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Connecting the Theoretical, the Personal, and the Ethical in Psychology: George Kelly and Emmanuel Levinas

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George Kelly's personal construct psychology has proven popular among many psychologists because of the unique way in which it blends both elements of a postmodern, constructivist philosophy with elements of a modernist, scientific philosophy. However, Kelly's theory offers little in the way of substantive guidance for how we might understand moral judgment, moral action, and responsibility. That is, although Kelly's theory seems to escape the dangers of epistemological relativism, it still engenders the potential for moral relativism because it fails to provide adequate tools for addressing genuinely ethical questions. We argue that the ethical phenomenology of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas provides a compelling account of how ethical responsibility can be found in the raw datum of lived-experience, rather than in the processes of mental construction, and in so doing provides a way for psychologists to more fruitfully address ethical questions from the perspective of Kelly's personal construct theory.

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George Kelly's personal construct psychology has been a theoretical and practical perspective of keen interest to personality researchers and clinicians because of the unique way in which it brings together key elements of both a modernist,

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scientific psychology and a postmodern, constructivist philosophy (see, e.g., Benjafield, 2008; Butt, 2008; Epting and Paris, 2006; Eustace and Bruni, 2006; Raskin, 2001; Winter, 2012). Without discarding the reality of an external world against which we must test our ideas, Kelly also embraces the notion that in fundamental ways we "construct" the reality we experience. Indeed, Paris and Epting (2014) suggest that Kelly was "something of a postmodernist," though they admit that Kelly himself "would probably object to this idea" (p. 187). Elsewhere, however, these same authors argued that in key respects Kelly's work "anticipated postmodernism with his conception of the self" and thereby perhaps "provides a bridge to more recent postmodern conceptions" of the nature of self and the world (Epting and Paris, 2006, pp. 31 and 32). According to Kelly (1963), the world presents itself to us in its raw form as an "undifferentiated homogeneity" (p. 9) — what William James (1890) famously called "one great blooming, buzzing confusion" (p. 488) — which we actively and creatively construe in a variety of ways. "We take the stand," Kelly (1963) explains, "that there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world. . . . We call this philosophical position constructive alternativism" (p. 15). He argued that "man looks at his world through transparent patterns or templates which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed" (p. 9). In short, the world as we experience it is the product of those mental constructions that we actively create for the purposes of bringing order and giving meaning to our experiences. Such thinking would seem to position Kelly as an ally of a postmodern theoretical paradigm.

At the same time, however, Kelly also positions his psychology of personal constructs squarely within a broadly modernist, or mathematical and scientific, paradigm (Kelly, 1963; see also Benjafield, 2008). For example, he argues that although we can conjure a variety of different ways of construing the world to order and make sense of it, we regularly make predictions based upon our constructs and test our predictions against our lived-experience. Through this system of forming "hypotheses" (constructs) and testing those hypotheses by prediction, we can — in a series of successive approximations — hone our constructs to match the reality of the external world around us. Thus, Kelly formulates his theory of personality and motivation in a way that sees people as being scientists in nature. Indeed, one of his central premises is that psychologists should investigate their subjects as though such subjects were scientists akin to the researchers themselves. "Let us," he said, "instead of occupying ourselves with *man-the-biological-organism* . . . have a look at *man-the-scientist*" (1963, p. 4). Thus, "like the reformists who insisted that every man is his own priest," Kelly proposed that "every man is, in his own particular way, a scientist" (1963, p. 5).

Kelly seems to dance in this tension between the modern and the postmodern very well — and in doing so, manages to befriend both those who see reality as deeply, inescapably interpretive in nature because it is fundamentally socially

constructed and those who understand reality as existing independent of our understandings of it and waiting to be uncovered through careful, objective rational inquiry, experimentation, and observation. As such, Kelly's ideas are appealing to both modernists searching for absolute truth and postmodernists who believe that the world we experience is our own creation (see, e.g., Butt, 2000; Stojnov, 1996). However, in all of Kelly's flirtations with these two disparate philosophical paradigms, there are important questions — incredibly relevant to lived human experience — that remain insufficiently addressed in his work. For example, from Kelly's perspective, how does one discern the difference between morally right or wrong action? How might one establish ethical responsibility towards or for other human beings? What is the nature of moral reality? Neither the postmodern constructivism nor the scientific modernism upon which Kelly's theory draws provides much in the way of a solid footing for moral judgment and ethical obligation (see, e.g., Gantt, 2001; Gantt and Williams, 2022; Martin and Sugarman, 2000; Williams and Gantt, 2012). In other words, although Kelly's psychology of personal constructs seems to solidly escape relativism in general (for reasons we will address later in this paper), it may nonetheless still engender the potential for *moral* relativism — or, at the very least, fail to provide us with the tools necessary to address genuinely ethical questions in a meaningful manner. In this article, we argue that the ethical phenomenology of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas offers a compelling account of how ethical responsibility can be found in the raw datum of lived-experience, rather than psychological construction, and in so doing provides a way for psychologists to address ethical questions more substantively while still retaining the broad outlines of Kelly's personal construct theory perspective.

Kelly and Relativism

Kelly aptly avoids general relativism in his theory because, unlike theorists who would argue that objective reality is either (a) fundamentally inaccessible to the human mind, or (b) solely a contingent construction of the human mind, he argues that our mental constructs are always actively being tested against an objective reality. As Butt (2008) and others have noted (see, e.g., McWilliams, 2009; Stevens, 1998), there is a strong strain of Jamesian pragmatism running through Kelly's thinking. Thus, although none of us have *direct* or *immediate* access to any external or objective reality, Kelly argues that reality is nonetheless still there acting as a constant check on our ideas and constructions. For Kelly, the stubborn facts of reality act as a foil against psychologically healthy individuals becoming *too* creative and farfetched in their interpretations of the world. We are, in other words, always constrained by an independent reality which, although in many instances is quite pliable and elastic, and, thus, is amenable to a variety of viable interpretations and constructions, nonetheless resists the excesses of an

unbounded construction and reconstruction of meaning or understanding. Kelly (1963) clearly states:

> We presume that the universe is really existing and that man is gradually coming to understand it. By taking this position we attempt to make clear from the outset that it is a real world we shall be talking about, not a world composed solely of the flitting shadows of people's thoughts. But we should like, furthermore, to make clear our conviction that people's thoughts also really exist, though the correspondence between what people really think exists and what really does exist is a continually changing one. (p. 6)

Thus, we might say that the world always "gets its day in court," to testify for or against the viability of whatever constructions we may have of it. In this sense, then, Kelly is perhaps best thought of as a minimum realist, rather than a radical constructivist (Stevens, 1998).

Kelly assumes from the outset that the reason an individual adopts one construct system over another is because it allows him to anticipate his experiences and, thereby, exercise some measure of control in his environment. In Kelly's theory, prediction and control are the fundamental reasons for formulating, altering, and amending construct systems. For example, he says:

> Some [ways of construing the world] are undoubtedly better than others. They are better from our human point of view because they support more precise and more accurate predictions about more events. . . . The yardstick to use is the specific predictive efficiency of each alternative construct and the over-all predictive efficiency of the system of which it would, if adopted, become a part. (Kelly, 1963, pp. 14-15)

Thus, constructs are tested against *experience*, and since time is always progressing and new events happening, constructs are inevitably tested against experience in a future that postdates the time they are first formulated. "In short," Kelly (1963) writes, "a construct is tested in terms of its predictive efficiency" (p. 12).

Amongst competing interpretations and construals of human behavior, Kelly (1963) decided to spend his time exploring the perspective of "man-the-scientist" (p. 4). He asked: "What is it that is supposed to characterize the motivation of a scientist? It is customary to say that the scientist's ultimate aim is to predict and control" (p. 5). He further elaborated, "As a scientist, man seeks to predict, and thus control, the course of events. It follows, then, that the constructs which he formulates are intended to aid him in his predictive efforts" (p. 12). In addition, he explained, "Like the prototype of the scientist that he is, man seeks prediction. His structured network of pathways leads toward the future so that he may anticipate it. This is the function it serves. Anticipation is both the push and pull of the psychology of personal constructs" (p. 49). For these reasons, the fundamental postulate

of Kelly's personal construct theory is: "A person's processes are channelized by the way in which he anticipates events" (1963, p. 46). He clarifies that "anticipation is not merely carried on for its own sake; it is carried on so that future reality may be better represented. It is the future which tantalizes man, not the past" (p. 49).

We can use some mental imagery to help illustrate Kelly's vision here. For a moment, imagine a blind man moving through a large room full of furniture. Although the man cannot directly see the room that he is in, nor the furniture that currently populates it, he is still able to make a sort of crude "mental map" of his surroundings that he can use to orient himself and navigate as he moves around the room. As he explores more of the room (perhaps bumping and scraping his shins along the way), this mental map becomes more and more complete and increasingly informative. Imagine further that there are some unseen mechanisms that occasionally change the positions of the furniture (though not randomly, but with a discernable pattern or orderliness) so that the man must occasionally change his mental map of the room as the room itself changes. Slowly, through trial and error (and bumps and scrapes), he may come to discern patterns in these changes until he is eventually able to navigate the room unaided and without surprises. He might even generalize whatever patterns he observes and use them to make predictions about unexplored territory, and when those predictions are disappointed, he revises his expectations accordingly. Although the mental maps of his environment are inventions, creatively fabricated to make sense of his experiences, bruises on his shins help ground his cognitive inventiveness in the stubborn facts of reality.

From Kelly's perspective, this analogy is very much like the world in which we live. Bumping into furniture is similar to experiences of disappointment, as when our anticipations do not quite pan out the way we had expected or hoped. The "mental maps" are like constructs, aiding us in our anticipation of events as we attempt to not only make sense of our world, but also to predict and control events in it. According to Kelly, we evaluate our construct systems by how well they help us anticipate and adapt to the events of our lives. He explains, "Whenever a person is confronted with the opportunity for making a choice, he will tend to make that choice in favor of the alternative which seems to provide the best basis for anticipating ensuing events" (Kelly, 1963, p. 64). Constructs are, thus, good (i.e., useful) only so long as they help us to make adequate predictions of future experience. In other words, as Niklas Luhmann (1985) notes, "One does not want to do without the expectation of a solid, well-trodden ground" (p. 25). Constructs that lead to uncertainty and ambiguity are typically abandoned in favor of those that lead to more reliable predictions. Kelly's "man-as-scientist" is someone who attempts to construe the world in such a way that he can traverse it with increasingly fewer surprises or disappointments.

This is not to suggest that the process by which we navigate the ambiguous contours of daily life and solve the various problems that arise in doing so is an

"all-or-nothing" matter wherein we simply replace one rigid but unhelpful construct with another equally rigid opposite one in some detached, purely cognitive or algorithmic fashion.[1] Rather, Kelly's personal construct theory characterizes the creative, unfolding, and choice-filled activities of daily living in a dynamic, vibrant, and even dialogical way. Accordingly, constructs should not be thought of as abstract rules or "mental sets" that are followed or implemented in some programmatic fashion. To the contrary, construing the world, its behavioral possibilities, emotional valences, and moral meanings, as well as envisioning potential solutions to the various problems we face, is often a complicated matter wherein there is no singular, obviously correct solution or answer available. It is one in which our constructions are inherently vague and variable — at least, that is, until the person has made a choice and settled on a particular course of action or meaning. Reflecting on the dialogical nature of construing the world, Butt (2008) points out, "Constructs are like questions. You could say we 'have' questions, but it is more accurate to say that we ask them" (pp. 74–75). Further, he notes that "any question posed does not stand alone — posing it necessarily involves the asking of other questions" (p. 75). The process of construing the world in ways that permit accurate prediction and effective problem-solving necessarily involves the "loosening and tightening" of one's construction. That is, allowing both the ambiguity that does not lead to clear and defined anticipation and the pinning down that demands precision and facilitates clear, fruitful prediction (Butt, 2008). Indeed, it is this sensitivity to the intrinsic interplay of ambiguity and possibility, on the one hand, and clarity and exactitude, on the other, so characteristic of actual human living, that stands out as one of the more important contributions of Kelly's work for the discipline of psychology — a discipline, as Kelly (1963) frequently noted, all-too-often committed to the abstract, the mechanical, and the bloodless in its attempts to explain human behavior.

Therefore, unlike radically relativistic or purely constructivist paradigms, Kelly's worldview *does* accommodate distinctions between good (i.e., accurate) and bad (i.e., inaccurate) construct systems, and making these distinctions requires fluid interactions with, and comparisons to, an external objective reality. However, what makes Kelly's ideas susceptible to the critique of relativism — both epistemological and moral — is that, in the *proximate* sense, it is difficult to know for certain if our constructs do in fact match up with the external world. The metaphorical "room full of furniture" we are traversing is much larger than we are able to explore in our own lifetimes, and, therefore, we have to (1) make use of the recorded experience bequeathed to us by those who have gone before and

[1] Indeed, Kelly objected strongly to any suggestion that his theory was a cognitive theory, or an example of cognitive psychology. He once remarked, "I have been so puzzled over the early labeling of personal construct theory as 'cognitive' that several years ago I set out to write another short book to make it clear that I wanted no part of cognitive theory" (Kelly, 1969, p. 216).

(2) learn from others as they communicate to us their mental maps of the parts of the room they have explored. Also, given that we may be at different points in the discovery process and have explored different parts of the room, we may have different "mental maps" and, therefore, quite different expectations for the future — as well as different anticipations about what the rest of the room will look like. Thus, it is no surprise that we often debate and argue about "reality" when we differ as to the picture our mental maps provide, and it is no surprise that we might sometimes wonder, based on these wide divergences, whether there really is an objective reality at all. At this stage in the history of the world, Kelly states, "no one has yet proved himself wise enough to propound a universal system of constructs. We can safely assume that it will be a long time before a satisfactorily unified system will be proposed" (1963, p. 10).

However, according to Kelly, in the *ultimate* sense (and possibly only as the product of a collective effort) it is possible to eventually discover the objective, external world in its entirety. Through collective remembrance and collaboration, we will all eventually arrive at the truth of things and be able to navigate the room unaided and confident in our knowledge of it, based solely upon our mental maps of reality and how they work and have changed and adapted over time. Eventually, we may get to the point where there are no surprises, and our construction systems are all homogenous and perfectly predictive of our future experiences. But because this possibility lies far in the future, we presently live in a world where each individual construes the world differently than others, and we must constantly negotiate, communicate, and learn from and with others in an essentially pragmatic, trial-and-error fashion. Although there are always different mental maps that we can currently use (based on different experiences and different interpretations of those experiences), the epistemological and moral promise is that we are slowly, in the aggregate, converging on the truth of the matter. In essence, although constructive alternativism implies that human beings will employ a heterogenous, self-contradictory mess of personal construct systems, such systems could eventually (given enough time) unfold into a single system of constructs with an unlimited range of convenience. "Essentially this means that all of our interpretations of the universe," Kelly (1963) explained, "can gradually be scientifically evaluated if we are persistent and if we keep learning from our mistakes" (p. 15).

Kelly and the Question of Ethical Action

Does Kelly's essentially pragmatic framework of evaluating construct systems provide a sufficient *moral* grounding to constructive alternativism? Does it provide us with a way of evaluating whether our ideological commitments are wise or foolish, or whether our choices — both individually and collectively — are morally good or bad? Does it offer any grounds for justifying our moral judgements and actions in a way that is more stable than mere appeal to current practice,

common consensus, and lessons of historical precedent? We argue that the answer to these questions is ultimately no. Knowing whether my construct system helps me predict events accurately and therefore enables me to pursue my desires says little about *what those desires should be*.

As Charles Taylor (1985, 1989) makes clear, human beings not only experience certain desires but also are capable of evaluating their desires in terms of their worthiness or intrinsic value. That is, human beings are the sorts of creatures who experience some of their desires and aims as being more worthy of pursuing, more properly and meaningfully human in nature, than others. To be human, he argues, is to be capable of engaging in "strong evaluation" insofar as we not only desire certain ends but are able to reach beyond those ends and judge their value in the context of living a fully human and fully moral life (Taylor, 1985; see also Meijer, 2018). Thus, any theoretical description of human nature and personality (such as Kelly's) that seeks to adequately articulate the teleological core of human action, especially moral action and intent, so as to preserve the substance of meaningful distinctions and avoid moral relativism must offer more than just an account of the relationship between predictive efficiency and the achievement of desired outcomes. It must offer some deeper understanding of the intrinsically moral nature of human being and flourishing, an understanding that goes beyond simply establishing the experiential pragmatics of testing and validating certain predictions. Rather, an account must be offered in which the source and nature of the moral worthiness[2] of our various desires and predictive engagements with the world and others is made clear so that the substance of human moral life, as well as a coherent and viable theoretical account of it, can be preserved. Thus, while Kelly's pragmatic approach envisioning the human agent as a sort of scientific experimenter engaging in a continual trial-and-error testing of predictions offers an engagingly descriptive account of how people often navigate the intrinsically dynamic and ambiguous topography of moral life, it leaves important questions about moral life and ethics insufficiently examined.

According to Williams and Gantt (2002), the claim that "that individual minds possess the capacity to decide significance and assign meaning" (p. 13) implies that "human events . . . have some pristine and neutral existence while waiting for meaning to be assigned to them" (p. 13). This can lead even the most careful

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[2] In short, it is not sufficient that we acknowledge the reality of moral life, which is something that many moral relativists are perfectly willing to do (see, e.g., Gergen, 1994, 2005). Rather, so as to not "circumvent the necessity for coming to grips with the problem [of good and evil]" (Kelly, 1969, p. 183), we must also recognize that human life is not "indifferently," or only subjectively or culturally moral, but rather that our moral reality is rooted in transcendent distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, praiseworthy and blameworthy. Indeed, as Taylor (1985) persuasively argues, it is only because moral life is inherently rooted in such distinctions — distinctions that exert a powerful, authoritative demand on us to conform — that we can make strong evaluations (rather than merely weak ones) in the first place.

thinkers to unintentionally adopt "a form of moral and epistemological relativism" (Williams and Gantt, 2002, p. 13). Furthermore, they conclude that "once it is allowed that, at least in some fairly prominent sense, events exist in a morally and meaningfully neutral form, the seeds of moral and epistemological relativism are sown in the fertile soil of modern life and cultures" (p. 13). This is not to say, however, that the position of constructive alternativism inherently and necessarily leads to, or is an endorsement of, moral or epistemological relativism. Rather, Williams and Gantt (2002) are simply highlighting the dangers the position holds for even the most careful scholars.

Kelly's version of constructive alternativism certainly provides the "seeds" that Williams and Gantt warn about — not for epistemological relativism (for reasons described in the previous section), but for moral relativism. For Kelly, while the stubborn facts of reality ground our mental constructions in an external, objectively existing universe, moral judgments and evaluations are entirely the product of mental construction. As Kelly (1970) once remarked, "Events do not tell us what to do, nor do they carry their meanings engraved on their backs for us to discover. For better or for worse we ourselves create the only meanings they will ever convey during our lifetime" (p. 3). While Kelly's theory certainly assumes that people can and do construe events and actions as good or bad, right or wrong (in other words, people can and do construe qualitative differences in the world), Kelly asserts that those meanings are assigned to the world by human actors and are not inherent in experience itself. Under constructive alternativism, there are always different ways of construing the good life and what constitutes morally praiseworthy wants, desires, and behaviors. However, in order for these different constructions of the good life to rise to a level higher than mere personal preference, a means of evaluating them is required. Unfortunately, constructs of the good life are not the kinds of things that are amenable to the sorts of tests or comparisons with objective reality that otherwise guide Kelly's "successive approximations" towards truth.

Although Kelly does make place for the ordinal nature of constructs, such that "moral constructs like good/evil are frequently located at the most superordinate positions in people's construct systems, what he termed their core structure, regulating subordinate conduct" (Butt, 2000, p. 89), it is also the case that "each person's construct system is forged with anticipation as its purpose, which has nothing to do with morality and is orthogonal to it" (Butt, 2000, p. 90). Thus, while people certainly incorporate "moral constructs into their systems in pivotal superordinate positions, these may be highly idiosyncratic and permeable to every sort of conduct" (Butt, 2000, p. 90). In such a scheme, then, "morality will be the result of the construction of each individual" (Butt, 2000, p. 90). Ultimately, Kelly's position was that "we have no sure way of telling good from evil, but that it is important to try to do so" (Butt, 2000, p. 90). Clearly, some presumption of ethical universalism is at work here, but why exactly it needs to be, or how

precisely we can know that we ought to try to work toward telling good from evil, or why we ought to opt for the good over the evil, is never well explicated. Kelly's pragmatic approach does point psychological attention in an important direction, one all-too-often neglected by the discipline, but ends up needing further development and support in order to achieve a fuller sense of the morally imperative texture of daily human living.

Kelly's method of evaluating construct systems can certainly help us parse out which construct systems will help us better navigate our social worlds and pursue our goals. But in a world where rain falls on both the just and the unjust, the existence of frustration (inability to reach one's goals), pain, and sorrow cannot be used to determine the moral permissibility of one's behavior, unless one assumes a consequentialist ethic and a hedonistic outlook on life (assumptions that, from the perspective of constructive alternativism, are not necessary but could be freely made among competing alternative assumptions). Returning to our previous analogy, while the blind man's scraped shins might reveal important flaws in his cognitive map of his surroundings, they reveal very little about which parts of the room he should visit and what his final destination in the room ought to be. In other words, knowing whether my construct system helps me predict events and therefore pursue my desires provides me with little insight as to *what those desires ought to be*.

As a simple example, a man on his way to work, based on his personal constructs, may be able to successfully predict both the consequences of stopping to help a stranger stranded on the side of the road and potentially arriving late to work, and the consequences of not helping the stranger, simply carrying on his way, and arriving on time to work. However, this knowledge does little to help him determine which course of action would be right or best. In other words, his personal constructs, in spite of their predictive efficiency, do not assist him in weighing his desires — in this case, perhaps the desire to be dependable and punctual against the desire to be altruistic and generous. Neither do his constructs help him evaluate his desires or values individually. That is, unless he adopts a particular ethic as mentioned above, the man is unable to determine whether such values themselves are good — whether he *ought* to be dependable, punctual, altruistic, or generous in the first place.

Again, what we believe to be the "good life" and morally permissible ways of pursuing it are not testable by means of prediction. Therefore, under Kelly's version of constructive alternativism, what constitutes *morally appropriate* action (rather than simply action that advances us towards our goals and desires) remains solely a matter of individual preference — unless we can find some way to evaluate our constructs of what constitutes genuinely moral behavior. As Letwin and Reynolds (2005) explain, "however firmly we assert that 'every human being is to be treated as an end and never as a means,' that understanding must be a *commitment* because we accept it even though there are alternatives to it that we cannot

demonstrate to be necessarily false. We can elaborate and embellish this commitment, but we cannot establish a universal and wholly uncontentious obligation to regard every human being as an end in himself" (p. 331).

Kelly's (1969) response to this significant dilemma is, unfortunately, quite weak — as when he writes:

> What I have said so far may suggest that man simply cannot distinguish good and evil. In the sense of making an ultimate distinction in time to enjoy the weekend, that is true; he cannot. But man does distinguish the two after a fashion . . . . Through the ages he has undoubtedly improved his perceptiveness and, while circumstances seem to keep increasing in complexity faster than he can keep up, it would be a mistake to argue that he should give up the quest. (p. 176)

His response, essentially, is that human beings can aggregate their collective experiences and the knowledge bequeathed to them from previous generations, and thereby glean a general picture of what constitutes moral behavior and the good life. In addition, he says, we can document how our constructs of what constitutes the good life and how we ought to live have evolved over time. "What we shall come to realize as sinful a thousand years from now," Kelly asserts, "may bear no more resemblance to the evils that preachers talk about today than does the morality of a thousand years ago — or even of a hundred years ago — resemble 1963's emerging sense of decency" (1963, p. 210). As we have seen, one of Kelly's central hypotheses is that the algorithmic process of reconstruing the world in response to experience is inherently progressive. True to that thesis, then, Kelly implies that because our constructs are *changing*, they must therefore (at least in the aggregate) be *improving*.

However, under the central premise of constructive alternativism, what constitutes *improvement* versus what constitutes *regression* is itself a construct that is freely chosen amongst alternatives, and, thus, itself needs to be evaluated. And the best test that Kelly can offer is that *improvement* leads to greater predictive power. The ultimate value in Kelly's worldview is predictability — we as human beings cannot help but seek to make our world more predictable. But if constructive alternativism is to be taken seriously, there are *other* ways of construing what constitutes improvement. There is very little Kelly can do to persuade us of this except declare his commitment to that assumption as a *premise* of his narrative, rather than a conclusion. And Kelly, an honest and self-reflective scholar, does only that.

Again, this assumption that *improvement* in construct systems means "greater predictive power" is a core assumption of Kelly's constructive alternativism, and one we must simply accept on faith. Unless one accepts as an assumptive presupposition a consequentialist ethic, the consequences of one's actions do not necessarily reveal whether one's actions are in fact morally permissible, unless

we are talking about the final judgment in one or another religious worldview — and as Kelly (1963) has said, "most people are in no hurry to collect validational evidence in such matters" (p. 13). Therefore, it seems that Kelly's constructive alternativism lends very little guidance regarding *how I ought to behave today* and *what I should value in life*. This is because ideas about *how I ought to behave* and *what I should value* are ways in which the individual construes what the good life is for themselves (amongst competing alternatives), and Kelly offers little to help us evaluate the merit of these construct systems generally except insofar as they seem to "work" for the individual — as determined *by the individual*.

It is important to note here that a common response to the problem of moral relativism, and one that Kelly (1969) and others are quite aware of (Butt, 2000), is to appeal to some sort of absolute, rationalistic ethical or moral system or abstract, impersonal, and universal concepts of moral truth that exists independent of human interpersonal and cultural life, and beyond or outside specific historical context. In addition to the fact that rationalistic ethics have traditionally proven intransigent and "bloodless" in the face of the complexity and ambiguity of actual human moral dilemmas, rationally justifiable implementation and practical application of abstract principles is often defeated by the insufficiencies of rational deliberation itself. For example, as Butt (2000) trenchantly points out, "a universalist ethics is of little help when we are faced with a moral dilemma and two universal imperatives collide" (p. 90). In the end, universalist ethical theories fail when called upon to guide or ground actual moral practice. However, "as a psychologist and not a philosopher, Kelly was concerned with the grounding of moral action in everyday life" (Butt, 2000, p. 90). In so doing, he articulated a view in which our tendency to divide the moral world, and ethical theories about it, into absolutist or relativist categories was to be seen as simply one more way in which we are able to construct the world and its meaning for us in order to resolve certain problems we happen to face or anticipate.

Unfortunately, while an insightful characterization of a common human tactic, Kelly's approach fails to avoid the very relativistic perspective it seeks to mitigate. Although Kelly and likeminded constructivists typically reject moral absolutism, arguing instead for the contingent nature of human moral construing, they maintain that such a position is not "impotent" in the face of (what is construed as) evil. As Butt (2000) suggests, "what the constructivist can do is to forcefully argue for his or her case. . . . We can draw on whatever power or persuasion we can muster to bring about change" (p. 98). For example, he continues:

> We might resolve to do whatever we can to prevent judicial tortures. But we also have a moral obligation to try to understand the context in which these tortures have been justified. This is not because we expect to be convinced by the logic, but to remind us of our common humanity and prevent us adding cruelty to cruelty. (Butt, 2000, p. 98)

However, it is not clear here why precisely anyone should care about not "adding cruelty to cruelty," what exactly constitutes our "common humanity," or why we ought to seek to "bring about change" by forceful argument. Clearly, there is the presumption that we should care about and do what is right and good — a presumption with which we most definitely agree — but why that presumption should be accepted by anyone not already sharing it is left obscure and undeveloped. And, insofar as it remains obscure and implicit, rival presumptions — for example, more Hobbesian or instrumentalist ones in which it is acceptable to see others as objects, as means to one's own ends — can continue to maintain a strong foothold on our disciplinary moral discourse, as they have done for a very long time now (Gantt and Williams, 2021). However, it is our hope here that in the remainder of this paper we can make clearer the needed grounds for accepting the undergirding moral presumptions of constructive alternativism.

Levinas and Stubborn Facts of an Ethical Nature

How then might we prevent Kelly's tremendously valuable constructivist perspective from carrying us down the path towards moral relativism? We propose that Kelly's psychology of personal constructs may be rescued from implicating moral relativism by revisiting his theory from the perspective of the ethical phenomenology articulated by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. A brief introduction to Levinasian thought will help to provide a framework for this claim.

The work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, though long recognized for its contributions to contemporary Continental philosophy, has recently begun to stir interest among theorists in psychology and psychotherapy (see, e.g., Dueck and Parsons, 2007; Freeman, 2014; Gantt, 2005; Gantt and Williams, 2002; Goodman, 2012; Goodman and Freeman, 2015; Krycka et al., 2015; Kunz, 1998; Marcus, 2008; Severson et al., 2016). Levinas's work arose out of the phenomenological tradition of such thinkers as Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau–Ponty, and Martin Heidegger (Spiegelberg, 1994). Over the course of a career spanning most of the twentieth century, Levinas produced a careful phenomenological explication of the lived-experience of what it means to be a human being. Central to any understanding of Levinasian phenomenology is his conception of otherness (Levinas, 1961/1969). For Levinas, the Other stands in contrast to, and as a remedy for, the primacy of individual ego so often assumed in contemporary psychological theory to be the source of our identity as persons. The absolutely other is that which is absolutely other than I — in general terms, other than the ego — that which, by its very nature, escapes or exceeds my cognitive or rational abilities to adequately capture, conceptualize, and explain on my own terms. Levinas usually speaks of this "otherness" as "alterity," or, as that which "overflows" the self and the self's conceptualizations (Levinas, 1961/1969, 1985).

In significant ways, Levinas positioned the entirety of his philosophical project as a response to both the modernist and postmodernist worldviews (Child et al., 1995; Williams and Gantt, 2002), each of which he found insufficiently attentive to the fundamentally ethical and profoundly social nature of human existence. For Levinas, fundamental to human being is the experience of sameness and otherness (Levinas, 1961/1969). In the absence of any other moral agent or human being, we simply explore the unfamiliar otherness of the world around us and appropriate it, making that which is different and other familiar and part of ourselves — that is, the Same. Levinas employed the metaphor of consumption to describe this process. He asks us to consider, for example, a fruit — perhaps an apple. The apple, upon my first encounter of it, is not part of me; it is manifestly something other than me. However, when I eat the apple, it then becomes a part of me. When we consume food, we make it part of us, or part of the Same. Because the apple can be consumed and digested in its entirety, it is a totality, and making it part of us is a process Levinas referred to as "totalization" (Levinas, 1961/1969).

This metaphor can be extended to the cognitive process of discovery. There are many new and different things that we encounter in the world as we go about our business in it, and it is a relatively simple matter to "totalize" them into our worldview — to categorize, explain, or otherwise appropriate them for our own purposes. This process of uncovering, discovering, and investigating what is *other* leads us to codify, expound, and articulate what is other in terms that are most congenial to our worldview, our desires, and our current system of thought. "Perceived in this way," said Levinas (1961/1969), "philosophy would be engaged in reducing to the Same all that is opposed to it as other" (p. 48). In essence, the goal of Western philosophy and (by extension) science has been to turn that which is alien into that which is familiar, that which is other into that which is the Same. Levinas (1995) continued, "Western philosophy coincides with the unveiling of the other in which the Other … loses its alterity. Philosophy is afflicted, from its childhood, with an insurmountable allergy: a horror of the Other which remains Other" (p. 105). Admittedly, there are a great variety of experiences that we have in the world that are perfectly compatible with this way of encountering, knowing, and appropriating the world. For example, descriptions of how things fall, mathematical principles, even bacterial infections are encounters with the world that are not necessarily distorted when enframed into a totality. Making sense of the "undifferentiated homogeneity" (Kelly, 1963, p. 9) of the world around us by erecting constructs through which we interpret the world is an example of this process of totalization. Levinas compared this kind of cognition to consuming what is other and turning it into the Same (Levinas, 1961/1969).

However, according to Levinas, there are many experiences where this process of subsuming the other distorts the reality of the Other. For example, according to Levinas, human beings are foremost and always an irreducible Other, and, as such, must always be approached differently than the way in which one might

approach a thing or object in the world (Levinas, 1995). A second metaphor that may be helpful in making sense of this notion is that of drinking from a well-spring. Like with the apple, when we drink from a spring, that which we drink becomes a part of us. But unlike the apple, we cannot drink all of the water that flows from the spring. Not only is there more to the phenomenon than we can consume, but there will always be more than we can consume, because it is an inexhaustible source. Thus, in this scenario, the Other is not some object that we can adequately or exhaustively encapsulate in our words, or fully capture in our concepts and theories — no matter how refined and extensive they might be. Persons, as the Other, are never things, and, thus, can never be taken possession of or made into just another part of ourselves. There is always something genuinely and irreducibly "otherwise" and "more than" about persons, there is always an excess and an overflowing of otherness in other persons. The Other is, thus, for Levinas, an infinity, rather than a totality, and, therefore, cannot be totalized (i.e., turned into the Same) without committing violence against it (Levinas, 1961/1969).

Let us consider an additional example: when we think of the ocean, we have an idea what the ocean is and what it is like. However, there is always more about the ocean that we do not know. There will likely always be more in the ocean than what we know, or even can know. Perhaps an even better metaphor is an idea of the cosmos: no matter what is contained in our ideas about the universe, the reality of the cosmos — by which we mean not just the physical universe of time, space, and matter, but also the universe of ongoing human experience and meaning — is its infinity and overflowing inexhaustibility. As such, the cosmos is not the sort of thing that can ever be fully encapsulated into words or concepts or principles. The reality of the infinite will always be able to shatter whatever finite and constrained conceptions we might make about it. We can never make the Infinite into a Totality. Levinas (1961/1969) has written: "The relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it" (p. 25). The Other can, thus, never be fully consumed, tamed, mastered, or made a part of us. In this mode of approaching the Other, it is always recognized and accepted that we cannot turn the Other into the Same.

Because people are foremost and always irreducibly other, they escape any attempt to reduce them into a totality or to make them into the Same, a function, instrument, or aspect of the ego. The Christian apologist and popular children's author, C. S. Lewis (1989), provided a unique example that helps to make this point. He wrote that when his wife died, he would remake the images and memories he had of her in his own image. He said, "Although ten minutes — ten seconds — of the real Helen would correct all this, the rough, sharp, cleansing tang of her otherness [was] gone . . . . The reality is no longer there to check me, to pull me up short, as the real Helen so often did, so unexpectedly, by being so thoroughly herself and not me" (p. 30). Such experience illustrates that there is something about the Other that is always in flux, that will always shatter whatever

conceptions we form about it, that is inexhaustible in its presence as a spring of water. Levinas (1961/1969) described this shattering as the phenomenon of the "face": "The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face . . . . The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me" (p. 50). In other words, the otherness of the Other cannot be made perfectly familiar without destroying its essential alterity. As Levinas (1961/1969) said, "The face resists possession, resists my powers" (p. 197). For Levinas, this experience of the other person in which our prejudices and pre-established categories are resisted by that person's very existence, and in which our own projects and intentions are brought into question, is the very foundation of moral and social life.

When we make what is other into a totality, the other surrenders to us, and we take possession of it. However, in the approach of the Other, as the overflowing of infinitude itself, something unexpected (perhaps even unwanted) happens: the Other places us in a relationship of ethical obligation. Levinas (1985) describes how, as the face of the Other resists our attempts to totalize, it also calls to us. "The first word of the face," he says, "is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me" (Levinas, 1985, p. 89). This obligation to the Other precedes (logically, not chronologically) the formation of reason itself. "The face," Levinas writes, "opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 201). The encounter with something that is fundamentally *Other*, which cannot be totalized (in contrast with its surroundings) and which resists our habitual attempts to encapsulate it in a fixed meaning, calls us into an admiration and an obligation that we cannot ignore.

In short, there is something about the infinitude of the Other that approaches us from higher ground, an ethical height. Williams and Gantt (2002) elaborate this point when they write:

> In opposition to the notion that all realities and truths are ultimately reducible to the activity of an autonomous subject, or "the Same," Levinas argues that this absolute alterity overflows the rational capacities of individual subjects and instantiates them in ethical obligation. . . . The otherness of this Other is concretized in the face of an-other human, a face which speaks and, in speaking, demands of us, from a position "above" ourselves, an accounting for the very existence we enjoy and have assumed to be ours by individual right. (pp. 25–26)

This experience of obligation frames the meaning of all social and human activity. Indeed, meaning as a product of totalization is actually dependent on meaning as it arises in the face-to-face encounter with the Other inasmuch as the experience of alterity is prior to and grounds all other meaning, whether it be personal, philosophical, or scientific (see, e.g., Downs et al., 2012).

Further, as Williams and Gantt (2002) explain, "All human activity becomes fundamentally ethical, deriving its meaning out of the ground of infinite

obligation, and *difference*, the absolute otherness of the Other" (p. 29, italics in original). The central implication of the Levinasian analysis, they contend, is that:

> [O]ur very subjectivity is born, and our life comes to have meaning and moral character, because we are being-for others in our being-with them, and the presence of those others inescapably places us in obligation to them. Thus, our relationships are from the beginning — and without mediating factors — relationships of responsibility, and we are, thus, primordially and immediately ethical beings. (p. 9)

This obligation manifests itself in the faces of the others whom we encounter in our day-to-day lives. Whenever we ignore or violate this experience of obligation, we do violence against the Other. "We find this obligation, this inescapable responsibility for another," Williams and Gantt (2002) argue, "in the face-to-face reality of our daily social lives . . . in the face of the other person — whether that of a close friend, a beloved spouse, a crying infant, or the homeless stranger on a busy sidewalk asking us for something to eat — a demand that requires our most sincere moral attention and response" (p. 10). Thus, a Levinasian perspective offers an ethical grounding that is not simply a construal of the good life or one among many alternatives freely chosen, but one that arises from our very ontology — from the fact of our being with others in the world. It is an ethic that, even if I do not choose, I cannot escape.

Felt Moral Obligation

We believe that the experience of ethical obligation unfolds in a way that is intricately related to the "moral sense" described by Olson (2004) when he writes:

> The fundamental notion is that humans are relational in the sense that in the presence of the Other (any other person), we experience a moral call and obligation to that Other. This includes honoring our felt sense of how to do right by that other person. (p. 4)

This basic moral sense — what Williams and Gantt (2012) have elsewhere termed "felt moral obligation" — is most often experienced as an invitation to treat others as persons with needs, hopes, cares, and fears just as real and relevant as one's own. It is important, however, to clarify what is meant here by *felt* moral obligation. Though the word "felt" is employed, it is not meant to imply emotivism, the notion that basic human moral experience arises merely out of sentiment, or what would normally be called emotion. To do so would be to take the understanding of moral impulse and moral action in precisely the wrong direction by psychologizing it and, thereby, reducing it to the product of some presumably more fundamental non-moral or mechanical psychological process or condition. Rather, as Williams and Gantt (2012) state, what is meant by felt moral obligation

is "a primitive, pre-rational, but unmistakably moral and contextual sense of particular 'oughtness,' an obligation of self to other at the originative source of our being" (p. 427).[3] Such an "oughtness" or sense of obligation and responsibility is intentional, in the phenomenological sense, in that it is not reducible to simply some manifestation of our biological nature or intuitions as commonly conceived (e.g., Boehm, 2012; Haidt, 2001), but rather is a pro-active, anticipatory, fully human, fully moral, fully contextual sensibility occasioned by the presence of the other as Other.

Warner (1986) offers a useful anecdote that helps to illustrate the experience of felt moral obligation. Warner tells the story of a man named Marty who was sleeping next to his wife when he heard the baby crying in the next room. Marty described his experience this way:

> At that moment, I had a fleeting feeling, a feeling that if I got up quickly, I might be able to see what was wrong before my wife would have to wake up. I don't think it was even a thought because it went too fast for me to say it out in my mind. It was a feeling that this was something I really ought to do. (Warner, 1986, p. 1)

This "fleeting feeling" that there "was something [he] really ought to do," Warner (1986) argues, is something that most — if not all — human beings experience on a regular basis. Again, Olson (2004) has said, "The fundamental notion is that humans are relational in the sense that in the presence of the Other (any other person), we experience a moral call and obligation to that Other. This includes honoring our felt sense of how to do right by that other person" (p. 4). This moral call, this sense that individuals have of how they ought to treat others is usually subtle, and it is this sense that Marty was experiencing in the anecdote described above. According to Williams (2005):

> The key element in the narrative . . . is that in that first fleeting moment, Marty sensed — or felt — the ethical. This is the aboriginal and most authentic "still

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[3] Kelly does note, though only briefly, that not all construing is to be understood as verbal in nature. He writes, "Construing is not to be confounded with verbal formulation. A person's behavior may be based upon many interlocking equivalence-difference patterns which are never communicated in symbolic speech" (Kelly, 1963, p. 51). He further elaborates this point by noting that "if a person is asked how he proposes to digest his dinner, he will be hard put to answer the question" because such things "seem to him to be beyond his control because he cannot anticipate them within the same system which he must use for communication" (p. 51). It may be that here, in identifying that certain experiences seem to exceed our capacity to adequately articulate them, there is an opening for a deeper analysis of Kelly's understanding of construing and the contours of the "wide range of convenience" he sees in it. Caution, however, is warranted insofar as Levinas's notion of the otherness of the Other, an otherness that exceeds all attempts at conceptualization, intellectual comprehension, or verbal capture, reflects an ethical phenomenon that can never be adequately articulated in formal constructs, categories, or theoretical concepts, as (to use Kelly's example) the processes of digestion and similar "pre-verbal" experiences ultimately can be. Unfortunately, further exploration of this issue lies beyond the scope of the present analysis and must await another time and venue.

> small voice" of the ethical, . . . Marty knew what was right, and, what is more, he felt that he ought to do it — he felt an obligation. He felt the obligation to an other, to a (sleepy) face. (p. 13)

Warner (2001) maintains that Marty's experience is far from unique. He argues that we "are constantly receiving signals from others that reveal something of their needs and hopes and fears," and that in those moments, "we are called upon by others' unspoken requests, expressed in their faces and gestures and voices, to treat them with consideration and respect" (Warner, 2001, p. 129). Further, he holds that "to be a person in a family or community is to pick up from others such gently expressed imperatives as these" (p. 129).

Olson (2007) describes similar reports from others who claim to have experienced this moral call or felt obligation to others. Some examples include: "I sensed my neighbor needed help in moving his furniture," and "I believed I ought to help my mom with the dishes," and "I sensed I was being harsh with my child" (Olson and Israelson, 2007, p. 4). Another intriguing anecdote that Olson (2012) shares comes from a sixteen-year-old participant in a workshop:

> My mom was home late from work and asked me to drive to the store for avocados and lettuce, and get back so we could still have an on-time dinner with dad. I drove to the market and as I was entering the store, an elderly woman was virtually hobbling out of the store with two bags of groceries which were obviously too heavy. As I passed her, I had the feeling I ought to offer to help her with her groceries. (p. 32)

Olson (2012) suggests that "this example gives us qualitative evidence that it is possible for humans to experience an ethical call, and thus sustains the fact that humans have a moral sense — especially regarding how to treat others" (p. 32). As a consequence, Olson (2004) continues, "the perspective also installs the assumption of moral agency, meaning that any individual, in the present moment, has the capacity to live true or false to their personally felt sense of what is right" (p. 4). This moral sense, and our capacity to respond to or resist it, importantly constitutes the individual as a *moral agent*. Williams and Gantt (2002), arguing that this moral sense is an essential feature of our very humanity, state: "To be human at all, then, is to possess a moral sense — at the very core of our being — of the obligation to account for ourselves, to answer for our choices and actions (or inactions) in the face of another person's needs or suffering" (pp. 9–10). In short, whenever we experience the summons of our moral sense, we *also* sense an obligation to account for how we discharge our felt responsibilities. The experiences are not, however, two separate obligations, but really one and the same. *To the extent we experience a moral call to the needs of others*, we cannot help but make it a moral requirement of ourselves.

The Ethics of Self-Betrayal

Although essential to our very being, we are able to act against this felt moral sense in a way that, if we draw on Kelly, could be considered a false construal of a fact of raw experience (i.e., our ethical obligation). Whenever an individual experiences a moral call and then neglects to respond to that moral call, he engages in what Olson (2007) has referred to as "self-betrayal" (see also Warner, 1986; Warner and Olson, 1981). Olson (2007) describes self-betrayal as "a free act of a morally responsible person. To be in self-betrayal is to go against our own sense of what is right to do" (p. 5). The term "self-betrayal" is used here because, according to Warner (2001), our humanity is so intimately tied up with our capacity to sense what we must do that when we violate that sense, we are betraying our very nature. Additionally, when an individual feels that there is something he ought to do, he expects himself to do it, in the sense that it is impossible to sense that something is right without holding oneself to that standard. And, for this reason, Warner (1986) argues, "It's impossible to betray oneself without seeking to excuse or justify oneself" (p. 1). He continues:

> Whether childishly rationalizing his moral failures or self-righteously claiming to be morally superior, the self-betrayer is blaming others and excusing or justifying himself. He can consider himself in the clear only if he can successfully find fault in others for whatever he is thinking or doing. There's no way around this. There's no possibility of betraying oneself without living a lie — no possibility of sinning in a straightforward, guileless, and open manner. (p. 2)

Thus, whenever we attempt to rationalize, excuse, or justify our refusal to respond to our moral sense, we are *in that very act* demonstrating that we hold ourselves accountable to that moral sense (Williams and Gantt, 2012). Further, Warner (1986) argues, "We do it by carrying out the refusal in such a way that it seems to us that we are doing the very best we can under the circumstances. We make the moral requirement of ourselves by denying that we are doing what we're doing" (p. 2).

When we resist the call of the Other, our very thought patterns and emotional responses change in dramatic but often undetected ways. For example, when we resist the call of the Other, we reflexively mask the face of the Other with an accusation to excuse ourselves from responding to the call. If the Other is not a person to be respected and compassionately responded to, but rather an object, enemy, or monster to be ignored, fought, or detested, then we can effectively recuse ourselves from the obligation we experience towards them (Olson, 2007). The remainder of Marty's account provides an excellent example of this. When he felt that he ought to get up and tend the baby so his wife could sleep, he reports that not only did he not do what he sensed that he should do, but:

> I didn't go right back to sleep either. It bugged me that my wife wasn't waking up. I kept thinking it was her job. She has her work and I have mine. Mine starts early. She can sleep in. Besides, I was exhausted. Besides that, I never really know how to handle the baby. Maybe she was lying there waiting for me to get up. Why did I have to feel guilty when I'm only trying to get some sleep so I can do well on the job? She was the one who wanted to have this kid in the first place. (Warner, 1986, p. 1)

Marty is here describing how he immediately began to rationalize his refusal to respond to his moral sense, marshalling arguments in defense of his own victimization and righteousness. Interestingly, in the very act of rationalizing away his sense of ethical responsibility, Marty acknowledges that he indeed felt that getting up to take care of the baby for his wife was something that he ought to do. Otherwise, there would be no reason for him to justify his choice and inaction to himself. As Warner (1986) explains, "Someone who is straightforwardly doing what seems to him right will have no cause to excuse or justify himself" (p. 3). This illustrates what Warner (1986) means when he writes that we "make the moral requirement of ourselves" (p. 2), even in our refusal to comply with our moral sense, and this is why Warner, Olson, and others refer to this refusal to comply with one's own deepest moral sensibility as "*self*-betrayal."

Warner (1986, 2001), Olson (2004, 2007, 2012), and Williams (2005; see also Williams and Gantt, 2012) also show how rationalization and justification is an inescapable consequence of self-betrayal. For example, Olson (2007) maintains that the:

> price of self-betrayal . . . is to rationalize, blame others and in numerous ways shift our own felt responsibility to something or someone else. To rationalize and justify our wrongdoing takes a lot of energy, and, once we are betraying ourselves, we are not at peace psychologically. (p. 5)

Recounting the remainder of the teenager's experience buying groceries for his mother that was introduced above, Olson (2012) provides a helpful illustration of this point. After encountering the elderly lady who was struggling to carry her groceries, he felt he should help her carry them:

> I had the feeling I ought to offer to help her . . . but instead I quickened my step and headed for the produce section. Once I got there, I wasn't even thinking of avocados and lettuce. I was turning thoughts over in my mind about the lady with the groceries. I was irritated, and was silently asking myself questions such as: "Why doesn't that lady use a shopping cart? If those bags are too heavy, why doesn't she make two trips?" (p. 32)

This anecdote demonstrates what Olson means when he claims that individuals who engage in self-betrayal are not at peace psychologically. The process of

demonizing the Other in order to justify one's own behaviors often results in us construing ourselves in opposition to the Other; for example, we might conclude that the Other has done us some manner of wrong and, thus, we are in reality innocent victims of the other person's thoughtlessness or malice. Such dichotomization reflects as a way in which we can justify our response (or lack of response) to the face of the Other. When we cognitively and emotionally mask the face of the Other in an accusation, we totalize them.

In summary, then, Levinas offers a phenomenological account of our ethical being in which, in the encounter with another human being, we are brought into ethical obligation. Other scholars (see, e.g., Dueck and Parsons, 2007; Edelglass, 2006; Freeman, 2014, Gantt and Williams, 2002; Goodman, 2012; Kunz, 1998) have subsequently argued that this ethical obligation often manifests itself in the form of a moral sense, in which individuals experience a "call to action" when faced with another person's suffering. Although cultural, societal, or other contexts in which individuals are inherently embedded may influence the specific *form* this moral sense or call to action takes (that is, there are various ways to construe exactly *how* one should appropriately respond), the *substance* of it — that is, that one *should* respond in *some* way — remains the same for all and precedes individual or specific mental constructions. In other words, what Levinas provides is an account of ethics that would position ethical responsibility *prior to* Kelly's personal constructs, as a "stubborn fact of experience" and not merely one among many alternative ethical frames that are the product of particular mental constructions.

This repositioning of ethical responsibility — from the product of mental construction to a metaphysical reality that *precedes* mentation of any kind — can provide just the kind of anchor Kelly's psychology of personal constructs needs if it is to have anything non-relativistic to say about the good life, moral action, and ethical responsibility. The inclusion of ethical obligation in the datum of raw experience could provide a way to evaluate our constructs of the good life and how we ought to live against an external (and in this case, ontological) reality, as Kelly describes. Indeed, such an inclusion would make ethical responsibility comparable to the furniture in the analogy of the blind man used earlier, and violations of ethical responsibility comparable to the bruised shins the blind man experiences as he stumbles upon furniture. Since, according to Kelly, our construct systems are fabricated in response to experience, some of our construct systems might be better at taking our experiences of ethical obligation into account than are others, and some might be an attempt to ignore, deny, or explain away those experiences and the ethical obligation revealed in them. Indeed, as Warner (1986) argues, when individuals violate their sense of ethical responsibility, they find their mental constructions shifting, changing, and evolving to account for and excuse their actions. They find themselves excusing, rationalizing, and explaining away their behavior in a way they *would not* need to do had they not experienced

the ethical call to responsibility in the first place. Thus, *even in the act of rationalizing* away their sense of ethical responsibility, they are still construing the world in response to a *pre-rational* experience of ethical obligation. They are still, in a sense, navigating *around* furniture, albeit now with bruised knees.

Two Quick Clarifications

Before concluding our analysis here, it is important to offer two further clarifications. The first is that Levinas's phenomenological account of the face-to-face encounter, the moment of ethical summons that disrupts and overflows our pre-established categories of understanding, calling into question the totalities we have embraced that permit us to order, manage, explain, predict, and control the world and others by reducing otherness to sameness, reveals a moral reality prior to any superordinate, or "regnant personal constructs" (Kelly, 1955, p. 204), we might have or deploy. Kelly's notion of regnant personal constructs, and of the ordinal nature of our personal constructs, may indeed be helpful in the dialogical process of clarifying, particularly in the context of therapeutic treatment, how one's values might influence one's behavior in various ways and varying situations, but such constructs come — at least, that is, from the Levinasian perspective — too late. Regnant constructs are, we learn from the *International Handbook of Personal Construct Theory* (Fransella, 2003), those kinds of "superordinate construct which assign each of their elements to a category on an all-or-none basis, as in classical logic" (p. 457). As such, Epting (1984) suggests, "the regnant construct might be thought of as an express train that runs directly from the superordinate (value-like constructs) down to the constructs that are concerned with everyday activity" (p. 45).

At their conceptual root, however, regnant constructs originate in, flow from, and ultimately return personal meaning to the individual, organizing the world according to its value to and for the individual. In this way, regnant constructs — like all constructs and all construing — reflect back only sameness, even when such constructs are employed to formalize meaning in terms of the categories of otherness and sameness, or good and evil. Interestingly, from a Levinasian perspective, regnant personal constructs need not be seen as empty of meaningful content or without moral significance. They can be, rather, understood as flowing from the ethical summons of the other to offer some accounting — however inadequate, provisional, and subject to continual re-examination and revision such an account will necessarily be — of what is good and right and morally worthy in genuinely human relationship. The key point here, however, is that not only does the face-to-face encounter disrupt and overflow our construals of the world and the other, but in so doing also reveals the fundamental priority of the Other. That is, the ethical reality of the other always already precedes (and exceeds) whatever personal constructs we may favor or employ, whatever interpretive frameworks

we may be relying on to make sense of the world, and whatever theories or self-understandings we may have adopted.

According to Levinas, the face of the Other, by virtue of its irruptive otherness and excess, always already overflows and escapes whatever constructs, regnant or otherwise, we may deploy in the service of our own efficient prediction, generation, and maintenance of useful knowledge, and careful management of a world of anticipated possibilities and desired outcomes. The ethical moment of the face-to-face is one in which not only are all our ways of construing the world called into question, but also one in which the self-sufficiency of the Same is itself challenged by the infinite otherness of the Other that confronts us from a moral height and demands ethical response. As such, ethics (in the Levinasian sense) precedes all regnant constructs and any formal attempts to articulate one's moral construals of the world, but that need not be taken to mean that Kelly's theory of regnant personal constructs is without merit. Rather, it may be important precisely to the extent that it reveals the fundamentally moral "directedness" of all human construing of the world and others as a prime instance of ethical responsibility in action.

The second clarification concerns a likely objection to the analysis and comparison between Kelly's theory and Levinas's ethical phenomenology that we have offered. It might be argued that our entire analysis here is fundamentally flawed insofar as the comparison of Kelly and Levinas is illegitimate because they were each engaged in very different, perhaps even incommensurate, intellectual endeavors. Indeed, as one reviewer of this manuscript claimed, "Kelly's theory of constructs was a theory of epistemology, a question of how we gain knowledge of the world around us," whereas Levinas's project is of a very different, more pointedly ontological sort, and, as such, "is not concerned with knowledge production in the traditional sense." While it is true that Levinasian phenomenology is not directly concerned with articulating a particular epistemological viewpoint — except insofar as any phenomenological inquiry inherently aims at truthful descriptions that constitute valid knowledge — it is not so clear that Kelly's personal construct theory can be neatly cordoned off as only involving epistemological matters and nothing else. Kelly himself seems to have recognized that his theory was more than epistemological in nature, even commenting to one of his students, "Yes, I guess I do think of PCT as an implicit ethical system: just imagine a world in which we understood one another as people" (Hinkle, 1970; cited in Butt, 2008, p. 65). Indeed, as Butt (2008) notes, "Kelly uses the concept [of sociality] to make a claim about how we *ought* to act in relation to other people. This is nothing to do with science, but with ethics" (p. 65).

However, even were we to grant here that constructive alternativism is primarily a theory of epistemology, it would not therefore follow that the theory is not undergirded with metaphysical and ethical assumptions. In fact, metaphysical and ethical assumptions are inescapable in any theory, regardless of how formal or

informal such theories might be. Such assumptions are intrinsically intertwined with and inform whatever epistemological point of view one wishes to advance. After all, one cannot sensibly forward any particular claim about *how* we know something without at the same time advancing — perhaps only implicitly or without acknowledgment — a metaphysical claim about *what it is* that can be known and what sort of being is doing the knowing. Likewise, the central concern of ethics (i.e., how we *ought* to treat others) hinges on and informs both our understanding of how we know what can be known, and why we should seek to know anything at all, and in any particular way. Thus, while Kelly's personality theory may well be primarily focused on articulating how people come to know their world, it is also very much the case that the theory necessarily embodies certain metaphysical and ethical presuppositions about what sort of creatures people really are and not only how they are to be best understood, but also how they *ought* to be treated. In this way, then, it is clear the personal construct theory of George Kelly and the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas, while certainly having different specific foci, and coming from distinct disciplinary realms, nonetheless are not in fact incomparable intellectual projects. Rather, as we have argued in this paper, the work of Levinas offers a number of important insights that both deepen and expand Kelly's theory by providing it with an explicit and articulate accounting of the fundamental ethical reality seemingly presupposed by the theory itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, George Kelly's psychology of personal constructs describes individuals as *scientists*, constantly revising their mental constructs against experimental evidence, thereby improving the accuracy and predictive power of those constructs and strengthening such individuals' ability to act in the world and pursue their goals and desires. However, this paradigm alone offers only partial insight into questions of everyday moral and ethical concern — because predictive efficiency is not necessarily indicative of moral rightness and wrongness and cannot answer questions about the nature of the good life. In addition, because, according to Kelly, beliefs about right and wrong, ethical responsibility, and the good life are the product of personal constructs that may not have external, objective counterparts, it is difficult to avoid the possibility of moral relativism if we adopt Kelly's perspective alone. However, if we postulate, as Levinas does, that moral summons can be experienced in a *pre-rational* way, and that ethical responsibility exists *prior to* mental construction, we can then imagine the possibility of formulating a sturdy psychology of personal constructs that accommodates the possibility of testing moral and ethical beliefs against the data of raw experience, including the experience of ethical obligation. In this way, we suggest that the ethical phenomenology of Levinas does not constitute an alternative to

or replacement for Kelly's personal construct theory, but rather a needed and insightful corrective that deepens and enriches what is already a very important approach to making sense of what it means to be a human being.

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