



Conscience of a Conservative Psychologist: Return of the Mysteriously Illusive Psyche

by George Kunz

Abstract

Psyche, the daughter of a Greek king, was so beautiful that people stopped worshipping Aphrodite; instead they turned their adoration to the girl who modestly rejected any divine honours. Aphrodite, enraged, sent her son Eros to contrive a spell to make this beautiful maiden fall in love with an ugly creature. Seeing her, however, Eros fell in love and could not obey his mother. Short version: Aphrodite, jealous, tried to sabotage Psyche with impossible tasks. After great struggle, Psyche escaped the traps with the help not of the gods but of the creatures of nature. Finally, Eros appealed to Zeus to set her free. With his consent the happy couple married on Mount Olympus celebrated by all the gods including Aphrodite. Psyche bore a daughter, Voluptas (better known as Pleasure), and so goes this great myth.

Weary of the mainstream's claim that only it is scientific, and its dismissal of phenomenology as "conjecture", this paper is an effort to return to the origins of the study of the fascinating and frustrating old psyche. To conserve (a) its most fundamental approach, (b) most empirical method, and (c) most lived psychological content, the author urges students to ask first the persistent – since the Greeks – and necessary philosophical questions (ontological, epistemological, ethical, and so forth). He proceeds from there to show that phenomenology can (a) resurrect the psyche and its neglected meanings both experienced and expressed in action, (b) rescue behaviour from the Procrustean bed of "the scientific method" and resuscitate it as lived, (c) expose the myth of objective consciousness, and (d) reaffirm that freedom makes the psyche not less but more available to science by letting human reality show itself. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas have inspired over forty years of classroom rebellion and conservation of a psychology of incarnate humankind. These philosophers have provoked an alternative understanding of the characteristics of science (empirical, objective, reductive, and so forth). Finally, this paper reasserts a moral science with attention to the "psychology for the Other" over a "psychology for the self" with the paradoxical content: we can sabotage ourselves with self-interested power and discover ourselves in the service of the weakness of others. The call to responsibility is the most fundamental characteristic of the psyche.

The allegory of the soul (psyche) in pursuit of love and happiness through trials and tribulations, and succeeding with help from others, is not a bad ancient palimpsest, covered over by many layers of modern psychologies, to found a phenomenological approach for the study of the human. With phenomenology's rubbing reality to get "back to the things themselves", we can conserve *meaning*.

Who is a phenomenologist? We all are. Everybody searches for the deeper *meaning* of love through reflection on the psychologically *lived* as it appears to experience. Humans, short on instincts, show an infinite variety of consistent and creative behaviours. What makes humans special is that they want to know not only *why* certain conditions influence behaviours, but, more specifically, *what* meanings are intended. They want to know *how* they know what they know, and if *what* they know is real. Everyone asks, "What does that mean?" We verbally and behaviourally struggle to express our meanings and to know if what we express is the same as what our neighbours mean, especially if our experiences and behaviours are the right thing to do. Everybody is a moralist. Everybody is a philosopher. Everybody is a psychologist.

Academic psychologists, however, have a special obligation to do their pre-psychological homework to avoid reducing their subject matter, the human psyche, to something less than what it is. I have been influenced by the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, intellectual descendant of Edmund Husserl, and Emmanuel Levinas, another Husserl student, but more deeply rooted in Judaic tradition. They inspire us to scratch and sniff deeper in search of the psyche.

Homework: Philosophical Reflection on the Human and on a Science of the Human

Amedeo Giorgi (1970), translator of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty into psychology as a human science, taught many of us at Duquesne that each science has an *approach*, a set of *methods*, and its special *content*. In respect of *approach*, Robert McLeod (1975) gave us an outline of six questions raised by the Greeks with which to begin: *ontological*, *epistemological*, *ethical*, *aesthetic*, *political*, and *religious*.

In my classes we use three steps by asking: (a) what does natural science assume about the psyche and about psychology concerning each of these six questions? (b) what are the problems with these assumptions when applied to the human? and, finally, (c) what can phenomenological psychology offer as an alternative that remains faithful to the human as human?

(1) The *ontological* (onto- being + -logos, study) asks: "What kind of being is the human being?" *Mind*

and/or *body*, *spirit* and/or *matter*? Each individual *unique* and/or *common*? *Free* and/or *determined*? Responsible only for their *own good* and/or for the *good of others*?

Mind/body, spirit/matter? Psychology, wanting so badly to be a science, tends to reduce the human to little more than determined materiality, a highly complicated bundle of bone, tissue, nerves, and chemicals, behaving in predictable and controllable patterns. Merleau-Ponty countered this approach with an eloquent and persuasive description of the ambiguous *body-subject* as the psyche that chooses within situated freedom (1962, 1963, 1964).

Levinas further undercuts the split by describing the psyche as an *ethical* embodied being, uniquely responsible for the needs of others. Only as incarnate psyche with eyes to see needs, ears to hear, hands to grasp and give or clinch, arms to caress, lips to speak about the world, only as material can the person give the gift of service (Levinas, 1961, 1981). When the psyche tries to escape into isolated individuality, it is backed into its own lived skin, muscle, bone, face located in this place, at this time, fully responsible for the incarnate Other facing him. The self is identified as the one called "... to take food from my (his) mouth to give to the needy other" (Levinas, 1981). The ontological condition of the psyche is the being that is responsible for others.

(2) The *epistemological* question asks "How do we know?" and, especially, "How do we know the psychological?" Natural Science insists that its methods are objective by collecting only third person data (s/he, hers/his, they, theirs), and distrusting both first person experienced meaning (me, mine) and descriptions from second persons (you, yours). Theodore Roszak (1972) clarifies and criticizes this in his chapter, "The Myth of Objective Consciousness", pointing out three problem characteristics of the objective mode of consciousness. (i) The "alienative dichotomy": the "in here" of the scientist observes the "out there" of the observed as an object alienated from his lived world; (ii) the "invidious hierarchy": the observer claims to be the source of explanation of the behaviour of the observed and dismisses experienced meanings; and (iii) the "mechanistic imperative": the observer reduces human events to naturally determining causes and resulting effects. Conservative psychologists can dismiss these so-called "objective" characteristics as not really "objective", because they are contaminated by the "subjective" intentions of the scientist, with his operational definitions, his chosen and controlled variables, his statistically manipulated measures.

How do we know the world? The problem is not how a subject knows, "subjectivizes", the world, how she

makes an object a part of her subjective milieu; she simply *lives* it. The puzzle is rather how she recognizes its independence from her own subjective incorporation, allowing it to be a common object for others. In the natural attitude, the everyday attitude, things are taken up into the meaningful world of the person. When she walks in her shoes and uses a hammer they become an extension of her. They are “subjectivised”. The subject *lives* her objects. Merleau-Ponty brilliantly shows how the world is not only subjectivized by being *lived*, but also how things can then become “objective”, how they become detached from the exclusive domain of the subject’s subjectivity. He gives us two hints: (i) when the subject grasps and picks up an object, looks at it, loosening it from her use, or walks around to discover hidden qualities, she returns its “objectivity”; (ii) when the subject observes others observing the object from their perspective, they pull it away from the psyche’s private point of view and show it to be theirs as well: common.

Levinas offers a more “dramatic” way of recognizing independent objectivity. Objects are fully independent only when given up to another. They no longer belong to the realm of “mine”. Only a gift released from the subject’s possession and given to another can fully be an object (1969, p. 210). The origin of all objectification, challenging subjectification, comes from the Other revealing her own existence and value as independent and irreducible to other subjects. She is neither an independent object nor a subject like the self, an alter-ego. She is certainly an independent subject. The facing face of the Other, the interlocutor reveals herself as “...starting from him(her)self, foreign and yet presenting him(her)self to me” (1961, p. 67). The other shows herself as not a product of the self’s subjective knowing. She is always more than anything and any other body.

“Objects” needed by the irreducible other, even those belonging to the self, are drawn out of the self’s subjectivity and shown to be an object for the Other. Commanded to be given away, they have gratuitous status as what should be moved across the psychological space to the needy other without the expectation of reciprocity. They are already the Other’s. The self has no incontestable ownership. All possessions have been gifts to him and are possible debts to another.

The tricky epistemological question asks, “Are the psychological meanings of the Other available to observation?” “How can you tell if another is happy, or sad, or angry?” The Other’s experiences and expressed meanings are ambiguously *visible* and *invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). The self does not logically infer the other’s meaning based on her own outward expression corresponding to her inner

experience, and matched up with the other’s outward expression to solve the puzzle of his inner experience. She doesn’t really know how her own expression looks from a distance to compare with the other’s expression seen from a distance. The Other presents himself as an expression of meaning. He is not an object receiving her meaning projected and plastered on his face. He can dissemble and she can make mistakes, but she perceives his meaning. His needs cannot be fully and clearly known by her. He and his needs are always more than what can be seen. Yet he is more real than the self to herself. He is “in her face”. His presence, saying “here I am”, commands attention. His “here I am” is an “awakening” – Levinas calls it a traumatizing – but a peaceful awakening. He is an enigma. His command is an appeal. It is not a physical, but a moral, force. He presents himself as absolutely *here*, but as *always more than* his visible presence *here*. He is *Other*. He is present with his distinctive otherness, but beyond her. The eyes, nose, mouth and so forth can be an object of knowing, but the Face beyond the visage, the real Other, cannot be known. Levinas says, “I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical” (1985, p. 85). Always a mystery, yet commanding to be recognized; he cannot be denied. She can turn away, but this does not make him go away. He cannot be fully disclosed by shining the light of her consciousness to make him fit her pre-conception. He reveals himself as *close-by* commanding and escaping *beyond* her reach.

(3) The *ethical* question asks “What is the good? What is the right thing to do?” The self can freely choose *how* to fulfil its ethical obligation, but responsibility is not chosen: it is assigned by the face of the Other. Natural science psychology tends to bypass the ethical question – other than setting professional standards for research and therapy based on legalism. It seems afraid to enter the mess of morals, the debate between *relativism* and *absolutism*, and standards set by religious and state bodies. But their standards are not within the realm of the ethical.

The proto-ethical question offered by Levinas asks if motives are based only on self-interest or whether they can be for the *good of others*. An individual’s freedom is situated not only in a body/subject appropriating concrete conditions for choices. He also faces others who hold rights to these conditions over him. Levinas offers this beyond-*ethics* where responsibility originates neither from individual *freedom* nor from *causes* in nature, but from the facing Other’s ethical command. The Other says, “Here I am. Do not do violence to me. Serve my needs.” In our comfortable, enjoyable, detached domain we are free on the stage of our world spread

out before us, available, to grasp and consume. But upon this stage of consciousness enters the Other saying, "Here I am. I have rights over you. I have needs. Help me." We are free to responsibly or irresponsibly respond when thus commanded. But this freedom is invested in us by others neither to be capriciously used for self-indulgence, nor to be servile to the Other. To allow the Other to abuse the self, or to enable the Other to abuse herself and others, is not responsible. The self is responsible for the responsibility of the Other. Allowing the other to be irresponsible is to be irresponsible to that other and to other others, and to oneself.

Paradoxically, responsibility re-establishes freedom by loosening it from the chains of compulsive self-interest. Responsible freedom does not restrict the self from being a self. It opens subjectivity. Responsibility returns the self to itself. The ethically responding psyche is freer than the capricious ego victimized by his own obsessions, compulsions and addictions. He has the capacity to misuse the freedom invested by and for others for self-indulgence and harming others. The command to responsibility is not a physical but an ethical force. It is an experience of the human psyche, but initiated by the Other. It cannot be negated. The command can be pretended to not be noticed; it can be resisted; it can incite violence toward the one commanding; but it cannot be reduced to non-existence. The self has choice only about how to respond; it has no choice regarding the existence of the command itself.

Levinas not only places ethics prior to ontology and epistemology, but also claims that responsibility called for by the face of the Other provides the foundation for understanding both ontology and epistemology: "pre-existing the plane of ontology is the ethical plane" (1969, p. 201); "The face is the evidence that makes evidence possible" (1969, p. 204). Responsibility is the foundation for knowing by commanding the self to work out how to serve and to communicate as a giving.

(4) The *aesthetic* question asks: "Is good taste *relative* to each individual or does it follow *absolute* standards of beauty?" Phenomenology would describe the first person experience of aesthetic sensitivity. Levinas holds beauty to be that which gratuitously adorns what is beautiful, but *secretly*. Beauty is "the radiation of a splendour that spreads unbeknownth to the radiating being" (1969, p. 200). The child is beautiful with innocence. Splendour naïvely lacks self-consciousness. The perceiver unselfconsciously and undeliberately receives this "spreading splendour". Unlike perception for utility, where the individual intends meanings to serve a purpose, the perception of beauty is passively given. Beauty is a highly valued but *useless* gift. Its value lies in being

unuseful. Enjoying beauty is a wonderful waste of time. Beauty invades the self despite the self.

(5) The *political* question asks about power and control, about justice based on *equality* or *inequality*, and about the distribution of power for individual and/or the common good. Classical phenomenology rests on the experience of equality. Merleau-Ponty understands the Other as *another me* and therefore equal to me. Heidegger (1927/1996) describes Dasein (the human) as "that being that in its being is concerned about its being". He places the power of freedom to maintain and extend Dasein's being before any concern for others. Against both, Levinas describes how the goodness and weakness of the other calls the self to be awakened by the rights of the Other to weaken its own self-interest, and to serve the Other's good.

Most people base political justice on *equality*. Levinas (1985) describes *political equality* founded on a more fundamental *inequality*: the Other has rights over me. I am responsible to serve without the right to demand reciprocity. The self has rights, but these rights are not primary; they are founded on the self's unequal obligation. Individual rights come from being a citizen of a community of more than oneself and another. With just two, the Other comes first. To be present and "to hear his destitution ... is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligation More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond ... to find the resources" (1969, p. 215). With three or more, the self becomes another for more than one other and therefore takes on the role of citizen with rights (1969, pp. 212-214).

(6) The *religious* question usually asks about our relation to a supreme power. It asks about the experience of *independence* and *dependence* on a being greater than oneself. For Levinas, *religion* is not primarily an individual's allegiance to God. He writes: "We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same (self) and the other without constituting a totality" (1961, p. 40), that is, without being forced by another to join and serve it. Responsibility is a religious event establishing the bond of the self to those to whom the self is already bound. Religion means to *rebind*. The word *religion* comes from *re* (again and again) + *ligari* (to bind). The self is not asked to abandon individuality and join a totality, but to re-establish its own identity as the *one here* in this place and *now* at this time before this other who is here and now and to whom the self has responsibility. The self cannot escape its own skin in this place and at this time. He ought not to give in to the seduction of a totality. As an individual, the self has the choice to rebind to God or deny any

dependence. Levinas says, “It is certainly a glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which without having been *causa sui* [its own cause], has an independent view and word and is at home with itself” (1961, pp. 38-39). Ties to tribe, ancestors, descendents, contemporaries near and far, to the widow, orphan, stranger, even to a hidden God, cannot be broken. The self can renounce allegiances but cannot unbind them. This understanding of religion points out that a choice is not only capable of atheism, but also to re-bind these unbreakable bonds. The study of psychology could be the study of how we bind ourselves to others and/or sever these patterned bonds of responding to responsibility.

An Even More Conservative Foundation for Psychology

Psychology could be defined as “the study of breathing”. The word “breath” came from the Greek *psýchein* = to breathe, blow. *Psyche* as *spirit* came from the Latin *spirare* = to breathe. Perhaps *psyche* as breath came from listening for the breathing of another testing if the soul (spirit) was present in an unconscious person. Through history, *psyche* came to mean *life, spirit, soul*, and then *mind*. Equating *psyche* with *mind* – as came about only in 1910 – separates it from body. *Psyche* is the incarnate spirit. A return of *psyche* to *breath* as *spirare* of *respiration* roots it back to the depth of our responsibility for each other. Our ancestors, parents, teachers, friends, our models, breathed (blew, inspired) good and bad habits into us, and in turn we breathe influence back to others. Like the *in* and *out* of respiration, we breath *in* and *out* “helpful” and “hurtful” meanings. Those habits of expressed meanings are what psychologists should be interested in.

Phenomenology Conserves

Having done our homework, the rest of the paper will follow an itinerary. When I teach graduate and undergraduate psychology, I use the phenomenological approach, especially Levinas’s depth, as the most conservative. Phenomenology (1) resurrects the *psyche* and its experienced *meaning* back into the lexicon of psychology. (I’m always amazed at the absence of the words, *psyche* and *meaning*, in standard introductory texts, cf. Tavis & Wade, 2001, and Feldman, 2009); (2) rescues *lived behaviour* from the reductions of Behaviourism (I would like to define psychology without irony as “the study of the expressed (expired and inspired) meanings of behaviour”); (3) exposes the myth of *objectivity* and honours the vernacular rich with *words* as the language to express the *meanings* of the *psyche*, *lived behaviour*, *subjectivity*, *objectivity*; (4) reaffirms *freedom* and its origin in *responsibility* and re-establishes both at the centre of the *psyche*.

(1) Phenomenology resurrects *psyche* and *meaning*. It understands psychology to be the study of the *structures* (patterns, styles, habits) of the *meanings* of experience and the *psyche*’s behaviour. It is interested in what *sense* experience and behaviour make, what *matters*, what purpose supports them. Meanings, whether explicitly reflected upon or lived as pre-reflectively embodied behaviour, are what both lay and professional psychologists are interested in. We want to know *what’s what*, and *how* we express *what* we hold to be *what*, more than *why* forces from the environment are defined to be *causes* of nature. Mainstream psychology seeks ways to change behaviours without concern for their lived meaning; phenomenology seeks *meanings* to make clearer choices for changing behaviours. For objectivists to throw out *meaning* to rid psychology of what they construe as “subjectivism”, “opinion”, is to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Although often accused of this, phenomenological psychology is not subjectivist armchair opinion, conjecture, interpretation according to some philosophy. It is the study of the *essence* of concrete lived-out *meanings*. Phenomenologists do not look directly at the “sun”, not directly at *essences*. They look for essential meanings from the ground up as *lived* in both *experience* and *behaviour* and illuminated by the light of reflective consciousness. With their mantra “back to the things themselves”, they look back to what’s concretely lived and expressed in order to collect descriptions of what is *known*, what is *acted out*, what is *felt*. With rigorous reflection on these descriptions of real events of *knowing*, *acting* and *feeling*, they make explicit the implicit essential meaning of *knowledge*, *action* and *feelings*. Phenomenologists look for the *psychological* disclosed in interaction with the stuff of the world. The *psyche* intentionally directs itself to its everyday life-world so as to make sense of it. Phenomenology assumes that the *psyche* is neither inside nor outside, neither exclusively *subjective* nor *objective* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). It is not an object in space, nor is it a *homunculus* spirit pushing the buttons and pulling the levers to move body parts. Phenomenology defines the *psyche* as the embodied *intentional* relationship, the making and finding of meaning in and about its situations.

(2) Phenomenologists rescue behaviour. They are more interested in *lived behaviour* than are mainstream psychologists (Merleau-Ponty, 1963). What is the difference? The mainstream reduces behaviour to effects: it aims to *explain* how prior events, stated as measurable facts, independent of experience, *cause* resulting events, also stated as measurable facts. The phenomenological describes *understanding* – that which is *standing under* – the *meanings* of behaviour. Intentional meanings are

“because”. The mainstream calculates *why* forces determine behavioural events. Phenomenology describes *what* is intended that provide the ground for behaviour. Both observe situated choices. One assumes that choices are determined. The other assumes that choices are meant as intended.

(3) Phenomenology exposes the myth. It is critical of modern psychology for adopting too closely the natural scientific method with its reduction of qualitative meanings to statistics of quantified occurrences, and for thus neglecting the long tradition of reflecting on the “psychological” meanings experienced and expressed (Husserl, 1954; Merleau-Ponty, 1969). Literature, philosophy, theology, all the humanities, have honoured the depth of reflection on experience and the clarity and richness of its qualitative descriptions. The natural science approach to psychology could be called “liberal”, as in “modern”, but certainly not “progressive”. While modern psychology has accumulated mountains of data and explanations of behaviour, its “reductionist”, “objectivist” and “determinist” ontology is a devolution rather than an evolution.

(4) Phenomenology has reaffirmed *freedom* in the psyche. Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and various other Continental philosophers have described freedom as the essential characteristic of the human. Merleau-Ponty, as their representative – at least for me – articulates situated freedom (1962, 1964, 1969). Levinas not only ties freedom to responsibility, but also gives responsibility priority over freedom (1969, 1981, 1985). While mainstream psychology *reduces*, phenomenology *conserves*.

Mostly Merleau-Ponty

Phenomenology’s distinctive contribution is the notion of *intentionality*. It shows how the psyche directs itself out to the world to find and make meaning. The ways in which meaning is constituted comprise the subject matter of psychology. The word “intentionality” comes from the Latin *intendere* = to stretch toward. Edmund Husserl – as Father of Phenomenology – inspired many philosophers and psychologists to attend to this distinctive relationship between the *psyche* and its *conditions*. The psyche intends (directs) itself toward things, toward its own self, toward others, and toward lived time, and makes these contents meaningful. This use of the word “intention” means more than our ordinary sense of the “purposive”. To intend is to reach out transcendentally to the world to find and make it meaningful.

The psyche intends (directs itself) out to the world, and the world offers itself to be known, acted upon, and cared about. *Psyche* ↔ *meaning* ↔ *world*. Meaning arises in this “always already” intentional

meaning/making/finding relationship. *Consciousness* – whether pre-reflective or reflective, deliberate or undeliberate – “is always consciousness of something other than consciousness itself” (Husserl, 1931). Consciousness is the way of transcending the situation without leaving it, making it meaningful without disengaging from it.

Here are some necessary redefined terms. Psyche are subjects, but too loosely called *subjective* (too distanced from *objects*), which, in turn, are too loosely called *objective* (too reduced to an existence independent of human knowing, acting and feeling). Merleau-Ponty describes a kind of “subjectivity” of the world as he offers a kind of “objectivity” of the psyche (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). He cuts below the subject-object split. *Subjects* are not simply knowers (choosers, movers and sufferers); *objects* are not simply the known. Objects offer themselves as meaningful. Any separation between a knowing “psyche” and the “things” about which the psyche intends retards psychology’s effort to describe the psychological as “lived”. Humans are subjects, but subjects who are also *subjected to* being known, being acted upon, and suffer being *objects* without being reduced to being pure materiality determined by natural laws. It is precisely because humans are *known objects*, pushed around and suffer, that they can be *knowing subjects*. They paradoxically know themselves to be *objects* that are *subjects*. This intertwining of the psyche as *subject-object* Merleau-Ponty called the “chiasm” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). They are “object-subjects”, “embodied-subjects”, “incarnate-psyche”, paradoxically both “immanent” and “transcendent”. He raised the objectivity of the body up and brought the subjectivity of the psyche down into materiality. He raised objects up to being *lived*, and brought subjects down to being *incarnate*.

That’s what gives psychology its distinctive vision and mission, what makes it so fascinating and frustrating. It asks what the paradoxical conditions of this hybrid *body-subject* psyche might be. *What* (who) is this that is the place or arena where the psychological meaning of stuff is presented, and *who* is also a player on this arena presenting these meanings to itself and to others? What is this psyche that acts as both the finder and the maker of meaning and at the same time is the place where this happens?

Merleau-Ponty used the term “flesh” (1968) to expose our concreteness and carnal “groping”: seeking, failing, finding, grasping, missing, intertwining, ingesting, enjoying, pleasuring, hurting, wallowing in the stuff of the world, and paradoxically sabotaging ourselves. As *subject-objects* we make and find meanings about objects, about ourselves, about other subjects and temporality while we are engrossed, immersed, flailing around in all of these. Our physical

skin, receptors, muscle, bone, nerve, tissue are of the stuff of the world and also our very means to know, act and feel our worldly condition. We can get some psychological distance to *re-present* to ourselves the objects which we are and upon which we depend, our own embodied flesh, others who “breathe” into us our own psyches, and the temporality even in the midst of each moment being interrupted and the next being inaugurated. The time-watcher is the adjuster of time; the beginner is the one interrupted. The seer is the seen. The toucher is the touched; we know as we are known. As *subject-objects* we are “trapped” *here* in skin as en-skinned to transcend through consciousness out *there* beyond our skin to the places and times of the known.

This description of the psyche as *subject-object* relating to its *objective-subjective* world shows why describing it is neither easy nor clear, and yet why psychologists must remain faithful to the psychological as relational, especially interpersonal. This is not easy. We try to get some distance to observe our own subjective-objective experience of the world and our behaviour, but we get in the way of our own observing. We can't see our own back, nor fully reflect on our experience and behaviour; we are always an embodied impediment to pure reflection. This is a problem: we can't fully know ourselves. It is bothersome that sometimes we know ourselves less than our neighbour knows us. She has a distanced point of view back toward us, while our point of view is directed out to the world and not attending to what our own behaviour expresses.

What is even more problematic than the impossibility of full self-reflection is that the self understands the expressed meanings of its neighbour as an invitation to know her, but without her full disclosure of who she is. What a mystery she is! Both of us get in the way of clear understanding of each other. The project of psychology to achieve a comprehensive and certain understanding is impossible, not because of the inadequacy of the psychologists and their science, but by the very ambiguous mystery of the psyche itself. Merleau-Ponty gives us this frustrating yet enlightening glimpse of our own embodied psyches and those of others.

Mostly Levinas

Seven of Levinas's distinctions will be described in order to show his contribution to a deeper understanding of the psyche and our critique of psychology.

These distinctions are: *totality* versus *infinity*; *need* versus *desire*; *activity* versus *radical passivity*; *self-directed freedom* versus *invested freedom*; *social equality* versus *ethical inequality*; the *said* versus

saying; and the *there is* versus the *face*.

(1) *Infinity* is distinguished from, and has priority over, *totality* (Levinas, 1969). To totalize is to understand something by reducing it to a use object and/or to enjoyment. The self totalizes her shoes and a hammer as *nothing more than ...* her means to do. She may try to reduce another person to *nothing more than ...* someone for herself. But the Other resists and presents himself as *always more than ...* any labelled something. His existence as *always more than ...* is the one who invites and introduces *infinity* to the self. The self can never really reduce him. When the self tries to reduce him, she paradoxically reduces herself by narrowing her experience. He remains infinitely other.

(2) *Desire* has priority over *need* (1961, pp. 33-34). A *need* is a lack in the *self* that can be satiated when filled. *Desire*, however, is the experience of the self “transcended” above its needs toward the Other for the sake of the Other. *Desire* is insatiable, not because it is too great a lack, but because it deepens *desire*¹. Mainstream psychology tends to reduce *desire* to a *need*. For it, desire (love) is just another need. It assumes that the self is the centre of the self and that others, like other objects, are there to feed it. But the Other deposes the self from her own centre and commands the self to want the good for the other for the sake of the other, often sacrificing her own good. *Desire* is not only the distinguishing characteristic of being human; it is the foundation for all that is psychological. “The psyche in the soul is the Other in me” (1981, p. 69). This is a most extraordinary sentence.

(3) *Radical passivity* is prior to *activity* (Levinas, 1981). We *actively* initiate thoughts, actions and feelings. But first we are *passive* to what is other than self: the resistance and force of materiality, the limits of our own body, the rules and regulations of society, the incessant onslaught of time, and the interruptions from others. We are radically passive to the revelation of the Other as infinitely Other and to our responsibility for the Other. We do not initiate responsibility. It is given before any choices.

(4) *Invested freedom* is prior to *self-initiated freedom*. Freedom, when understood as “doing whatever one wants”, is capriciousness. But capriciousness (self initiated and self-directed freedom) is founded on a more fundamental freedom: the freedom invested in us by others. It is to be used for good. It is a gift “lent” or “allowed” by the Other, not to violate, but for the good of, the Other. Self-initiated and self-

¹ While he means “love”, Levinas reserves that hallowed name for the specific relation between intimate lovers (1969, pp. 254 ff).

directed freedom allows us to be spontaneous and enjoy life. Levinas proclaims that “Life is the love of life” (1961, p. 112). We live from good soup, good music, good conversation. However, when our freedom, invested in us by and for others, violates others, when it serves one’s own ego at a cost to another, then this freedom is universally seen as unethical.

(5) *Ethical inequality* is distinguished from, and is prior to, *social equality*. Democratic *equality* is too often considered our highest value. We discussed earlier the assumptions of political life where our precious equality presupposes an *ethical inequality* where “*the Other has rights over me*” (1969, p. 98).

(6) *Saying* has priority over *the said* (1969). The *said* is information passed between interlocutors. Foundational to any exchange of signified meaning, the presence of the Other *says* “Here I am.” The Other’s face *says* this “first word”, declaring her unavoidable presence with independent dignity. As her *saying* is fundamental to any *said*, so my presence *says* in return, “Here I am. I am here as witness to your presence.” The Other is revealed to me. Her existence as worthy cannot be denied. *Saying* is the breaking through of the *Face*, the revelation of the Other. Levinas says, “The face speaks” (1969, p. 66).

(7) The *face* is distinguished from the *there is...* The *there is...* is the experience of existence without content. Levinas suggests it is introduced perhaps to the child told to sleep in a dark room. It is experienced in the extreme by the prisoner in solitary, by the isolated psychotic, by the paralyzed confined in his body. All of us at times suffer the deep loneliness of the *there is...* . It is the impersonal *given* without any meaning. It is undeniable *existence*, but no-thing offers itself. It is haunting rustling *there* without any meaning from another. It is horror and panic. While Levinas describes it as neither nothingness nor being, he states that it is “...the phenomenon of being: ‘it’” (1985, p. 48). The *face* thankfully announces another whose radical otherness is “imposed” and thereby “deposes” the sovereign isolated ego haunted by the lonely rumbling of the *there is...* . The *face* shines a light into the empty *there is...* . It frees the self from isolation so that it can responsibly respond. The uprightness of the *face*, its exposure without defence, calls the self out of its self-imposed night without the light of signification. The *face* breaks through. It signifies itself without context. It provides its own context; it is meaning by itself. Its meaning *says*: “Here I am. Thou shalt not harm.” This announcement is a commandant whose authority comes from the Other’s worthiness and destituteness. It does not come from the Other’s personal, social or physical strength, but from her ethical goodness (Levinas, 1985).

Mostly the General Intent of the Phenomenological Method

Phenomenology takes its starting point from the description of this frustratingly unified and ambiguous *subject-object* situated in its *subjective-objective* milieu. It searches for those perceptually-behaviourally lived-out facts before they are reflectively known to be “facts”. It listens to the descriptions of experi-action to understand *what* they express.

In my classes, we discuss the characteristics of the scientific method and ask about their applicability in the context of a human science. Our review of the perennial philosophical questions, the descriptions from Merleau-Ponty of the body-subject and the distinctions of Levinas give us a legacy to stand on. Now we attend closely to psychology as a science.

Amedeo Giorgi (1970) outlines the characteristics of the methods of science. “In essence, the approach of psychology conceived as a natural science is characterized as being *empirical, positivistic, reductionist, genetic, deterministic, predictive*, and posits the idea of the *independent observer*” (pp. 61-62). He identifies the problems of each of these characteristics when adopted for a science of the human, and offers a phenomenological adjustment. We review in class five characteristics: *empirical, objective, reductionist, determinist, and neutral with respect to values*. Natural science psychology claims that the adoption of methods of control, manipulation and measurement of variable changes is what makes psychology a science and not a pseudoscience. Giorgi, one of the founders of human science psychology, argues that the unexamined adoption of these methods carries philosophical presuppositions that violate the human. We take each in turn and turn it on its head and claim for each a better fit for phenomenological psychology.

(1) Science is *empirical*. Phenomenology can legitimately claim to be more *empirical* than mainstream natural science psychology. For the mainstream psychologist, *empirical* implies “relying on or derived from observation, experimentation, or measurement” (Tavris & Wade, 2001, p. 552). Experimentation under controlled laboratory conditions is generally considered the most reliable method. However, experimental control disallows the *meaning* of the phenomenon to be expressed independent of predetermined experimenter-defined conditions. Positing a hypotheses (a kind of predicting), controlling variables (disallowing the disclosure of the lived influence of meaningful conditions), manipulating independent variables (selecting and changing the “causes” of the identified behaviours rather than allowing experience to have its

say), observing changes in the dependent variable (so-called, being “dependent” on the “independently” manipulated variation), and translating from the vernacular language of qualitative meanings into quantities – all these tasks supposedly move the “empirical” psychologist further from the psychological to guard against his own subjective bias and assure objectivity. Each of these *empirical* tasks, however, is not only loaded with assumptions about the nature of the human, but also inserts the subjectivity to turn the results toward coming more from the researcher’s than from the participant’s psyche.

Phenomenological psychology, in contrast, allows the phenomenon to show itself, observes it through the expressions of participants, and describes it in meaningful language. Its openness to what is given thus makes it more *empirical* than natural science psychology’s openness to the heavy-handed intrusion of the “scientist’s” subjectivity.

Levinas would extend the phenomenological definition of *empirical* by recognizing that the Other is the source of her revelation of distinctive meanings and her value independent of the prejudgments of the observer. His phenomenological *epoché* consists in: awakening the observer by the Other’s face and restraining the observer’s prejudgments, not by artificial prophylactics against subjectivism originating from the observer’s choice, but from the Other’s ethical command to not do violence, to not impose significations, to not reduce the Other’s phenomenon to an objective event and turn it into quantitative language. This *epoché* originating from the Other would be more *empirical* than the natural scientific mode of experimental control.

(2) Science is *objective*. If we describe *objective* as implying that which is given “uncontaminated by the subjective judgments of the knower”, then phenomenology can claim that it is more *objective* than mainstream psychology. Mainstreamers define the term *objective* as “reality existing independently of subjectivity”. This “objectivism” assumes that reality exists already independent, with natural properties, and structured within classes and subclasses. These natural properties distinguish members from those of other classes. Science is basically clear-lens taxonomy. Scientists observe specific members in the general classes and describe their *objective* properties.

Phenomenological psychology regards objectivity as “respect for the phenomenon” as the “given reality without alterations by the subjective choices of scientists to constrain and manipulate”. We discussed how Levinas insists that a piece of reality is only fully objective when it is detached from the observer by the

ethical command to responsibly *give* it to the Other. Levinas’s descriptions are *more objective* by respecting the most real of all reality: the Other as other. Paradoxically, we find that the most *objective* (most real, most independent, and most undistortable) is the Other *subject* (the source of the psychological). Nothing is more real than the facing face of the Other.

(3) Science is *reductionist*. If *reduction* is understood as getting down to the most basic phenomenon and allowing it to show itself, stripped of theories and those methods recycled from the hard sciences, then phenomenology can claim that it is more *reductionist* than mainstream psychology, which defines *reduction* as breaking down the phenomenon to its smallest parts and using the simplest explanation. The law of parsimony demands an economy of assumptions in logical formulations. Explaining laws of cause and effect seems simpler than describing intentional meanings. An explanation of “why” seems simpler than a careful description of “what” meaning shows itself. But, as Sherlock Holmes told us, when it comes to the matter of human motives “...one should be encouraged to seek a complex understanding when a simpler one is at hand” (2002, p. 613). Experienced meanings are not more complex, but they are more ambiguous and paradoxical. That is because the human is ambiguously free and conditioned, unique and common, immanent and transcendent.

The phenomenological *reduction* (the *epoché*, as phenomenologists call it) brackets explanations in order to get to the meaning of the phenomenon, always based on evidence. Not the best analogy, but it’s like reducing carrots on low heat to boil off the moisture and impurities in order to get to the essence of carrot.

Levinas turns the relationship around like a Copernican Revolution, moving the Other to the centre of the self rather than setting the self at its own centre. The observer is the one reduced by the face of the Other, rather than the observed being reduced by the observer’s research activity and explanation. Not only are the theories, methods and explanations of the observer reduced, but the ethical place of the observer is to be an unequal servant. The phenomenological observer is assigned to watch for and *reduce* what gets in the way of the observed so that he can reveal himself.

(4) Science is *determinist*. If we describe being determined as what provides the ground for choices, then phenomenology can claim to be more determinist than mainstream psychology. Mainstream psychology defines *determined* as “caused by energy from outside on psychological events inside”. The events of the psyche are regarded as caused by some independent power.

Phenomenological psychology describes the psyche as influenced not by outside *causes* but by its own *intentional meanings*. Human events as human are based on “because” rather than on “causes”. Causes are forces in nature; “because” are intentional meanings founding human events. Motives are not causes. They are the meanings that provide the ground for choice, while choice imposes itself on those meanings. There is a dialectical relation between freedom and nature, between the voluntary and involuntary, between choice and motives, creativity and norms, consent and given conditions. There are physical forces on the psyche, but the psyche resists, consents, and/or takes a stand toward them, thus making them psychological forces.

For Levinas, the ethical “force” of responsibility is psychologically stronger than both natural causes and the personal intentions of a subject. Of course, humans can be pushed around by physical forces, and can choose based on their own intentions. And of course humans can choose to not respond to the ethical imperative and instead act toward filling their own needs. The imperative of responsibility is not physically stronger. It is not a cause, but its ethical strength is *more fundamental* than psychological motives. Those conditions wanted by the person provide the basis for choice, but those conditions must be chosen to be the basis, otherwise they are just wished for.

(5) Science is *neutral*. Mainstream psychology claims that it remains *neutral with respect to values* by constructing rigorous systems to detach the value processes of the observer from the observed. The empirical methods of mainstream psychology, however, contaminate the psychological with pseudo values of “objectivity”, “determining causes” and “reductionist” explanations.

Phenomenological psychology defines *neutrality* in terms of its demand that the observer become aware of and bracket her/his values. It does not claim that its scientific method guarantees neutrality with apodictic certainty, but rather that the possibility of neutrality is reliant on the observer’s trying to become aware of the values influencing observation and to hold them neutral.

Levinas would define *neutrality* of values as based on the unalterable value of the goodness of the Other about which no-one can be neutral. The Other’s otherness and worth comes not from the judgment of the observer, nor even from the judgment of the observed. The dignity and value of the Other belongs to her as another person. Her infinite closeness (always already commanding responsibility) and infinite distance (always already incomprehensible) commands *neutrality*.

Content

Because of their differences in approach and methods, mainstream psychology and phenomenological psychology often attend to different “psychological” phenomena. However, the same phenomena can be approached differently by mainstream psychology and phenomenological psychology respectively. Describing how each would do their “thing” on phenomena is another project.

What would be the distinctive content of a psychology for the Other? Levinas would urge psychology to describe the paradoxical (paradox = beyond expectation, from para = *beyond* + dox = *belief* or *opinion*). Stories are interesting because they give the structure of how the expected gets tangled up in conflict and pain, and show how difficult lives try to get untangled, with success and failure. We are interested in psychological anomalies, conflicts, “deviations” from the expected, and look for the *paradoxes* of power and weakness, freedom and responsibility.

To grasp “deviations”, in my classes we describe what’s expected. We discuss how culture tends to adopt the value of self-interested power. We are seduced by the truism, without the paradoxical, that *power is powerful*; the self uses power to gain power by making good choices. The self is *motivated* to learn habits of thinking, acting and feeling in ways conducive to furthering its own benefit. At the *cognitive* level, power is *intelligence*: perceptive and rational for *understanding*. At the *behavioural* level, power is the *exertion of effort*: motivated and courageous for *success*. At the *affective* level, power is *fulfilled needs*: comfort and satisfaction for *happiness*.

The corresponding thesis states that *weakness* can only be understood as *weak*, beyond accidents and acts of nature. The self is responsible for its weakness and becomes weaker by making bad judgments and choices toward dispositions that restrict its own good. At the *cognitive* level, weakness is *ignorance*: insensitive and irrational. The weak self is *naïve* and *foolish*. At the behavioural level, weakness is *not exerting effort*: lazy and cowardly. The weak self risks *failure*. At the *affective* level, weakness is being *unfulfilled*: unsatisfied and discontent. The weak self *suffers*.

These styles of power and weakness point to an *ontology* founded on the premise that *Being* only strives to perpetuate itself and retain its “place under the sun”. *Being* (a noun) is always *be-ing* (a verb). Being *be’s*, if you will. Being’s nature is to continue be-ing. Plants crowd out others, animals eat plants and animals, the earth pushes and restrains. The laws

of nature are determined to determine. But humans, seeking to be human, unlike nature, find that their own power can easily sabotage themselves: this is the paradox of the *weakness of power*. Its thesis is that, paradoxically, power, by its own power, can be the source of its own weakness. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton, 1887/1948, p 364).

At the cognitive level, *intelligence* can become not only *arrogant* but *narrow*. Self-righteous knowing deceives itself with *obsessive* attention to its own perspective. This ancient psychology of tragedy is found throughout recorded history and literature. Original psychology was mythology. For the Greeks, Gyges was the prototype for the complex of the *unseen seer*. This *Gyges complex* is the seduction and illusion of *comprehension* – the psyche is convinced it knows all it needs – and being *certain* – convinced its knowledge is unquestionable. Convinced not only of its comprehension and certainty, the psyche believes it can hide itself from others. It can deceive others: "I know them, but they don't know me. I see through their deceits and can hide mine." But these convictions reduce the possibility of knowing others as they present themselves. Narrow and self-convinced knowing restricts knowing others, because they are always beyond the self's knowledge. The Gyges complex's deceptions are only self-deceptive and fool few.

At the behavioural level, *exerting effort* can become *manipulative*. Self-serving control defeats itself with its assertions of *compulsive* power. The prototype, the *Zeus complex* (assuming privilege), is the seduction and illusion of being in *control*: "I choose only for me." But compulsive control only turns others away and finds "the innate cussedness of inanimate objects" sabotaging the efforts of the Zeus complex, just as other gods and mortals found ways to sneak by Zeus's control.

At the affective level, *fulfilling needs* can become *greedy*. Self-indulgence can turn into self-corrosive *addictions*. The prototype, the *Narcissus complex* (self-worship) is the seduction and illusion of *consumption* to "feel good". But the greedy self-indulger only sabotages his own enjoyment. The mythical Narcissus wasted away staring at his own beautiful face. Addictions waste away the addicted.

These paradoxes are not in the repertoire of nature. Only humans self-sabotage. And only humans can be redeemed by abandoning their obsessions toward certainty, compulsions to win, and addictions to indulgence.

The paradoxical comprises irrational, illogical and unnatural deviations from the normal. The truly

psychological is the *paradox of the power of weakness*: weakness can be the source of power. The weakness of Others calls the self to give up self-deceptive obsessions, self destructive compulsions, and self-corroding addictions, to set aside its own self-interest and attend to others. This self-weakening of self-directed power paradoxically gives the self an authentic power.

At the cognitive level, the weakness of others calls into question *arrogantly narrow comprehension* and *certainty* and commands *attention* to listen to and be touched by the needs of others. This radical *self-scepticism* about one's knowledge of others is the gift of *simplicity* (from *simplicis* = without addition). To be simple is not to be stupid, but to be radically *open* for authentic *understanding*. To know the subject in research or the client in therapy the psychologist *must know by not knowing*. She must be radically open to the revelation from the Other by not imposing her knowledge on him in a way that filters revelation.

At the behavioural level, the weakness of the other questions *manipulation* and commands *obedience*, service to the real needs of others. This radical *self-substitution* to serve is the gift of *humility*. Humility is behaviour in the service of others. To act for the Other, the psyche *must act by not acting*. She must be radically committed to the good of the other with disinterested interest that does not manipulate his behaviour to fit whatever predetermined good she may have planned.

At the affective level, the weakness of others shames self-indulgence and inspires *compassion*: suffering with others for the sake of their good, and not for self-satisfaction. This radical *self-sacrifice* of enjoyment and suffering the Other is the gift of *patience*. To be *patient* means to suffer the Other for the good of the Other. To affectively feel compassion for the Other, the psychologist *must suffer the Other by not suffering her/his suffering*. The Other's suffering is unique to him or her. The psyche ought not to violate the Other's suffering by claiming to feel the Other's pain. We suffer because the Other who does not deserve to suffer suffers. We suffer that we cannot suffer her/his suffering. It is painful to be in the presence of another suffering, and we suffer the impotence of not being able to remove his or her suffering and take that suffering on to the self.

It is legitimate to demand that psychology be a moral science, just as medicine is the moral science of biology and chemistry. As such, psychology ought not be moralistic, but observe and describe the desired and expected experiences and behaviours of the human condition, the difficulties with human needs, the ways to heal ourselves and each other, and the paradoxical ways these difficulties and healing show

up. In my courses, we describe each of the topics of general psychology from this phenomenological approach, from Levinas's ethical philosophy, and therefore from this way of seeing psychology as a moral science.

The *psyche* and its *meanings* have been neglected because they do not fit well into the approach and method modelled after the natural sciences. This phenomenological approach is a way to return them to psychology.

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About the Author



George Kunz is currently Professor Emeritus in the Psychology Department at Seattle University where he has taught since 1971. He obtained his PhD from Duquesne University in 1975 with a dissertation on *Perceived Behaviour as a Subject-Matter for a Phenomenological Based Psychology*. With Steen Halling, he founded the MAP programme in Existential-Phenomenological Therapeutic Psychology in 1981. He also founded and directed nine annual seminars on the Psychology for the Other, a modest conference of international psychologists discussing the importance of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas for understanding pathology and therapy.

In addition to several articles, keynote addresses and conference papers mostly on that topic, his publications include *The Paradox of Power and Weakness: Levinas and an Alternative Paradigm for Psychology* (SUNY Press, 1998). He also served as co-editor with Del Loewenthal for the special March-June 2005 edition of the *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Health*, having as its focus "Levinas and the Other in psychotherapy and counselling", and hosted the *North American Levinas Society* conference in 2008. Prof Kunz's academic career further includes guest lectureships at the University of Pretoria in 1998, Trinity Western University in 2002, the University of Wisconsin Parkside in 2004, Duquesne University in 2004, and Vaxjo University in 2007.

E-mail Address: gkunz@seattleu.edu

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