and systematic thought. In other words, Mill pursues a grand theory of states of mind and their constitutive interaction with society.

There are several epistemological considerations related to Mill's text. First, while positing a basic human nature, Mill also suggests that development outcomes can be observed and used as the basis for further refinement of ethological laws.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Mill maintains his primary concern not with empirical laws (which, while holding true within the limits of observation, do not provide certainty about that which exists outside the scope of observation), but with scientific or ethological laws that guide the formation of character.<sup>3</sup> Once the laws of human nature are understood, it then becomes possible to speak about social life as a succession of states, ascertained through

inverse deduction (i.e., showing how empirical results follow from ethological postulates).<sup>4</sup> Mill writes:

But since both the natural varieties of mankind, and the original diversities of local circumstances are much less considerable than the points of agreement, there will naturally be a certain degree of uniformity in the progressive development of the species and its works.<sup>5</sup>

Such continuity makes possible a general science of society in which human beings, while malleable, are affected by circumstances in predictable ways. From this follows Mill's emphasis upon education, which may contribute significantly to the progress, though not necessarily the improvement, of human beings and their society.<sup>6</sup> In this way, his theory is conservative (that is, ethological laws form a general constant over time), while embracing the possibility of human change. However, even as these laws form a general constant, they admit the possibility of radically different results in view of differences in initial circumstances.

Importantly, the laws upon which all of this analysis is predicated are laws of mind; that is, they are formal rather than substantive and inductively derived through what has come to be known as Mill's Methods of Agreement and Disagreement. Mill clarifies:

The laws of the formation of character are, in short, derivative laws, resulting from the general laws of mind, and are to be obtained by deducing them from those general laws by supposing any given set of circumstances, and then considering what, according to the laws of mind, will be the influence of those circumstances on the formation of character.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, ethology emerges as the science of character, and more specifically, character formation. This has implications for persons as well as states, for insofar as ethology corresponds to the realm of education, it impacts the formation of national or collective as well as individual character.<sup>8</sup>

Epistemologically, Mill's philosophy is highly problematic. He openly admits that one may never be certain of the nature and scope of observation, particularly the extent to which what one observes in a particular instance is universally applicable. Simultaneously, Mill claims that ethological laws may in fact be derived inductively from observation – that scientific laws may proceed from empirical investigation. These two points are in tension.

If, indeed, it is unreasonable to suppose that one may observe all relevant cases, and moreover that one would actually know that all relevant cases had or had not been considered, then logically it follows that ethological laws will be deduced based on partial observation of the (un)known whole. Either the universality of said laws will be uncertain, or they must be constructed with the assistance of *a priori* assumptions that cannot be irrefutably confirmed *a posteriori*. In both cases, Mill's project ultimately falters: in the first instance because the scientific laws will be incomplete, in the second because they will not be firmly supported by the observable, confirmable world. These tensions are manifest throughout Mill's treatise, but their empirical significance is perhaps better illustrated by Inglehart's *The Silent Revolution*.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Post-Materialist Thesis of Inglehart***

Like Mill, Inglehart adopts a near evolutionary view of human beings, such that their values reflect their developmental positions understood in economic and social terms. Whereas for Mill, education acts as a primary factor conditioning the formation of character, Inglehart suggests that economic prosperity leads to normatively superior value priorities. Education plays a role, to be sure, but in tandem with mass communication, collective experiences and, most importantly, economic and technological developments

at the system level.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in keeping with the value-need hierarchy of Abraham Maslow, Inglehart argues that value changes occur uni-directionally in a normative hierarchy grounded by the provision of basic needs and progressing toward post-material values.<sup>11</sup> However, unlike Maslow, who saw justice as the ultimate value toward which social and political systems moved, Inglehart (in keeping with his methodologically individualist emphasis on psychology) substitutes such arguably therapeutic concepts as participation and belonging. Importantly, these value priorities are primarily determined in youth, with little substantive changes said to occur during the adult years.

While there is much to dispute about Inglehart's substantive claims, there are two epistemological issues that bear directly his ability to make them at all; first, Inglehart's utilization of mass surveys as a tool for ascertaining the values of individuals; and second, his generalization of findings at the individual level to that of society broadly.

Surveys, though helpful in gauging the preferences of individuals within the options presented, are hardly able to generate the precision and confirm the honesty that would allow for an accurate assessment of the purported laws of human behavior. The options on a survey do not represent the full range of choices available in life, nor can they take account of the full range of constraints faced by individuals making a myriad of decisions each day. Additionally, there are performance difficulties with surveys; that is, individuals are demonstrably able to interpret normative cues and project ideal responses that may or may not correspond to their real preferences and priorities. Both of these dilemmas pose serious issues for measurement and veracity, and thus, what Inglehart claims to know on the basis of survey results is constructed on problematic methodological (and epistemological) foundations.

This difficulty is similar to Mill's, in that it tautologically assumes laws of human nature (which for Mill are ethological, while for Inglehart are value-need based), and then refracts them uneasily through empirical observation that is admittedly incomplete but somehow confirming. Such a problem is only exacerbated when the conclusions derived at the individual level are aggregated to the social one – a movement that assumes not only the accuracy of the individual findings, but also a direct correspondence between individual values and social priorities. Epistemologically, this assumes that social knowledge is derived in the same manner as individual knowledge, which not only ignores the inherent complexity of social life, but suggests that the partial (i.e., the relative percent of post-materialist values in a given community) is reflective and representative of the whole – without regard to differences in demography, culture, religion or any other number of potentially (and likely!) relevant factors. The result is a social science grounded not in society, but in the individual, and in tenuous claims about the individual at that. I find it wholly unsatisfying, albeit the logical outworking of Mill's own philosophical difficulties.

Logical positivism acts as an intellectual disciplinary mechanism. Its constraints limit the questions that can be asked and the answers that may be hypothesized and confirmed or falsified. Perhaps these limitations would be acceptable were they capable of producing the scientific certainty and universal knowledge to which they lay claim. But they do not, indeed they cannot, given the complexity and interpretive richness of social and political life, and thus their privileged place in the realm of social science



(particularly the more empirically-rooted fields of international relations and comparative government) is quite troubling.

Here, the epistemological question is key. The philosophical tradition of which Mill and Inglehart are part claims to move beyond faith to the rigor of reasoned science. Yet as the ultimate tautology of Mill's inductive schema demonstrates, social science and its laws represent unverifiable claims of their own. Though the appeal is to the mind instead of the divine or revelation (and to the individual rather than the social mind, at that), an appeal is nevertheless made, the certainty of which is generated by its own rules (e.g., the scientific method) rather than any form of absolute confirmation. The real danger is that this form of positivism, while rejected by those with differing epistemologies, has the tendency to appear innocuous. We may disagree with it, we may find it unhelpful for scholarly inquiry, but we generally do not suspect it of permitting or, especially, of causing great violence. Such is why the writings of Levinas force us to pause, for by his interpretation, positivism is not only damned philosophically – it is fatal.

## **II. The Encapsulated Self: Emmanuel Levinas and the Positivist Path to Holocaust<sup>12</sup>**

On the dedicatory page of Emmanuel Levinas's magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, there is a series of names written in Hebrew – one for each of the members of his family, all of whom (with the exception of his wife) were killed during the Holocaust. It is a long list, and it was a long struggle, a lifetime in fact, for this man who could never quite escape the betrayal of his mentor, Heidegger, his country, and the traditions which first gave birth to his philosophical consciousness. There are

some who debate, even now, whether Levinas understood his philosophy in political terms, whether he intended an explicit link between ways of thinking and ways of governing. Yet the philosopher himself silences our debates on this point, even as we are left to interpret the significance of his ideas.

He dedicates the text ‘to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism’. Levinas wove his mourning into a philosophical legacy other than that which he inherited because he needed to understand the massive political violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – to apprehend, to articulate, to answer ‘why’ so that it might be possible to utter ‘never again’. The fact that the Holocaust and Hiroshima happened concurrently, that a single century gave rise to two world wars, Stalinism, fascism, nuclear war and massive poverty, is not a coincidence. Levinas’s political ethics were born in blood.

***The Violent Course of Enlightenment Reason: An Historical Narrative...***

Of Lithuanian Jewish parentage, Levinas was first noted as the philosopher who brought the work of Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl to France during the inter-war years. A phenomenologist by training, he worked as an academic until the Second World War, at which time he enlisted in the French army. Despite the capture of his unit by Germans, the French uniform protected Levinas from the concentration camps. However, almost his entire family perished in the Holocaust. The experience was to profoundly shape the direction of Levinas’s philosophical project in the post-war years; specifically, the engineered savagery of the concentration camps led him to question the whole course of Western philosophy, beginning with the Greeks and culminating in the

modern work of phenomenologists including his teacher, Heidegger. He began to recognize within European history a deep tension – a conflict between the supposed triumph of ‘glorious Reason’ and centuries of fratricidal violence, imperialism, oppression, genocide and poverty.<sup>13</sup>

Levinas’s reference to Reason encapsulates the long intellectual history rooted in Enlightenment thought and including subsequent developments in scientific and social theory, which came to be grouped under the rubric of modernity. I identify among the formative thinkers of the modern era Hegel, whose dialectical theory of history imbued modernity with the ideal of progress through time. Hegel’s work cemented the relationship between Western consciousness and the seemingly unalterable course of history, particularly for those who attempted to understand (and utilize) his philosophy in isolation from his theology. Like Kant before and Kierkegaard after him, Hegel maintained a dialectical division between faith and reason, one that flourished during industrialization and fast became the hallmark of modern thought. Indeed, the division inspired a humanist movement which sought to improve the condition of humanity without reference to divine inspiration or authority.

Paradoxically, humanism found its greatest challenge in a coincident occurrence – the dawn of mass production. The Industrial Revolution had ramifications throughout economic, cultural and martial relations. Individuals as laborers, citizens or soldiers were transformed into commodities to be manipulated by managers, politicians and other ancestors of today’s technocrats. Left with little local or even regional political significance (apart, of course, from their role as cogs in the machine of the new economy), the expanding lower classes found identification within the freshly-delineated borders of

the nation-state. Benedict Anderson illustrates how the fires of nationalism spread throughout the Western world, stoked by capitalist necessity for resources and new markets.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the advancement of the nation-state (taken to include both economic and military might) was inextricably tied to that of humanity.

This relationship assumed fascist dimensions in Nazi Germany, where the German working classes rallied behind a message triumphing their state, economy, culture and race. The rise of Hitler and the success of National Socialism can thus be read as the reification of modern ideals; specifically, Nazism embraced the rational discipline of progress via purity of the nation-state and its fractal counterpart, the body. It is important to recall that the dialectical system of history marked the continuing presence of the Jewish people as an historical aberration (the coming of Christ, in fulfilling Old Testament prophecy, had rendered Judaism obsolete).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Nazi anti-Semitism, insofar as it participated in the intellectual culture of modernity, conformed to the rationality of historical progress.

The true significance of Hitlerism for modernity, however, lies not in historical theory, but in the objectification and subsequent processing of the human body for ends that were both scientific and rational. Earlier in the nineteenth century, political scientists had introduced the systematic construction, maintenance and improvement of the nation-state via the manipulation of strategic resources and statistical accounting. By the time of Hitler, the implementation of scientific methods into policy formulation and enforcement was gaining in popularity, particularly after the disaster of World War I. The German dictator's unique contribution was embracing the body – in all its composite parts and signifiers – as a strategic resource of the state.

The Nazis, operating within an essentially Euclidean conception of the nation in political space, relocated the borders of the nation-state along racial lines. Human bodies, eugenically-delineated, became the basis of nationalist identity and the target of competitive aggression. The logic of nationalist conflict, in which the opponent is acted upon without consequence to the actor, was transferred into the calculated elimination of the Jewish body. In its faceless savagery, genocide is the progeny of modern scientific warfare. The fact that the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki happen concurrently is not a coincidence. Characterizing modernity as the elimination of the human face and the scientific processing of the human body recasts the introduction of the atomic bomb (a sterile, faceless technology of holocaust) as the exclamation, rather than the unexpected event, of modernity and the modern nation-state.

The Holocaust emerged, for Levinas, as a powerful and painful example of rationalized hell. By reducing human identity to blood and genetics, Nathan Bracher argues, the Nazis had renounced ‘in no uncertain terms the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of freedom, according to which the soul, distinct from the body, stands apart from the material conditions of existence and can freely choose its destiny, therefore transcending the bonds of history’.<sup>16</sup> Instead, a Nietzschean will-to-power was embraced, and the moral Self was sacrificed to the biological Self in pursuit of a society based on race. This was but one socio-political outcome of philosophical solipsism.

A second one was the incredible ability of the German ideology and its foot soldiers to deny the community of their non-Aryan fellows. In an account of his experience as a Nazi prisoner of war, Levinas describes how he was placed in a unit solely composed of Jews. Their interactions with other soldiers and citizens, denigrating

in the extreme, stripped them of their humanity, made them ‘subhuman, a gang of apes’.<sup>17</sup> Only a stray mutt named Bobby, whose barks and yelps simultaneously called for play and demarcated animal and man, helped them to recall their fundamental humanness.

Raoul Mortley rightly points out that the final and most significant horror of the Holocaust was, for Levinas, not so much the number of his fellow Jews and other innocent people murdered, but *the way* they were processed and killed...without faces, without names, without recognition that the bodies ransacked for resources were indeed human.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the horrific thread unifying these three observations is the rationality informing each of them – the scientific reductionism of race, the ideologically-based denial of community, the production-minded processing of human bodies.

***...And a Philosophical One***

For Levinas, the evidence of God in the Other’s face confers extraordinary significance upon the human person. In this sense, his philosophy might be considered humanist. However, this would only be true in a sense radically different from the contemporary humanism of secular intellectual culture. Levinas is deeply troubled by the secularization of ideals originally rooted in the Scriptures.<sup>19</sup> Absent the patient character of Scriptural study, Greek wisdom ‘demystifies, depoeticizes, demythicizes’ the Infinite; in short, it risks dissolving into ‘lie and ideology’ masked by the rhetoric of humanism.<sup>20</sup> Levinas is thus disappointed but not surprised by an academy that takes delight in fetishizing difference, while falling dramatically short of assuming responsibility for the Other. He denounces humanism as inhumane,<sup>21</sup> and charges ‘the little humanity that adorns the earth’ with pursuing justice via responsibility and sacrifice, not rhetoric and Self-indulgence. ‘One has to find for man another kinship than that which ties him to

being', Levinas exhorts, 'one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the Other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression'.<sup>22</sup>

Levinas directly criticizes Western philosophy and the State for their refusal to acknowledge the interruption of the ontological by the transcendent. This criticism, including its origins and formulation, is explored in greater detail throughout this and the following sections. For now, briefly, he argues that while philosophy and government rest upon true human relationality (which for him necessarily includes an element of transcendence), their ontological structure precludes language vested with originary meaning in favor of the thematized 'said'.<sup>23</sup> Put another way, philosophy and government go astray because their essential foundations – human relationships infused with transcendent responsibility – are obscured by language that filters everything, even the mysterious, through the lens of scientific rationalism.

The difference between the saying and the said constitutes, for Levinas, the heart of what is problematic about ethics. *Otherwise than Being* is his attempt to get at the substance of saying (that is, the non-totalizable interactions permeating dialogue) without perverting it. While the said is an active claim to knowledge, saying is a non-reciprocal permeability of the Self to the approach of another.<sup>24</sup> Levinas describes a saying that is more than a communication of the said, that signals a commitment to the Other, a refusal to cover, extinguish and absorb, a willingness to be open, without excuses, evasions or alibis.<sup>25</sup> In communication, saying is one's responsibility to the Other. Western philosophy presumes to capture saying in an ontological said. But saying disappears before we can grasp it, transcending time as if a disturbance. For example, at the deathbed of one's mother, where the significance of the relationship and the moment defy

linguistic containment, the said becomes irrelevant. Saying, a non-erotic sensuousness, an intimacy, celebrates the mother-child relationship and infuses death with meaning and dignity.

The distinction between saying and said is crucial to ethics, in part because Good cannot be represented.<sup>26</sup> Outside of that which philosophy claims to know, the Infinite commands me to approach my neighbor, to participate in a saying which is my responsibility, to expose myself in recognition of the trace of God in my neighbor's face. The temporal transcendence of the divine cannot be captured in ontological language, groping with themes and constructions of logic to contain an anarchic challenge.

This divine whisper runs throughout *Otherwise than Being*. Representing neither being nor its negation, *there is* indicates the haunting murmur debasing all certainty. Behind every essentialist statement, saturating all claims to pure knowledge, *there is* a horrifying lack of finality, a mute and anonymous rustling, beckoning each of us beyond being. As Levinas writes, 'this ignorance and openness, an indifference to essence, is designated in the title of this book by the barbarous expression 'otherwise than being''.<sup>27</sup> The quest to move beyond being stems from the ultimate impossibility of ethics within ontology. Here, Levinas turns to the story of Cain and Abel, and the former's response to God's question, 'Where is Abel thy brother?' Cain replies, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Levinas accepts Cain's response as sincere, arguing that its ontological assertion 'I am I, and he is he' eliminates the ethical charge implicit in God's question.<sup>28</sup> We are our brother's keepers, Levinas insists. To accept his assertion requires nothing less than an inversion of Greek philosophical tradition.



Western philosophy is rooted in essence – to be as I, to self-refer, to be active, aggressive, aware of self-need. ‘*Esse is interesse*; essence is interest’.<sup>29</sup> Truth and identity proceed from one who first thinks and then expresses the fruits of self-discovery in a theme – in being. This process occurs independent of all relationality, divorced from social and spiritual interaction. One exists egoistically, impermeably; the subject is thus the initiator, the origin, the source of freedom.<sup>30</sup> The subject is pregnant with possibilities, all concepts at once present within it. Being centers upon the competition of egos. Conflict is thus inherent to human relations. Social contract theory makes perfect sense to those who accept this primary assumption. Utilitarianism emerges as the only rational system of conflict resolution – a secular ethics born of our worst quality. Egoism transmutes into ideology, and the dialectic embraces ‘humanist rhetoric and existentialist pathetics’ to the exclusion of that which ideology can never encompass, Good.<sup>31</sup> Levinas acknowledges that philosophy has, in rare moments, broken the boundaries of ontology and stated the beyond being; more commonly, however, philosophers have privileged essentialism.<sup>32</sup> The human costs of this are tragically reflected in history, including that recounted above.

Levinas radically reconstructs the ego so as to escape the limitations of being, and it doing so, sets himself directly at odds with a Heideggerian phenomenology of being. Heidegger’s philosophy can be read as emphasizing the Self as a body in competition and the Other as a force that constantly threatens extinction.<sup>33</sup> The resulting obsession with one’s own death might rationally excuse aggression, between people or nations, in order to secure survival. Levinas, however, situates the person not as an entity capable of choosing to survive or expiate for another, but as one whose identity begins with

expiation.<sup>34</sup> Simon Critchley eloquently summarizes this point: ‘Ethics, for Levinas, is critique; it is the critical *mise en question* of the liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself’.<sup>35</sup> More importantly, the one, in its servitude to the Other, is irreplaceable. *I* cannot buy or bargain or retreat my way out of the responsibility to which *I* am uniquely called to serve.<sup>36</sup> This transformation of the ego into a Self shatters ontological essence and makes possible disinterestedness – a subversion of for-the-Self to for-the-Other. Ethics depends on this movement, for ‘all human relations as human proceed from disinterestedness’.<sup>37</sup>

### **III. Toward an Ethics of Encounter: The Phenomenological Epistemology of the Face-to-Face Relation**

The question thus arises as to how a Levinasian interpretation of our relations with each other leads to an alternate understanding of political ethics, justice and the ontology of the State. In Levinas’s writings, the face-to-face relation acts as a precursor to all discussion of State legitimacy or illegitimacy. ‘A state in which the interpersonal relationship is impossible, in which it is directed in advance by the determinism proper to the state, is a totalitarian state’.<sup>38</sup> He therefore restores transcendence to the first order. Justice and just institutions can be accomplished only in response to the trace of God in the face of an approaching neighbor. What some call the crisis of modernity is thus the inability of Reason to respond to the very suffering it propagates – the ‘spiritual misery of the industrial era’.<sup>39</sup> Levinas is appalled by a world that considers the exchange of human lives for commodities to be part of a rational order, and worse, the defense of such inhumanity by appeals to principled notions including freedom. Implicit in his writing is

a challenge to recognize in ontological imperialism the roots of modernity's failure, and further, to pursue the ethical relation of radical responsibility as the true path to a just polity.

To begin, Levinas locates the vitality of the West in the tension between proximity (an ethic informed by religious transcendence) and peace (used here in reference to the political sphere). He defines the ethical as 'the field outlined by the paradox of an Infinite in relationship with the finite without being belied in this relationship'.<sup>40</sup> That is, transcendence necessarily interrupts philosophical and political systems, infusing the latter with the possibility of ethical action, while maintaining the mysteries of transcendence. Yet, the anarchic interruption of politics by the transcendent is not competitive; Levinas's scheme favors neither one.

Instead, he postures a re-imagining of social justice with radical responsibility at the foundation. Justice must no longer be perceived as a legal system or social contract regulating human masses, or as a technique for harmonizing antagonistic forces.<sup>41</sup> Such would be justice based upon political expediency, rather than proximity. The judge, as the third party in a conflict, finds himself intimately bound in the ethical relation. The State, political institutions and commerce (political economy) cannot be conceived ethically outside of the one-for-the-Other because, in sociality, the plurality of Others raises the question of justice. To paraphrase Levinas, nothing is outside the control of this primary, pre-ontological ethical relation.

The radical responsibility of the one-for-the-Other is characterized by a remarkable permeability, a loosening of traditional barriers associated with the sovereign Western individual, a fluidity signifying ultimate vulnerability. Essence crumbles before

the opening of the animate body; signification undoes identity, exposes in the manner of an unwrapped wound.<sup>42</sup> The very skin that hangs from my flesh becomes permeable and ceases to command the space it occupies. ‘Substitution operates in the entrails of the self, rending its inwardness, putting its identity out of phase and disrupting its recurrence’.<sup>43</sup> The curtain of Euclidean space draws back to reveal absolute coexistence.<sup>44</sup> Spatial rigidity embedded in the ego, or the nation-state, fractures. Simultaneously, the one confronts the Other and the other’s Other, and the impossibility of separating the two along temporal or spatial lines. Proximity bears the problem of plurality, the problem of the third party, society.<sup>45</sup>

Levinas describes the third party as one who interrupts the face-to-face relation and initiates the question of justice.<sup>46</sup> The entry of the third in no way removes or substitutes for the responsibility of the one-for-the-Other, but makes further demands upon the oneself. The third party problematizes relationality, approaching as a neighbor of the one, and a neighbor of the Other, but also other than the neighbor who approaches the one.<sup>47</sup> Lines of asymmetrical responsibility begin to cross and consciousness is born. My relationship with the Other who approaches makes my relationship with every neighbor meaningful; thus, for Levinas, the radical responsibility of one-for-the-Other (disinterestedness) infuses all human relations with meaning.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, the third party is crucial to Levinasian ethics. For example, it completely alters the relationship between the persecuted and the persecutor, for while one victim is responsible for her oppressor, she demands formal justice for the oppression of her neighbor. Levinas elaborates:

For me, it would be to fail in my first-personal responsibility – in my pre-judicial responsibility with regard to the one and the other – fellowmen – were I to ignore

the wrongs of the one toward the other because of this responsibility, prior to all judgment, of proximity. This does not mean the taking account of possible wrongs I may have suffered at the hands of one or the other, and denying my disinterestedness; it means not ignoring the suffering of the other, who falls to my responsibility.<sup>49</sup>

In short, Levinas calls us to social action based not on Self-interest, but on responsibility for all the Others comprising society. However, Levinas does not wish us to mistake his ideas about community with historical notions of a social contract. Thus, to avoid possible confusion, Levinas introduces the term ‘sociality’.

In a personal interview, Levinas chastises the West for what he believes is a mistaken assumption of the superiority of the solitary Self.<sup>50</sup> He triumphs sociality above solitude, arguing that human society can only be accomplished by moral action rooted in responsibility to the Other.<sup>51</sup> Responsibility is human fraternity; thus, solitude precludes responsibility and, by extension, the possibility of circumscribing ideological egoism and violence.<sup>52</sup> The sociality of which he speaks begins in the relationship between one and the Other, and it is extended with the entry of the third party – the Other’s Other. With this entry, Levinas wants to re-inform Greek philosophical tradition; that is, he aims to show how the radical responsibility of one-for-the-Other interrupts society, altering popular notions of justice, and creating a critical dialogue between the ethics of Jerusalem and the politics of Athens. This is not a purely academic exercise; rather, to witness in the face of the Other the command ‘You shalt not kill’ is already to hear ‘Social Justice’.<sup>53</sup> With this movement, Levinas introduces highly nuanced understandings of equality, violence, freedom, and, ultimately, the foundation of a just State.

*Equality.* Nothing lies beyond the authority of the one-for-the-Other precisely because, in sociality, the plurality of Others raises the question of justice. The very

nature of my responsibility to the Other means the impossibility of passing by either the one closest to me or the one farthest off.<sup>54</sup> I am responsible to them all. The third party thus introduces a new reciprocity, a degree of equality – not of the rights of individuals, but of the infinite responsibility of one to all the Others. One might say consciousness occurs here at two levels: first, *individual* consciousness is born of the question, ‘what do I have to do with justice?’; second, *social* consciousness arises when the necessity of answering to all Others generates a thematization (equality) and a codification (law). The result is, as Merold Westphal points out, a ‘social order based on comparative reason in which rights are balanced against other rights, not in terms of calculating self interest but in light of the absoluteness of the original claim...justice is not the child of compromise but of disinterested obligation’.<sup>55</sup>

*Violence.* According to Levinas, this transition from radical responsibility to sociality is not without a degree of violence. In fact, John Llewelyn argues that for Levinas, failure to fulfill one’s responsibility to the Other all of the time is violent.<sup>56</sup> Levinas claims that ‘violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act; as if the rest of the universe were there only to receive the action; violence is consequently also any action which we endure without at every point collaborating in it’.<sup>57</sup> He hastens to distinguish, however, between the illegitimate violence of tyranny and the legitimate violence of justice. The tyrant inflicts his will upon Others with a Self-proclaimed ‘legitimate’ violence that refuses recognition of their humanity. Contrarily, the hand of the just person is compelled to action by the suffering of the Other, and the legitimacy of its violence resides in a code of ethics. What legitimates the latter is a

profound understanding of radical responsibility, of the need to serve all Others, and also, a subsequent recoiling from the very violence that justice demands.<sup>58</sup>

*Freedom.* For a Western society that recognizes in freedom the possibility of a fulfilling existence, the lack of choice (as in Levinas's assertion of radical responsibility) appears to be a violence precluding freedom.<sup>59</sup> Yet, he finds such objections coming from 'hasty and imprudent' reflection, from the failure to recognize that freedom actuated by responsibility liberates one from the violence characterizing a truly egoistic state of nature.<sup>60</sup> Responsibility precedes freedom, is a condition of it, is the means by which freedom is dignified.<sup>61</sup> Freedom conceived in finitude signifies goodness, the goodness that is prior to being – passive, not willful. Just as a single-cell organism is distinct from the water it inhabits only by virtue of its membrane, so too, responsibility limits the obliterating multiplicity of infinite choice and, in reifying ethical relationality, makes us humane. In other words, political ethics bound freedom.

*The State.* Levinas sees in the commitment to a third party the call for a State. The question thus arises, if the 'forgetting of self moves justice', what is the origin of the just and egalitarian State in which human society finds fulfillment?<sup>62</sup> A common rendition of social contract theory asserts that self-interested individuals, in order to avoid endless conflict and maximize personal utility, limit freedom to secure liberty in society. But as history testifies, a society founded on an agglomeration of individuals recognizing the 'rights' of others only insofar as their own well-being is promoted simply trades one kind of conflict (e.g., institutional) for another (e.g., natural). The West thus seems resigned to a self-fulfilling prophecy of perpetual antagonism and war. Levinas recognizes the reductionism of secular *realpolitik* as the true problem plaguing Western

society.<sup>63</sup> We must wage a just war against war, he challenges, and it must be marked by a new conceptualization of death. Paul Ricoeur clarifies Levinas on this point by suggesting that rather than seeing, as Heidegger did, the possibility of Self-annihilation in the approach of the Other, we must recognize in the Other's face the prohibition against murder and be ourselves willing to suffer or die rather than allow another to perish.<sup>64</sup>

The new State of Levinas's devising will be instructed by the patience necessary for true revolution,<sup>65</sup> one in which the passivity, the ethical relation of one-for-the-Other informs social peace. The neighbor near and the neighbor far off are to be equally respected and served, peace to and for them both made possible by the Infinite's interruption of essence and its corollary, war. Levinas envisions a political order that seeks to raise up its lowliest members, where even the most destitute are approached in their nobility by a non-totalizing Citizen-state. He calls for an open-eyed ignorance in governance that will be enlightened, inspired and ultimately ennobling in its interior and exterior relations.

Despite the prevailing significance of a turn toward the local, nation-states and international relations do not disappear in ethical political economy. The countries and peoples of the world can be said to exist as Others at a meta-level and, therefore, in ethical relation to the nation-state as a Self or one-for-the-Other. By extension, the approach of the neighbor occurs within diplomatic relations, and the emergent challenge is thus to recast the context of diplomacy. Closed-door policies, pre-encounter stipulations, ultimatums and the like have no place in diplomatic ethics. Foremost, each (whether nation-state, representative organization, ambassador or political leader) must be understood as approaching within the responsibility-centered ethical relation.



The Camp David Peace Accord of 1979 provides an excellent example of how such an approach might find success, one cited by Levinas himself. After thirty years of declared war, Egypt and Israel met in the U.S. to sign a treaty ending the conflict, re-establishing diplomatic relations and formally recognizing each other for the first time. Fierce antagonism seemed to preclude peace between the two nations, and yet through what Levinas calls ‘open-eyed ignorance’,<sup>66</sup> leaders on each side chose to de-emphasize nation-state sovereignty in favor of cooperative action. Despite ontological conditioning, political ethics can triumph over political egoism. The example of Israel and Egypt offers evidence and hope of political ethics rooted in encounter and recognition.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Restoring Relationality to International Relations**

Levinas’s narrative of the path from Enlightenment to Holocaust implicates not only the practice, but also the study of international relations. Over the past twenty to thirty years, the discipline has slowly evolved to include otherwise-than-positivist ideas and theories. This is due in no small part to scholarly pioneers like J. Ann Tickner, as well as to journals like *Millennium* that have had the vision to publish them. But the modus operandi of the field has changed very little: for all our talk about the importance of narrative, dialogue, cross-cultural research and critical theory, for all the students that we mentor and conferences that we attend, scholarly productivity is measured and hence professional advancement is tied (at least in the United States) to sole-authored publications in high-profile journals.

Moreover, despite methodological divides, there is little real difference in their final form. Every article is sourced like a comprehensive exam, which fosters the illusion

of engagement with ‘the literature’ but in reality is closer to serial monologues. In these articles, we talk *at* rather than *with* each other; we do not have conversations, we have schools of thought. Feminism and critical race theory make in-roads, but women and minorities are still significantly underrepresented among the ranks of tenured faculty. This should not be surprising – knowledge as production, academia as business is hardly emancipatory. We are disembodied and amorphous, and though we are experts on matters of international security, how many of us have looked into the eyes of someone raped, maimed or killed in war?

Thus, in keeping with Levinas’s call to re-conceptualize the ontology of the State, I suggest that we re-conceptualize the ontology of the discipline. Levinas grounds justice in the face-to-face relation, in an ethics of encounter. So, too, we should privilege scholarship that (recalling the introduction) allows us to speak meaningfully about political action in its moments of great triumph alongside its moments of deep horror, to make room in international relations for politics as the pursuit of justice and not just of publication.

In addition to continuing our engagement with a multiplicity of ideas and theories, we would be aided in this endeavor by structural changes to the way we work and what we reward. Such might include: valuing conferences and other forms of in-person scholarly engagement as highly as articles; encouraging collaborative writing and grant projects; collapsing the increasingly arbitrary distinction between international relations and comparative government (and, I would argue, political philosophy); establishing a disciplinary norm in favor of field work and foreign language acquisition, (i.e., actual experience of the countries and dialogue with the populations that we write about);

university exchanges of scholars from different regions around the world; and other measures designed to restore/introduce relationality to the study (and, ultimately, the practice) of international relations. Then and only then will we be relevant and engaged. Then and only then will our discourse bear, not the seeds of violence, but the possibility and the hope of true emancipation.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Logic of the Moral Sciences* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-3.

<sup>12</sup> I here wish to acknowledge a special debt to Ryan E. Polich, with whom many of these ideas were first explored and crafted. Levinas is a relational philosopher, and my understanding of his work has been immeasurably enriched by our dialogue. Additionally, I should like to express my sincere gratitude to Julian Edgoose and Suzanne Holland, who introduced me to Levinas's writings over a year of conversations and study, and to Anthony Kronman, Anthony Clark Arend, Thomas Banchoff and Mark Warren, who provided opportunities for continued engagement with his texts.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 235-8.

<sup>16</sup> Nathan Bracher, 'Facing History: Mauriac and Levinas on Nazism', *Journal of European Studies* 89, no. 89-90 (1993): 159-78.

<sup>17</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 151-3.

<sup>18</sup> Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 21.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 277-80.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob E. Meskin, 'Critique, Tradition, and the Religious Imagination: An Essay on Levinas's Talmudic Readings', *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 47, no. 1 (1998): 101-2.

<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 128.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>28</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 110.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 4.

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- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 19.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 178.
- <sup>33</sup> Mott Greene, 'Science in Context: Technology and Work in the Modern World', *Lecture* (Tacoma, WA: University of Puget Sound, December 1999).
- <sup>34</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 118.
- <sup>35</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 5.
- <sup>36</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 92.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 159.
- <sup>38</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 105.
- <sup>39</sup> Sean Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 237-8.
- <sup>40</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 148.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 159.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 70.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 196, #22.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 81.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 157.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 150.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 156.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 159.
- <sup>49</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 195.
- <sup>50</sup> Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation*, 20-1.
- <sup>51</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 9.
- <sup>52</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 152.
- <sup>53</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 8-9.
- <sup>54</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 159.
- <sup>55</sup> Merold Westphal, 'Entre-Nous: On Thinking of the Other', *Modern Theology* 15, no. 3 (1999): 385.
- <sup>56</sup> John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 144.
- <sup>57</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 6.
- <sup>58</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 106.
- <sup>59</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 10.
- <sup>60</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 116.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 123.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 159.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 177.
- <sup>64</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'In Memoriam Emmanuel Levinas', *Philosophy Today* 40, no. 3-4 (1996): 331-3.
- <sup>65</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 155.
- <sup>66</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 177.