

EMMANUEL LEVINAS'S EPISTEMOLOGY

FROM JUSTIFICATION TO JUSTICE

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Not much has been written about a possible Levinassian epistemology, most commentators preferring to deal with Levinas's ethics. There is however a whole chapter dedicated to Levinassian epistemology in *Totality and Infinity*.¹ It is titled "Truth and Justice." Such a title however can strike one as odd inasmuch as it seems to articulate two seemingly distinct notions: justice and truth. Indeed, the notion of justice seems to pertain more specifically to the domain of ethics; truth, on the other hand, pertains to the dimension of epistemology. How then can Levinas make such a connection? Levinas himself recognizes the uncanniness of this association and asks: "What is the relation between justice and truth?" (TI 82). There seems to be no connection between the two concepts. Much more plausible would be a connection between *justification* and truth. Levinas recognizes that and yet, in the very etymology of the concept of justification, he discerns an element of justice: "Truth is in effect not separable from intelligibility; to know is not simply to record, but always to comprehend. We also say that to know is to justify, making intervene, by analogy with the moral order the notion of justice" (TI 82). And so justice does seem to take a central place in the Levinassian epistemology and is articulated here with the better-known process of justification.

But, one does not yet understand the necessary articulation Levinas makes between justification and justice. Is not justification enough to delimitate truth from error? Is not the whole purpose of the scientific endeavor reduced to the act of justification of knowledge? Such has been, since Descartes, the traditional approach to truth. Truth, to be such, must find justification in a thinking subject. Thus, for Descartes, it is the thinking subject which constitutes the ground, the origin of any attempt at discovering the truth

of a given being.² Knowledge originates in a thinking subject exercising its freedom of discovery, constitution, and justification. In this context, knowledge is accessible only to a masterful and dominating subject capable of offering strong reasons for its beliefs, capable of justifying itself in the face of often difficult odds. What then of justice? Why is justice needed here in order to ensure truth and knowledge? Why articulate the ethical through the epistemological?

We shall see that, for Levinas, the connection between justification and justice is, however, fundamental. According to Levinas, the grounded subject is not the original moment of truth. Such a subject will always find itself prey to the pitfall of solipsism. It is always in danger of taking its own constructions for reality. What stance must one then adopt in order to achieve a genuine knowledge of being? According to Levinas, justice is the stance that will bring a given subjectivity the closest to discovering such a genuine knowledge of being. A genuine access to exteriority can emerge only, for Levinas, from a subjectivity that has a sense for justice. But we do not yet understand the connection between justice and truth. Indeed, justice seems to be a notion pertaining to the ethical or moral dimension. What then does it have to do with the epistemological quest for truth? What is here then the connection between ethics and truth? The purpose of this essay will be to show how Levinas moves from a Cartesian epistemology based on justification to an epistemology founded on justice and, as such, indissociable from ethics.

Truth and Justification

Truth as grounded in subjectivity, as a subjective endeavor or activity, was the essence of Des-

cartes's teaching. Contrary to a conception of truth as existing outside of subjectivity, waiting to be discovered, Descartes shows in his *Discourse on Method* that truth, i.e., the revelation, the disclosure of being, cannot be thought apart from an activity on the part of subjectivity, from an act of judgment on its part. This is the first principle of the Cartesian method: "To accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so."³ It is the subjective I, the ego, which is the voucher for truth. Knowledge thus stems from an activity of the I of recognition and of acceptance of a given content as being true.

Thus, knowledge becomes relative to subjectivity, as Levinas comments:

The knowledge of objects does not secure a relation whose terms would absolve themselves from the relation. Though objective knowledge remains disinterested, it is nevertheless marked by the way the knowing being has approached the Real. To recognize truth to be disclosure is to refer it to the horizon of him who discloses. Plato, who identifies knowledge with vision, stresses, in the myth of the chariot of the *Phaedrus*, the movement of the soul that contemplates truth and the relativeness of truth to that course. The disclosed being is relative to us and not *kat auto*. (TI 64)

The objectivity of a given knowledge does not annul its intrinsic connection with subjectivity. Indeed, it is subjectivity which remains the final authority as to the objective quality of a given knowledge. It is subjectivity which decides, which determines what is real and what is not.

In this sense, while subjectivity does not constitute the origin of truth—truth remains to be found within being—it certainly constitutes its *ground*, or foundation. It is from subjectivity that an act of genuine knowing emerges, from its activity and judgment. There can be no genuine apprehension of being apart from this subjective activity intent on detecting the truth hidden within being. Levinas thus sees the quest for knowledge as a "work eminently individual, which always, as Descartes saw, comes back to the freedom of the individual, atheism affirms itself as atheism" (TI 89). Such a subjectivity freely disposes of its powers, it is in charge, it is masterful in the face of

being working as an artisan of truth, wrenching it from the muteness of being.⁴ It answers only to itself; it is "atheist,"⁵ that is, it answers to no one else, it is alone in the world, answering to no authority other than its own preoccupation and quest for truth.

It is the structure of this quest—as a limitless freedom and quest—which guides the scientific method. Indeed, whereas the act of knowing was considered by the Ancients as an unveiling or discovery of being,⁶ it becomes with Descartes the product of a subjective act of *justification*. Levinas observes along those lines that "the justification of a fact consists in lifting from it its character of being a fact, accomplished, past, and hence irrevocable, which as such obstructs our spontaneity" (TI 82). In other words, to justify amounts to grasping, to "lifting" being out of its irrevocability so as to ensure that it does not obstruct our spontaneity anymore. Essential to the act of justification is thus the affirmation of the self's spontaneity. Thus, what comes first in the Cartesian epistemological framework is not being but the self, for only the latter is able to engage in the act of justification. Justification, unlike the acts of unveiling or discovery, has thus a strong subjective connotation. The intention of knowledge thus takes the form of a struggle of the *self* over and against anything outside of it presenting an obstacle to its quest for knowledge.

A genuine encounter with exteriority must then be assimilated to a battle of the heroic and solitary *self* against incredible odds. Levinas describes thus this battle of the self:

In clarity an object which is first exterior is *given*, that is, is delivered over to him who encounters it as though it had been entirely determined by him. In clarity the exterior being presents itself as the work of the thought that receives it. Intelligibility, characterized by clarity, is a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes. (TI 123–24)

Knowledge emerging from the act of justification thus necessitates the overcoming of obstacles or odds to the self's quest for intelligibility.

Justification implies a mastery of the self over the “object’s resistance.” Whatever was deemed as a resistance, an obstacle to the self’s quest for knowledge, must be overcome in the self’s act of justification.

Intelligibility of a given being thus emerges from an act of violence on the part of the self. It must be wrenched from being; it must be upheld against competing paradigms. Levinas speaks of an act of “mastery” on the part of subjectivity:

This mastery is total and as though creative; it is accomplished as a giving of meaning: the object of representation is reducible to noemata. The intelligible is precisely what is entirely reducible to noemata and all of whose relations with the understanding reducible to those established by the light. . . . Descartes’s clear and distinct idea manifests itself as true and as entirely immanent to thought: entirely present, without anything clandestine; its very novelty is without mystery. (TI 124)

Intelligibility is therefore the product of an act of mastery on the part of the self, an act of creation which, out of the indistinctiveness of being, speaks to the meaning of a truth. Knowledge constitutes in this passage a triumph of light over darkness, of word over matter. It allows for no part of “mystery” or of “clandestinity.” Light must triumph, meaning it must be established over the darkness and muteness of being.

Knowledge shines forth as the result of complete mastery on the part of the subject. Justification is symptomatic of a subjectivity that has shown itself victorious, masterful over difficult odds. Such a subjectivity adopts the stance of the demiurge, who has all power over reality, and whose word wrenches light from the darkness: as Levinas observes, “There is an absolute, creative freedom, prior to the venturesome course of the hand which chances on to the goal it seeks” (TI 124). In this sense, truth as justification emerges from a subjectivity whose position in the world is one of mastery and centrality. Truth as justification is grounded in a subjectivity who has shown itself capable of holding on to its vision in the face of alien obstacles and threats and of remaining unmoved by opposition—be it that of being or of competing scientific paradigms. Subjectivity thus “holds its ground” in the face of external

opposition. It is in this sense that one must understand Descartes’ understanding of truth as emerging from a solitary subject and all philosophy as “egology” (TI 44), in the Levinasian sense of the term.

This egology, however, poses a number of problems. One may wonder how a genuine discovery of alterity is possible from an egological stance, from a subjectivity defined by its centrality and which sees itself as “master and possessor” of the world.⁷ Is truth as justification the best way? Does an act of knowing structured as the self’s affirmation of its views and hypotheses still allow for an unveiling of alterity, of something *exterior* to the self? Can exteriority emerge from interiority? Does truth find its ultimate ground in subjectivity? This is precisely the Levinasian critique of a knowledge emerging from a grounded self and discovered by means of justification: “Absolute experience is not disclosure; to disclose on the basis of a subjective horizon is already to miss the noumenon” (TI 67). According to Levinas, an experience of otherness which is absolute, that is, which reveals otherness *as such*, cannot be coined as disclosure, that is, by an elucidating activity of the self. Alterity will not, according to Levinas, be *disclosed*; it does not reveal itself through an act of mastery and domination on the part of the self: “For truth is neither in seeing nor in grasping” (TI 172). On the contrary, alterity is neutralized by such an act of mastery; it dissolves at the contact of a dominating self. The mastering self only has access to the “phenomenon,” that is, to the product of its own constitution and perceptions. But it has no access, according to Levinas, to the “noumenon,” that is, to the thing in itself, to the being as such, in itself.⁸ Alterity does not lend itself to an approach structured as domination and mastery.

Such an approach is termed by Levinas “ontology.” Ontology translated as “discourse on being,” must be understood in the Levinasian sense as the meaning, the logos, that the dominating self extracts, with a necessary violence,⁹ from being. According to Levinas, however, such a violence, such an ontology, which emerges from an activity, a spontaneity on the part of the self, can never get to the true reality, to genuine exteriority.

ty: “Ontology, which reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom—the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other. Here theory enters upon a course that renounces metaphysical Desire, renounces the marvel of exteriority from which that Desire lives” (TI 42). The act of ontology, in its quest to understand, to elucidate, comprehend being, amounts for Levinas to a neutralization of otherness. One might wonder, however, as to why the quest to understand being amounts to a dissolution of the alterity of being. Does not the effort to understand being, on the contrary, reveal this being to us and to itself?

According to Levinas, there is nothing wrong with seeking to approach being and alterity in order to encounter it. But this approach must occur in a certain mode if it is to correctly approach otherness. It cannot be a masterful or dominating approach. This approach, which Levinas terms “freedom”—in that it privileges the self over the other—does not constitute the proper approach to alterity. Such an approach is not concerned with the other; it is primarily concerned with the self and its personal agenda. Here Levinas acknowledges that the self is never completely disinterested in its quest for truth.¹⁰ There is often, at the basis, of a given quest, the need for the self to affirm *itself* rather than to genuinely seek to know a given being. The quest for truth becomes in such a context a power struggle of a self seeking to affirm itself, its world view, its status as a scientist, before a given community. Such a power struggle stems not from a genuine interest in knowledge but in the economic, political, and ideological interests of the self.¹¹ Such a self will never genuinely approach exteriority, according to Levinas, but has renounced “metaphysical Desire,” that is the genuine and disinterested thirst for truth which alone allows the “marvel of exteriority” (TI 42) to be revealed. Thus, the quest for truth as justification, as seeking the affirmation of the self, never truly engages in the journey towards otherness, but, like Ulysses, ultimately always comes back home to the self’s interests and agendas: “For the transcendence of thought remains closed in itself despite all its adventures—which in the last analysis are purely imaginary, or

are adventures traversed as by Ulysses: on the way home” (TI 27). The self that practices ontology ultimately remains with itself, with its own constructions and productions. Such a self has firmly established itself in the face of overwhelming odds, has “stood its ground,” but in so doing, has distanced itself from the truth.

This was, incidentally, Descartes’s problem. Having founded the quest for truth on an activity of the self, Descartes himself came to wonder whether such an approach would not bypass exteriority altogether and leave the self with nothing but the product of its own imagination. For Descartes, the self’s constitution of reality would never escape the looming doubt that perhaps it was all a construction and that perhaps the self was fooling itself in thinking that his perception of reality coincided with being itself:

On first contact the *phenomenon* would degrade into *appearance* and in this sense would remain in equivocation, under the suspicion of an evil genius. The evil genius does not manifest himself to *state* the lie; he remains, as possible, beyond things which all seem to manifest themselves for good. The possibility of their fall to the state of images or veils co-determines their apparition as pure spectacle, and betrays the recess that harbors the evil genius; whence the possibility of universal doubt, which is not a personal adventure that happened to Descartes. (TI 90)

The quest for truth as justification, as an affirmation of the self, is always prone, according to Descartes, to the doubt that perhaps the self’s findings are nothing but the product of its own imagination. The world which emerges from the self’s justifications, may be nothing but an illusion of the self, an image conveyed by the self. Thus indissociable from the act of justification is the doubt that perhaps it is all a grand illusion. The self’s affirmation of a given knowledge remains shrouded in the doubt that perhaps what it has found does not correspond to reality in itself.

Thus doubt constitutes the first time the self encounters an obstacle in its quest for justification. Doubt erects a wall of opacity between the self and the light of truth which it seeks and, as such, can only be seen in a negative light, as an evil that must be done away with. Descartes per-

sonifies this doubt as an “evil genius.”¹² The doubt that Descartes feels accompanies the quest for intelligibility is not something positive; it stems from an evil that must be somehow overcome. It is the concept of an “evil” genius which is for Descartes at the origin of doubt. Such a view on doubt has been that of the entire scientific community from Descartes on. In this, Descartes profoundly differs from the Ancients, who, on the contrary, situated wonder, the capacity to wonder, to be perplexed and curious, at the origin of the scientific endeavor.¹³ Descartes also gives wonder, or doubt and questions, their place, but as a necessary evil which must be overcome. With Descartes, doubt becomes the ultimate enemy of truth. It casts a shadow on the glorious and noble quest for knowledge. It signifies the limitations of the self’s spontaneity, places a huge obstacle in its quest and must be ultimately overcome. And as such, doubt puts into question the self’s epistemological stance. A self in prey to doubt is a self that is no more at home in its world-view; it is a self which feels a certain uncanniness within its prior stance, a self in danger of losing its footing, its ground in the scientific community. Thus doubt is perceived as a terrible obstacle that must be overcome, as a “scandal” within the scientific endeavor. Levinas comments: “The spontaneity of freedom is not called in question; its limitation alone is held to be tragic and to constitute a scandal” (TI 83). As such, doubt is seen as a menacing obstacle to be reckoned with, as a negative foe to be resisted again in the quest for foundations. Doubt casts a shadow on the self’s credibility, on the strength of its position within the scientific world; it must be overcome, done away with, dissipated.

But must doubt necessarily be seen as an “evil” to be overcome? Can we not see doubt as an awakening of the self to its arbitrary freedom and to the dangers of solipsism that such a freedom entails? We shall see that, for Levinas, doubt is positive;¹⁴ it is the first moment when the self’s solipsistic bubble is put into question, where the self’s mastery of the world is questioned. This, for Levinas, marks the end of a definition of subjectivity as the ground for truth and the beginning of its exile away from all of its own certainties

and world-view. Interestingly, we shall see that the exilic journey of doubt does not signify the dissolution of the enterprise of knowledge, inasmuch as it allows an opening of the self to a dimension of otherness, constitutes the beginning of a more genuine epistemological approach—of the discovery of a genuine exteriority unconstituted by the self. We shall see that, in this sense, far from occulting the quest for knowledge, the exilic journey of doubt paves the way to truth. As Levinas puts it: “It is because it suspects that it is dreaming itself that it awakens. The doubt makes it seek certainty. But this suspicion, this consciousness of doubt, implies the idea of the Perfect” (TI 86). Thus, for Levinas, the exilic moment of doubt is a positive experience which makes possible an “awakening” on the part of the self. But what is the nature of this “awakening”? And how does this awakening imply the “idea of the Perfect”? What is meant here by the “idea of the Perfect”?

Truth and Justice

Far from facilitating the quest for knowledge, we have seen that a grounded subjectivity, intent on justifying itself, can easily bypass the encounter with reality in itself. A subjectivity that gives free reign to its spontaneity, to its activity cannot, according to Levinas, encounter alterity or otherness. For alterity does not lend itself to an approach of domination or mastery. But what kind of stance must subjectivity then adopt in order to genuinely encounter otherness? We shall see that subjectivity can only encounter exteriority by letting go of its centrality in the world and adopting an exilic stance. The path of justification, whereby subjectivity “holds its ground” within the scientific world, must be relinquished for the path of *justice*.¹⁵ But we do not yet understand this connection between justice and knowledge. What connection can there possibly be between the ethical quest for justice and the epistemological endeavor of the search for truth. Levinas himself recognizes this problem and poses himself the question: “What is the relation between justice and truth?” (TI 82). How does the concern for justice prepare one for the quest for truth?

In order to answer these questions, we must first gain a renewed understanding of what a genuine encounter with exteriority consists in. We must first understand whether exteriority is encountered solely through an activity on the part of subjectivity, or if a moment of receptivity, of *respect* on the part of subjectivity with regards to the otherness of what is approached, is also necessary. In other words, does knowledge originate in a subjective activity, or, on the contrary, in receptivity to an otherness which precedes all subjective activity? We shall see that, for Levinas, exteriority does not reveal itself to a subjectivity which affirms itself in the face of alterity, but, far to the contrary, to a subjectivity willing to let its spontaneity be interrupted by this very alterity. The question remains, however, as to how this interruption takes place in a subjectivity which a priori is only concerned with itself and with the affirmation of its world-view.

Far from defining the quest for knowledge as an activity derived from the spontaneity of a subjectivity, Levinas describes the encounter with exteriority as a stance on the part of subjectivity which allows for the alterity of the known to remain, which “lets the known being manifest itself” (TI 42). A genuine approach of the exteriority of a being thus protects the otherness of the known being and does not taint it with preconceptions or a priori conceptualizations on the part of subjectivity.¹⁶ The quest for knowledge must do away, according to Levinas, with a priori categorizations and become a posteriori: Pure receptivity to the revelation of an other, or, as Levinas puts, untainted “desire” to know.¹⁷ The correct stance of a subjectivity seeking truth is precisely this: that it seek, that it “desire” it. The activity of subjectivity, its spontaneity, must reside in *desiring* knowledge and not in constituting or producing it. Such a knowledge will be no more the product of a subjective activity, but “metaphysical,” that is, exterior to the world constituted by subjectivity; it will not originate in subjectivity, but originate from beyond its scope, from exteriority.

Such a stance, which protects the alterity of the known being, is described by Levinas as “respectful”:

Knowledge or theory designates first a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation. In this sense metaphysical desire would be the essence of theory. (TI 42)

The stance of respect thus implies a limitation on the natural freedom and spontaneity of subjectivity:

The famous suspension of action that is said to make theory possible depends on a reserve of freedom, which does not abandon itself to its drives, to its impulsive movements, and keeps its distances. Theory, in which truth arises, is the attitude of a being that distrusts itself. Knowledge becomes knowing of a fact only if it is at the same time critical, if it puts itself into question, goes back beyond its origin—in an unnatural movement to seek higher than one’s own origin, a movement which evinces or describes a created freedom. (TI 82-83)

Genuine objectivity, which allows for the known being to exist independently of subjective whims and desires, is born, according to Levinas, from this “reserve of freedom” on the part of subjectivity. Such a reserve is fundamental if the known being is to be known *as such* and not merely as a construction of subjectivity. Interestingly, the attitude of subjectivity is in this context no more that of *justification* but of *distrust* of itself.¹⁸ Subjectivity is no more intent in justifying itself, but distrusts itself¹⁹ and, in so doing, allows for exteriority to escape its constitutive grasp and reveal itself as it is in itself.

This distrust is, however, profoundly unnatural for a subjectivity hereto defined as master and possessor of the world. Levinas thus speaks of a “conversion” of subjectivity to exteriority: “The conversion of the soul to exteriority, to the absolutely other, to Infinity, is not deducible from the very identity of the soul, for it is not commensurate with the soul” (TI 61). Indeed, natural subjectivity is not intent on respecting otherness or letting it be. It is intent on affirming itself and its world-view in the face of that otherness.²⁰ As such, it is not naturally disposed to encountering genuine otherness. A “conversion of the soul” is

thus, according to Levinas, necessary. The question remains, however, as to what event is to bring about such a conversion. If subjectivity is not naturally bent on letting otherness reveal itself, what brings about such a change of heart? What makes this conversion possible?

According to Levinas, such an awakening cannot come from within the act of knowledge, for the latter depends itself on such an awakening, on such a conversion. Indeed, this conversion, this calling into question of the self's freedom and spontaneity, which allows for the very concept of exteriority to emerge, is necessary for the encounter with truth to be even conceivable: "Knowledge as a critique, as a tracing back to what precedes freedom, can arise only in a being that has an origin prior to its origin—that is created" (TI 85). According to Levinas, the quest for knowledge can only emerge from a subjectivity which already has a sense of exteriority, of otherness. Such a subjectivity, according to Levinas, is "created." It has a sense of an exteriority outside of its world, of a transcendent being. Only such a sense of otherness can give to subjectivity its thirst for knowledge, can kindle in it the desire to know and to encounter something other than itself. The question remains, however, as to how this sense of otherness can emerge in a subjectivity heretofore entirely self-absorbed.

Already Descartes struggled with this question and appealed to the idea of Infinity as that which, from within subjectivity itself, signified towards a dimension transcendent to itself. According to Descartes, only the idea of Infinity, which in turn testified to the existence of God, could dispel the doubt uttered by the "evil genius."²¹ For Descartes, then, the discovery of being as such, and not as a product of subjectivity, could only be possible through the intervention of the idea of the Infinite. It is the idea of the Infinite—as it testified to the existence of a God who would never deceive his creatures—which gave the seal of exteriority to being and salvaged it from being a mere hoax or illusion in the mind of the self.²² Thus, the idea of the Infinite enables an awakening of the self to being as such, to a dimension outside of itself, to transcendence.

It is precisely this "idea of the Perfect" (TI 86) that Levinas will reclaim from Descartes in order to describe the awakening of the self to being as such. But what will Levinas mean here by "the Perfect"? Does the "idea of the Perfect" or of the Infinite also signify God for Levinas?

According to Levinas, the Cartesian Infinite is not an abstract and formal being of which the self has a peculiar intuition. This Infinite, this unknowable and transcendent dimension can be found within the realm of being, in the concrete person of the other, in the face of the other: "The exposition of the ethical signification of transcendence and of the Infinite beyond being can be worked out beginning with the proximity of the neighbor and my responsibility for the other" (TI 141). And indeed, the Cartesian Infinity and the face of the other as described by Levinas present a fundamental commonality: they both manifest themselves as transcending, as "overflowing" the sphere of subjectivity: "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: To have the idea of infinity" (TI 51). The face of the other thus resembles the Cartesian Infinite in its capacity to overflow the sphere of subjectivity. Just like the Cartesian Infinite overflowed the sphere of subjectivity, thereby showing the limitations of its activities of mastery and possession, the other disturbs subjectivity and puts into question the centrality of its epistemological stance.

We have seen in our first chapter how the other appears within the realm of the self as an interruption of the self's grasp on the world. It is the self's encounter with the other, with a human face, which according to Levinas marks the original interruption of the self's spontaneity: "It is the welcoming of the Other, the commencement of moral consciousness, which calls into question my freedom" (TI 84). When faced with the other, the self realizes the limits of its spontaneity; it realizes that it is not alone in the world and that the other has an equal claim on that world. For the first time, the self finds itself in the presence of the genuine exteriority of a being which

refuses to be encompassed or subjected to the self. For the first time, the self learns the limits of its spontaneity and apprehends a being exterior to itself. This awakening to exteriority can, in turn, inform the way that the self had here to apprehend the world and give it a renewed sensitivity to the otherness of that world. Instead of situating itself as master and possessor of the world, the self now hesitates in the face of the world.

And it is precisely in this hesitation that Levinas situates the genuine access to exteriority. For it is this hesitation which, according to Levinas, allows for an apprehension of being as such and not merely as the product of its own spontaneity:

But theory understood as a respect for exteriority delineates another structure essential for metaphysics. In its comprehension of being (or ontology) it is concerned with critique. It discovers the dogmatism and naive arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom in such a way as to turn back at every moment to the origin of the arbitrary dogmatism of this free exercise. . . . Its critical intention then leads it beyond theory and ontology: critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same. (TI 43)

Genuine knowledge—understood as “respect for exteriority”—can only come about when subjectivity has learned to hesitate before the world, that is, to be critical of itself and distrustful of itself. But this self-criticism and mistrust, this self-induced interruption of its spontaneity is not innate to the self. It has to be taught by an other.

We now better understand how the journey towards knowledge is “bound up with the social relation, which is justice” (TI 72).²³ For without justice, whereby the self’s spontaneity finds itself limited by the presence of the other, there can be no knowledge, that is, no apprehension of exteriority as such. In this sense, the other precedes the self in its epistemological quest and teaches it something it did not know before: the limitation of its spontaneity which is the beginning of respect. Exteriority reveals itself only at the price of such a contraction on the part of the self, whereby the self experiences its limitations in the face of

exteriority. But this contraction on the part of the self cannot emerge from the self’s own innate capacities. It is brought about *by* the other. This is why for Levinas the beginning of justice lies in “recognizing in the Other my master” (TI 72). The initiation to exteriority is possible only at the price of a de-centering of the self, whereby the other is recognized as “master” (TI 72), as the one who chastises the self, who interrupts its spontaneity, who teaches it the narrow way of justice. Only such a self is capable of respect, of apprehending being as such.

Justice thus plays out this contraction, this exile of the self interrupted by an other. The just self is thus not, according to Levinas, master and possessor of the world. It is a self capable of being interrupted and dislodged by an other, of losing its prior foothold and stance. It is therefore no more a grounded self, affirming and justifying itself in the face of alterity which paves the way to truth, but a de-centered self, exiled from its central place in the world, dislodged by a “master” greater than it and who teaches him the rigorous way of justice, which is found, by Levinas, to be the more apt seeker. The quest for knowledge can only be lived by a broken self, by a self that has put aside all desire for self-affirmation and mastery. Exteriority will not be accessed by a grounded self, seeking a secure position in the world, but by a self capable of justice and willing to be exiled, willing to suffer a “loss of its wings,”²⁴ willing to endure a limitation on its spontaneity by the other.²⁵ Only such a self will be able to see beyond its own categorizations and agendas and become capable of adopting a respectful stance enabling it to apprehend being as such.

But justice implies far more than a mere limitation of the self by the other. This limitation of the self is not performed *per se*, but with the objective of creating a space for an other to exist side-by-side with the self. The narrow way of justice thus opens upon the social relation and to all the new possibilities which go along with it. The Levinassian definition of justice thus eventually leads back to the creation of a space where the self and the other both can exist, affirm themselves and be heard. In this sense, justice as a lim-

itation on the self, as a straight and narrow way, in no way impoverishes the self. Far to the contrary, it opens, within the world of the self, a space for the other to be, to exist and to be heard. This welcoming of others in the world of the self, in turn, enriches the quest for knowledge. According to Levinas, genuine exteriority can only appear in the presence of another; it is never a solitary quest. Levinas goes as far as to say that “the Other is the principle of phenomena” (TI 92). But what does this mean? Why does exteriority not appear to a solitary subject? We have seen that the other was needed to teach the self to doubt, to critique and to curve its spontaneity. Only a self capable of exercising self-doubt is able, according to Levinas, to discover being as such and not as the product of its spontaneity. Is this not lesson enough? Can the doubtful and self-distrustful self not proceed on its own in the quest for truth? Why is the other still needed for the revealing of phenomena?

It is here that Levinas is closest to his predecessor Husserl. According to Husserl, the other does not only place a limit to the self’s spontaneity, as shown by Levinas, but expands the self’s horizons to encompass being in its entirety. A given object, according to Husserl, has an infinity of facets, an infinity of *Abschattungen*, or sides.²⁶ The self, exercising its perspective, can only see one of these facets depending on where it is standing with regard to the object. The self thus only has an incomplete vision of being, limited to its own standpoint and place in the world. An other, however, standing in a different place, and seeing from a different perspective, would encounter a whole new set of facets of the given being, thus enriching the self’s perspective. Yet another other would add to this vision, and so forth. Thus, given the structure of the phenomenalization of being—in facets—truth is necessarily *inter-subjective*.²⁷ It is only together that we can come, according to Husserl, to a full vision of the given object.

We now understand better Levinas’ claim that the other “is at the commencement of experience” (TI 93). The other does not only exercise a limitative effect on the self, but also enriches the self’s experience with its own perspective. Genu-

ine exteriority is thus never to be encountered alone, but results from an openness to others and to their perspectives. Truth is thus never the possession of a given self. It does not reveal itself to a grounded and masterful self. Rather, it surrenders to a broken self, to a self which realizes its limitations, which profoundly distrusts itself at the contact of an other. Yet, the presence of this other does not impoverish the self, but enriches it, brings in his or her own perspective on being, thus bringing the self closer to a full apprehension of being. The exile of the self thus does not limit the self’s world, but enables a hospitality of the self to the other, a welcoming by the self of the other, which in turn enriches the quest for knowledge.

Knowledge thus gives itself to a self capable not only of exile but of hospitality. We are here reminded of Socrates’ definition of the wise as a stranger.²⁸ Truth itself is not at home in the world; it is itself exiled and in need of hospitality. Only a self capable of receiving the stranger, capable of receiving that which does not fit a certain paradigm or a certain agenda, and as such, capable of justice, will be able to apprehend truth. According to Levinas, “in the welcoming of the face the will opens to reason” (TI 219). Levinas understands here reason in its etymological sense of *legere*, to connect, to link. In this sense, there can be no rational discourse, no epistemological discourse without a sense of connection between the self and the other, without a proximity between the self and the other wherein the self welcomes the other, the uniqueness of his or her perspective and world-view. Exteriority will only give itself to an inclusive and just discourse, to a discourse which gives voice to alternative approaches and perspectives.²⁹ Only an infinity of perspectives can enable an approach of being as such. Being offers itself to a diversity and multiplicity of approaches³⁰ and not to a single method or mode of knowing. Alternative approaches to being are often shunned in a given scientific community. We learn here, however, that these voices must also be heard³¹ if being is to be approached in its integrity. Equality must be given to these voices. Justice must be done to these voices too often and

too long ignored if exteriority is ever to be approached.

We now understand better how the journey towards knowledge passes through the demands of justice. It is not, according to Levinas, the grounded and self-confident self, master and possessor of its turf and capable of justification, which can approach truth. Such a self is too engrossed in itself to acquire the proper respect necessary to the discovery of being as such. It is, on the contrary, a self which has allowed the other to interrupt its spontaneity, and as such, a self awakened to the demands of justice which, according

to Levinas, will be able to approach exteriority in a genuine way. Only such a self is capable, according to Levinas, of welcoming that exteriority unto itself, of welcoming that which is *not* itself, that which is *beyond* itself unto itself. The way to truth thus passes through justice, for only a self which has developed a keen sensitivity to otherness will show itself capable of respecting the otherness of that which it is investigating in the quest for truth. It is in this sense that, in the words of Elizabeth Minnich, one must *work* for justice if one is to encounter truth.

NOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
2. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes explicitly situates the ego as the foundation of truth. The first principle which was to guide the quest for truth was indeed to “to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitation and prejudice in judgments and to accept in them nothing more than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it.” Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weismann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 13.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Heidegger mentions this difficult, even violent, wrenching of truth from being in his commentary on *Antigone*: “It is this breaking out and breaking up, capturing and subjugating that opens up the essent *as sea, as earth, as animal*. It happens only insofar as the powers of language, of understanding, of temperament, and of building are themselves mastered in violence. The violence of poetic speech, of thinking projection, of building configuration, of the action that creates states is not a function of faculties that man has, but a taming and ordering of powers by virtue of which the essent opens up as such when man moves into it.” Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 157.
5. Levinas understands “atheism” as the capacity of subjectivity to take a solitary stance against any heterogenous influence: “One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated. . . . The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I” (*Totality and Infinity*), 58.
6. Heidegger explicates the Greek conception of truth as an unveiling of being versus a purely subjective construction in these terms: “The true as such is essent. This means: the power that manifests itself stands in unconcealment. In showing itself, the unconcealed as such comes to stand” (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 102).
7. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 38.
8. This distinction between phenomenon and noumenon comes from Kant, who, before Levinas, had already showed that while the act of knowledge can come to know the phenomenon—the thing as it appears—this act always, necessarily misses the noumenon—the thing in itself. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 303–22.
9. Derrida comments on this necessary violence of discourse as follows: “Discourse, therefore, if it is originally violent, can only do itself violence, can only negate itself in order to affirm itself, make war upon the war which institutes it without ever being able to reappropriate this negativity, to the extent that it is

- discourse. Necessarily without reappropriating it, for if it did so, the horizon of peace would disappear into the night (worst violence as prevalence). This secondary war, as the avowal of violence, is the least possible violence, the only way to repress the worst violence, the violence of primitive and prelogical silence, of an unimaginable night which would not even be the opposite of day, an absolute violence which would not even be the opposite of nonviolence, nothingness or pure non-sense. Thus discourse chooses itself violently in opposition to nothingness or pure non-sense, and, in philosophy against nihilism." Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 130.
10. Alison Jaggar speaks to that effect of the "myth of dispassionate investigation": "When hypotheses are to be tested, however, positivist epistemology imposes the much stricter logic of justification. The core of this logic is replicability, a criterion believed capable of eliminating or cancelling out what are conceptualized as emotional as well as evaluative biases on the part of individual investigators . . . but if, as has been argued, the positivist distinction between discovery and justification is not viable, then such a distinction is incapable of filtering out values in science. For example, although such a split, when built into the Western scientific method, is generally successful in neutralizing the idiosyncratic or unconventional values of individual investigators, it has been argued that it does not, indeed, cannot eliminate generally accepted social values. . . . Despite its classical antecedents and as in the ideal of disinterested inquiry, the ideal of dispassionate inquiry is an impossible dream." "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," *Inquiry* 32 (June 1989): 161–63.
 11. Jaggar identifies this tendency for self-affirmation as constitutive of Western male-dominated scientific investigation: "It is claimed with increasing frequency that the modern Western conception of science, which identifies knowledge with power and views it as a weapon for dominating nature, reflects the imperialism, racism, and misogyny of the societies that created it. Several feminist theorists have argued that modern epistemology itself may be viewed as an expression of certain emotions alleged to be especially characteristic of males in certain periods, such as separation anxiety and paranoia or an obsession with control and fear of contamination" (*ibid.*, 163–63).
 12. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 62.
 13. Heidegger begins his essay on metaphysics with a reference to the Greek sense of wonder which, at the sight of being, asks simply: "why are there essents rather than nothing?" (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1).
 14. C. S. Peirce also recognizes this positive aspect of doubt and sees in it the beginning of all sincere scientific inquiry: "The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle *Inquiry*, though it must be admitted that this is sometimes not a very apt designation. The irritation of doubt is the only immediate motive for the struggle to attain belief. It is certainly best for us that our beliefs should be such as may truly guide our actions so as to satisfy our desires; and this reflection will make us reject every belief which does not seem to have been so formed as to insure this result. But it will only do so by creating a doubt in the place of that belief. With the doubt therefore the struggle begins, and with the cessation of doubt it ends." "The Fixation of Belief," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 231–32.
 15. This passage from justification to justice is itself implied in the process of justification as Levinas comments: "Truth is in effect not separable from intelligibility; to know is not simply to record, but always to comprehend. We also say that to know is to justify, making intervene, by analogy with the moral order, the notion of justice" (*Totality and Infinity*, 82).
 16. Bacon speaks of four such preconceptions susceptible of tainting human knowledge, which he terms idols: "There are four kinds of illusions which block men's minds. For instructions's sake we have given them the following names: The first kind are called idols of the tribe; the second, idols of the cave; the third, idols of the marketplace; the fourth, idols of the theater. . . . Idols of the tribe are founded in human nature itself and in the very tribe or race of mankind. . . . Idols of the cave are the illusions of the individual man. . . . There are also illusions which seem to arise by agreement and from men's association with one another, which we call idols of the marketplace Finally, there are the illusions which have made their homes in men's minds from the various dogmas of

different philosophies, and even from mistaken rules of demonstration. These I call idols of the theater.” Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40–42.

17. Levinas defines desire as the disinterested quest for otherness: “The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other. . . . The metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves. . . . It is a desire that can not be satisfied” (*Totality and Infinity*, 33–34).
18. Popper makes a similar distinction when comparing Cartesian epistemology—seeking to justify and to prove—with Socratic epistemology aware of its limits and fallibility: “Thus the doctrine of fallibility should not be regarded as part of a pessimistic epistemology. This doctrine implies that we may seek for truth, for objective truth, though more often than not we may miss it by a wide margin. And it implies that if we respect truth, we must search for it by persistently searching for our errors: by indefatigable rational criticism, and self-criticism. . . . Cartesian doubt we see is merely a maieutic instrument for establishing a criterion of truth and with it a way to secure knowledge and wisdom. Yet for the Socrates of the Apology, wisdom consisted in the awareness of our limitations; in knowing how little we know, every one of us. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 16.
19. This attitude of distrust was already acknowledged by Popper as essential to the scientific attitude in contrast with what he terms a mistaken attitude seeking to justify or prove a hypothesis: “The Greeks’ discovery of the critical method gave rise at first to the mistaken hope that it would lead to the solution of all the great old problems; that it would establish certainty; that it would help to prove our theories, to justify them. But this hope was a residue of the dogmatic way of thinking; in fact nothing can be justified or proved (outside of mathematics or logics). . . . Nevertheless the role of logical argument, or deductive logical reasoning, remains all important for the critical approach; not because it allows us to prove our theories, or to infer them from observation statements, but because only by purely deductive reasoning is it possible for us to discover what our theories imply and thus to criticize them effectively . . . there is no more rational procedure than the method of trial and error, of conjecture and refutation; of boldly proposing theories, of trying our best to show that these are erroneous, and of accepting them tentatively if our critical efforts are unsuccessful” (*ibid.*, 51).
20. Levinas is here very close to Kuhn’s descriptions of normal science as incapable of acknowledging anomalies which could, in fact, point to yet unknown truths about the world: “Normal science . . . is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like . . . normal science for example often suppresses fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments . . . sometimes a normal problem, one that ought to be solvable by known rules and procedures, resists the reiterated onslaught of the ablest members of the group within whose competence it falls . . . revealing an anomaly that cannot, despite repeated effort, be aligned with professional expectation. In these and other ways besides, normal science repeatedly goes astray. And when it does—when, that is, the profession can no longer evade anomalies that subvert the existing tradition of scientific practice—then begin the extraordinary investigations that lead the profession at last to a new set of commitments, a new basis for the practice of science. They are the tradition-shattering complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science. Thomas Kuhn, “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, year), 162–63.
21. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 70–83.
22. *Ibid.*, 83.
23. This was also Peirce’s intuition in comparing Cartesian epistemology—stemming from a solitary subject—to scientific epistemology which rests on a community of thinkers: “The same formalism appears in the Cartesian criterion, which amounts to this: “Whatever I am clearly convinced of, is true.” If I were really convinced, I should have done with reasoning and should require no test of certainty. But thus to make single individuals absolute judges of truth is most pernicious. The result is that metaphysicians will all agree that metaphysics has reached a pitch of certainty far beyond that of the physical sciences;—only they can agree to nothing else. In sciences in which men come to agreement, when a theory has been broached it is considered to be on probation until this agreement is reached. After it is reached, the question of certainty becomes an idle

one, because there is no one left who doubts it. We individually cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy which we pursue; we can only seek it, therefore, for the community of philosophers. . . . Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods. . . . Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected.” “Consequences of Four Incapacities,” in *Collected Papers*, 157.

24. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV, tractate 8, no. 4, trans. Stephen Mackenna (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 360–61.
25. Thorstein Veblen also describes the alienated standpoint of the exiled self as an epistemological plus, in that it gives rise to what he calls “skeptical animus” invaluable in paving new ways in science: “The first requisite for constructive work in modern science and indeed for any work of inquiry that shall bring enduring results is a skeptical frame of mind. The enterprising skeptic alone can be counted on to further the increase of knowledge in any substantial fashion. This will be found true both in the modern sciences and in the field of scholarship at large. . . . This intellectual enterprise that goes forward presupposes a degree of exemption from hard and fast pre-conceptions, a skeptical animus, *Unbefangenheit*, release from the dead hand of conventional finality. [Such a man] is in a peculiarly fortunate position in respect of this requisite immunity from the inhibitions of intellectual quietism . . . for him as for other men in the like case, the skepticism that goes to make him an effectual factor in the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men involves a loss of that peace of mind that is the birthright of the safe and sane quietist. He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no man’s land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.” *Essays in our Changing Order* (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 226.
26. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 127.
27. According to Husserl, the only way to avoid Descartes’s solipsism while nevertheless acknowledging the ego as the foundation of all experience is to broaden that experience to include the other’s per-

ception of the world and as such, to arrive at a genuinely objective and transcendent world: “It is an essentially unique connectedness, an actual community and precisely the one that makes transcendently possible the being of a world, a world of men and things. . . . Openly endless Nature itself then becomes a Nature that includes an open plurality of men. . . . To this community there naturally corresponds, in transcendental concreteness, a similarly open *community* of monads which we designate as *transcendental inter-subjectivity*. . . . Manifestly it is essentially necessary to the world constituted transcendently in me (and similarly necessary to the world constituted in any community of monads that is imaginable by me) that it be a *world of men* and that, *in each particular man*, it be more or less perfectly constituted *intrapsychically*” (ibid., 129–30).

28. In the *Symposium*, Socrates introduces his speech with a reference to Diotema, a stranger and a wise woman. The juxtaposition is interesting and speaks to a possible understanding of wisdom as that which, by essence, must be taught by an *other*.
29. Such is the approach Paul Feyerabend proposes: “This book proposes a thesis and draws consequences from it. The thesis is: the events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure. . . . Successful research does not obey general standards; it relies on one trick, now on another. . . . It also follows that “non-scientific procedures” cannot be pushed aside by argument A consequence which I did not develop in my book but which is closely connected with its basic thesis is that there can be many different kinds of science. People starting from different social backgrounds will approach the world in different ways and learn different things about it. . . . First world science is one science among many: by claiming to be more it ceases to be an instrument of research and turns into a political pressure group.” *Against Method* (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1988), 1–4.
30. According to Eduard Farber, such a different approach would include, beyond the method of hypothetic-deduction, a mode of scientific investigation open to the workings of the mind in dreams and visions: “We need Kekule’s testimony today as a powerful reminder that chemistry advances not by experiments alone but by a process in which dreams and visions can play an important role. Chemists seem to be particularly inclined to disparage anything that is not experiment; perhaps they still have a

guilt complex about alchemy and the speculative periods of the 17th and 18th centuries. In an attitude of defense against speculation, J. C. Poggendorff refused to publish Robert Mayer's paper about 'Forces in Inanimate Nature' (1842). This defensive position was fortified by scientific standards of verification, but it also contained an element of prejudice that has been harmful. Results of experimental work were rejected when they would have required a change in cherished assumptions." "Dreams and Visions in a Century of Chemistry," in *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Arthur Zucker (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 36.

31. To this effect, Jaggar speaks of the voice of emotion which, according to her, should also be heard in the scientific endeavor if progress is to be made: "Posi-

tivism views value and emotions as alien invaders that must be repelled by a stricter application of the scientific method . . . rather than repressing emotion in epistemology it is necessary to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and construct a conceptual model that demonstrates the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion. Far from precluding the possibility of reliable knowledge, emotions as well as value must be shown as necessary to such knowledge. Despite its classical antecedents and like the ideal of disinterested enquiry, the ideal of dispassionate enquiry is an impossible dream" ("Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," 163).

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