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The Econometric Attitude: A Levinasian Reflection

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Abstract

In this thesis the concept of 'the econometric attitude' is developed. This is an attitude an econometrician necessarily takes on when practicing econometrics. Through this attitude individuals are reduced to data. This implies that the econometric attitude does not allow for singularity and radical alterity. Because Levinas stressed the importance of singularity and radical alterity in relation to ethics, the econometric attitude is reflected upon from a Levinasian perspective. We find that econometrics is inherently incompatible with Levinas' ethics, because the econometric attitude does not allow a Face-to-Face encounter. However, the feeling of responsibility can be installed in the econometrician by forcing a real-life dialogue with one of the to-be-studied individuals or by making him perform a performative speech act in the form of an oath. Although a complete Levinasian econometrics is impossible, these two methods are a step towards a more Levinasian econometrics.

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1 Introduction

It is undeniable that big data is having an increasing impact, both on an individual level, e.g. personalized advertisement, but also on a societal level, e.g. data-driven policy making. At the same time, we observe that this comes with ethical failures. Take the banking crisis of 2008 for example. Individuals were reduced to debt-portfolios and subsequently pooled into asset-backed securities, essentially making them into investment products (Gorton and Metrick 2012). These investment products turned out to be unsafe, leading to a bank run in the short-term money market (Erkens, Hung and Matos 2012, Murphy 2008). As Lewis et al. 2010 show, during this period aggressive lenders pushed the boundaries of ethics in order to engage in risky loans called 'sub-prime mortgages'. Greed overtook ethics in financial institutions, possibly because the human aspect in the data was overlooked. The individual context of the 'investment products' was left out of the picture and the real-life implications for the people were not considered. In other words, humans were reduced to data. They were only represented by the debt that they had and consequently they were not treated as humans anymore. Even though, on a first glance, this might seem like an economical or technical problem, there is an inherent philosophical question regarding the datafication of humans.

A philosophical explanation, by for example Levinas, for the unethical behaviour of the bankers could be that the singularity of the individuals is not taken into account when accessing them through data. The humans are accessed (in this case, by the bankers) through an attitude that reduces them to some universal feature (in this case, debt). This example begs the question whether there is an inherent problem with the datafication of humans; does datafication lead to unethical behaviour, or is there a way to feel responsible for humans through data?

These questions are particularly prevalent in the science of econometrics. *Econometrica*, one of the leading econometric journals, defines econometrics as 'the quantitative analysis of actual economic phenomena based on the concurrent development of theory and observation, related by appropriate methods of inference' (Samuelson, Koopmans and Stone 1954). This shows that universalizing worldly phenomena in order to make a quantitative analysis is inherent to econometrics. Thus, when researching humans, the econometrician must universalize them. They must select specific characteristics to extract from the individuals and quantify. But why is this an attitudinal issue, instead of a technical issue?

In the phenomenological tradition, it is supposed that this quantitative way of accessing the world does not stem from the science, but rather from some scientific or theoretical attitude of the researcher. This 'theoretical' attitude is criticized by Heidegger (Blok 2020). He is critical of this, because attitudinal access does not allow for singularity, that is *the things themselves*[1], but immediately adds a layer of the attitude to the observation. This is problematic, because by doing this, the phenomenon can never be examined as it truly is. In relation to econometrics, the econometrician will datafy the observation. It is this datafying way of accessing the world that we will call 'the econometric attitude'. In this thesis the econometric attitude and its ethical implications will be studied and we will answer the main question of the thesis: How

[1]Here, '*the things themselves*' refers to the notion of Husserl when he says *zu den Sachen selbst*. According to Husserl *the things themselves* are accessible through 'bracketing'. For more information I refer to Beyer 2022 and Husserl's own work *Ideas* (1913).

does the econometric attitude, i.e. the reduction of individuals to data, influence the experience of responsibility in the econometrician? In order to explore this ethical dimension in relation to the econometric attitude we will turn away from Heidegger, who did not focus on ethics, towards Levinas, who did prioritize ethics in his philosophy.

According to Levinas, accepting the unbridgeable singularity of other people is essential for ethical behaviour, which is precisely the thing that the econometric attitude cannot do. For Levinas, the singularity of being is expressed through the Face, which is written with a capital letter, because it does not refer to the corporeal face, but to 'the way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the Other in me*' (Levinas 1969, p. 50). According to him, accepting the unbridgeability of the Other (again written with a capital for the same reason) is necessary for an ethical relation between people. This is in sharp contrast with the econometric attitude, because this attitude does not look at the Face, it merely looks at a quantitative representation. Therefore, we wonder, can econometrics be practiced in an ethical way? In order to answer this, we will put the econometric attitude in a Levinasian light. With this, we aim to understand the ethical implications of the econometric attitude and subsequently work towards a Levinasian econometrics.

In Section 2, a general overview of Levinas will be given. We will look at his critique of Western ontology. This is important because econometrics can be interpreted as a way of practicing Western ontology, in the sense that the econometric attitude, similarly to Western ontology, tries to order, totalize, and classify. Next, his philosophy of the Face-to-Face encounter will be discussed. Furthermore, we will consider the important place that language holds in his philosophy; in Section 5 it will become clear that this could be an important part of a Levinasian econometrics. In Section 3, we will examine the econometric attitude. The implications of the econometric attitude will become clear, for example the avoidance of the Face by using data representation. Next, in Section 4 the econometric attitude will be confronted with Levinas. In this section we will find that a complete Levinasian econometrics is inherently impossible. However, in Section 5 we will work towards a more Levinasian econometrics. This will be done by showing that something as simple as a dialogue with the individuals behind the data could impose a sense of responsibility in the econometrician. Here we will use the previously studied importance of language. Besides that, performative speech acts will be proposed as a way to 'mimic' a Face-to-Face encounter, in the sense that it *makes* the econometrician responsible with respect to the individuals behind the data. Lastly, in Section 6 the conclusion of the thesis will be presented.

2 On Levinas

To understand Levinas' notion of 'ethics as a first philosophy', we must first look at his critique of Western ontology[2]. Levinas argues that Western philosophy has been, in the first place, about ontology; it has been about creating a totalizing system of the nature of Being, that reduces everything to knowledge or, in other words, sameness. Levinas illustrates this by calling ontology as a first philosophy 'a philosophy of power' (Levinas 1969, p. 46). Everything must

[2]Ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies Being or, in other words, it is the branch of philosophy that studies what there is (Hofweber 2023).

be forcefully reduced to the same thing, namely comprehensible knowledge pertaining to our categories of the understanding. The knowledge is only knowledge of a general concept or idea of an object. Due to this, singularity is negated. For example, when we think of an apple, we think of all things that make apples similar, we think of a 'universal' apple. The things that make a specific apple different from the others are not considered. Western ontology reduces the observed apple to the concept of an apple, such that it is the same as every other apple. Consequently, the apple can be understood, because it now pertains to the categories of our understanding. This makes the world a demarcated system of comprehensive knowledge, that does not allow for singularity. This system is what 'Totality' refers to: the world as a reduction to a totalizing system of sameness. Levinas criticizes this in Section 1.A.4. of *Totality and Infinity*, 'Metaphysics Precedes Ontology'. In this section he argues that the tendency to posit ontology as a first philosophy is wrong, because ontology already presupposes metaphysics. To show this, he distinguishes the *existent* from the Being. The existent is the human and singular version of Being, while Being is a general notion of existing.[3] Where Western ontology focuses on studying Being, Levinas argues that the relation with the existent is a necessary condition for the relation with Being, making it prior to it. Therefore, metaphysics precedes ontology.

Totality (and, therefore, Western ontology), according to Levinas, is deeply egocentric. In Totality, Being is prioritized and it is thought that from Being we can understand the world and capture it in universal laws and principles. Here, the first philosophy is systematic, deterministic and objective. It is a philosophy that starts from me, as a Being, whereas Levinas' philosophy starts at the relationship between me and the Other. Totality is essentially a form of ontological violence. At the foundation of trying to understand Being, lies a violent act of reduction. In this violent act, Being is captured and put in solitary confinement, in order to study it. This negates exactly that what defines Being for Levinas, namely relationships. The essential first philosophy for Levinas is ethics, and finds its origin in the relation with the Other. This relationship with the Other is established before any thought can be given to it, before it can be put into a framework, in short, before freedom can be exercised. This is why Levinas argues that ethics is the first philosophy.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Section 1.A.5., Levinas explains his concept of Infinity, which contrasts Totality. Levinas gets his notion of Infinity from Descartes, who uses infinity to argue that there exists a God. Descartes argues that every concept or idea we have, could be thought of by a human. The only concept that cannot stem from a human is infinity, since what we perceive as infinite, is merely a tiny subsample of real infinity. Therefore, something else (God) must have implanted the idea of infinity in us. Levinas takes over this concept of infinity. He writes: 'But the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea' (Levinas 1969, p. 49). This means that the materialization of infinity (its *ideatum*) overflows the idea we have of infinity. According to Levinas, this proves the separation between Infinity and the 'I'. Subsequently, he argues: 'Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the Infinite is the absolutely Other' (Levinas 1969, p. 49). With this he emphasizes that the Other transcends me and is exterior to me, or, in other words, the Other has radical alterity. This transcendence exemplifies how Infinity always transcends Totality. An example of Infinity

[3]Notice how the existent versus Being is an example of the previously mentioned distinction between the singular and the reduction to knowledge.

is an encounter with an individual. Other individuals are fundamentally incomprehensible and transcend my reason. Levinas, contrasting Western ontology, argues that for ethics, we must accept this transcendence. We must accept the absolute otherness of the Other and accept the fact that some things escape the demarcated Totality.

In the first section of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explains the contrast between the Same and the Other. When objects are reduced to sameness, that what makes them fundamentally different from me, as a thinker, is absorbed in my own identity. It is presupposed that there is some specific characteristic that is shared among the objects and the thinker, such that the objects can be understood in their full complexity. In this way, the singularity of the object is negated, and the absolute differences are not taken into account and get lost in the reduction to sameness. The absolutely other or Other, however, cannot be reduced in the same manner; 'it is a desire that cannot be satisfied' (Levinas 1969, p. 34). The desire for the Other is not about an incompleteness within the subject, but rather about reaching the Other without depriving the Other of otherness. For example, one feels the urge to help the Other in need as a first demand. This demand does not stem from an incompleteness in the subject; the Other in need is not considered a means to an end. Rather, the alterity of the Other is respected and the otherness remains, while feeling the desire to help. At the same time, this indicates the asymmetry of Levinasian ethics. I am called upon to help by the Face of the Other, before I am able to make my own demand, before being able to process it, even before being free. Ethics is thus non-reciprocal (when the Other is not responsible for me, I am still responsible for the Other) and infinite (I have an unlimited responsibility for the Other).

Before understanding the Other, we must first understand ourselves, that is the 'I'. According to Levinas, being an 'I', i.e. being a *lived existence*, is the existential starting point of a meaningful world. This opposes, for example, Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*[4]. In Heidegger's philosophy *das Man* is a *Dasein* that is, first and foremost, *thrown* into a meaningful world. This implies that the meaningful world precedes the 'I' and the meaningful world, albeit partly, *defines* the 'I'.[5] If the 'I' can be defined by the world, then so can the Other, making both the 'I' and the Other mere objects in Totality. This is highly problematic for Levinas since it completely strips the Other from its radical alterity and reduces it to sameness. For Levinas, the starting point of a meaningful world must be the 'I'. The 'I' is the only weapon we have to guard ourselves from Totality, but this weapon is only powerful in multitude. It is essential to accept that the Other is, like me, an 'I'; an 'I' that is unreachable, unfathomable and unknowable, or in short, an 'I' that has radical alterity. This is important because according to Levinas an ethical relationship does not come from me, but from the Other: 'for the ethical relationship which subtends discourse is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the 'I'; it puts the 'I' in question. This putting in question emanates from the Other.' (Levinas 1969, p. 195). This, however, is only possible when the Other is accepted by me as an 'I', since only then the

[4] *Dasein* is derived from *da-sein*, literally meaning 'there-being'. For Heidegger *Dasein* is the mode of Being exclusive to humans. It can be summarized as 'Being-in-the-world', showing that according to Heidegger the world is an essential element of Being (Wrathall 2025).

[5] Heidegger, however, sees the opportunity for *das Man* to become an 'authentic *Dasein*' by realizing its finitude, i.e. its 'Being-towards-death'. This realization is freeing and gives ownership over itself according to Heidegger (Wrathall 2025). Although the 'I' is, thus, not forever defined by the world, in the first instance it is. Only later the 'I' can become an authentic *Dasein*. Therefore, the argument that the meaningful world precedes the 'I' for Heidegger still stands.

Other gets a Face and a Face-to-Face encounter can occur. In short, for Levinas, ethics stems from a social relationship.

Before going into the Face-to-Face encounter, we must delve into the Face itself. The Face is the expression of the presence of the Other. It is that, what makes a demand on you and it is that, what puts the 'I' in question. Levinas writes: 'The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his Face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence' (Levinas 1969, p. 194). This quote shows that the Face, in no way, stems from me, but rather interrupts me in my existence: 'it brings us to a notion of meaning prior to my meaning and thus independent of my initiative and my power' (Levinas 1969, p. 51). The Face of the Other is the display of its singularity and radical alterity. It is fundamentally different from me and my lived existence and, as the aforementioned quote shows, it is also irreconcilable with me.

Reading words like 'infinitely transcendent', 'infinitely foreign' and 'breaking with the world that can be common to us', one might think the Face of the Other completely escapes reality. This is a topic of ongoing debate. In, for example, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Critchley 2014 critically engages with Honneth 1995. Honneth claims: 'the starting point for such a description (i.e. of the relation to the Other) is the sentiment present in the visual perception of a human face' (Honneth 1995, p. 31). This shows that Honneth does think the Face is something physical.[6] Critchley responds by arguing that the visual relation is always characterized by totalization and that, therefore, the Face cannot be constituted by a visual representation. I have to agree with Critchley here. Levinas himself gave a solid argument for the Face being solely ethical, instead of real. Levinas claims that the primordial demand of the Face is 'you shall not commit murder' (Levinas 1969, p. 199). Thus, the Face enforces resistance to murder, about which Levinas writes: 'If the resistance to murder were not ethical but real, we would have a perception of it, with all that reverts to the subjective in perception.' After which he concludes: 'The epiphany of the Face is ethical' (Levinas 1969, p. 199). With the first quote he shows that, since we do not have a perception of our resistance to murder, it must be ethical and not real. With the latter quote, he argues that, since the resistance comes from the Face, the Face is also ethical. Therefore, Critchley is right saying that the Face is not an observation, but part of an ethical relationship. Earlier in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says it even more literally: 'To be sure, representation does not constitute the primordial relation with being' (Levinas 1969, p. 48). It is the Face that constitutes the primordial relation, which consequently is not a 'real' representation. This shows that the Face is fundamentally ethical and an essential factor in establishing an ethical relation, since it is the Face that makes an ethical demand upon me.

Now that we have established the concept of the Face, its demands and the ethicality, we can move on to the Face-to-Face encounter; we are, after all, not alone in the world. Usually, contact with other people is described by a sensation, such as touch, sight, hearing, etcetera. This, however, already presupposes some process in me, or in other words, my attitude is applied to the access to the Other. Levinas writes: 'The idea of contact does not represent

[6] Although, in a footnote he acknowledges that it remains ambiguous whether Levinas meant that the ethical content stems from linguistics or from visual representation of the Other.

the primordial mode of the immediate. (...) The immediate is the Face-to-Face' (Levinas 1969, p. 52). This shows that the Face-to-Face encounter escapes all thematizations and all attitudes. It is the absolute immediate encounter. It happens before any mental process and outside of my freedom. The Face-to-Face encounter is involuntary, primordial and it is the genesis of ethics. In this encounter the ethical demand is made.

The fact that the Face of the Other is irreconcilable with me does not mean that we cannot reach each other. Levinas gave speech and discourse a central position in his philosophy, because he argues that in proper discourse we can speak to the Other, without reducing the Other. For speech, reducing the Other to sameness is not needed, making speech our only way of reaching the Other. Levinas writes: 'speech proceeds from absolute difference' (Levinas 1969, p. 194). Moreover, in proper discourse the Other is not reduced to sameness. The Other is accepted in its alterity and remains in Infinity. Speech, and discourse in general, make it possible to present the transcendent and draws us towards the Infinity of the Other. In doing so, it is not a method of gaining knowledge about the Other, but it is, first of all, the establishment of an ethical relationship, demanding responsibility. In that sense, speech is not even about communication *per se*, but about a relationship. Levinas makes this distinction in *Otherwise than Being* by distinguishing the words (*le dit* or 'the Said') from what these words express (*le dire* or 'the Saying') (Bergo 2024). The Said is merely a casing that encapsulates the Saying and that makes it possible to bring the Saying towards the Other in the form of speech. The Said does not establish an ethical relation, this is done by the Saying. The Saying can only come from the Other, because it expresses transcendence beyond Totality. This means that while the Said can, for example, come from an AI-chatbot, the Saying cannot.

To summarize, we considered the contrast between Totality and Infinity and how reduction plays a big role in how we view the world. It became clear that the Other has radical alterity that cannot be accessed by any subject and thus operates in the realm of Infinity. The radical alterity is operationalized by the Face, expressing the singularity of the Other, i.e. that what cannot be reduced. Subsequently, we showed that the Face is something ethical, making demands before applying any thematization or attitude. In the Face-to-Face encounter, the first demand is 'you shall not commit murder', which shows the primal call for responsibility. Lastly, the importance of speech was emphasized. But what happens to this primal call for responsibility when the subject has an attitudinal access to the Other? Does the Face-to-Face encounter still take place? Does the subject still feel responsibility? And in particular, what are the ethical implications of the econometric attitude?

3 On the Econometric Attitude

Now that Levinas' work has been presented, we will focus on the econometric attitude. In the following section I will argue that the econometric attitude is built upon the theoretical attitude, as critiqued by Heidegger and explained by Blok 2020 in a phenomenological context. I will use the work of Blok 2020 to first outline the theoretical attitude, after which it will be expanded to the science of econometrics, paving the way towards a more elaborate interpretation of the econometric attitude.

The theoretical attitude is an attitude which places us *in front of* an object, making the object accessible as a present-at-hand-object. This means that the object is accessed through perception or *theoria*, completely separated from the observer. Consequently, there is no *living* relation with the object. This means that the object is taken out of the worldly network it is involved in, stripped from its singularity and made ready to be quantified, mathematized or datafied. The theoretical attitude steps away from the object, creating a distance between the observer and the object. Heidegger criticizes this, because in our Being-in-the-world we are always in close proximity to objects, meaning that there is always a social relation with the object we are studying. This implies that, with the theoretical attitude, the world is not understood from out of itself, but rather from an attitude that *a priori* provides a specific form of access to the world and drastically changes the position of the observer in the world. The theoretical attitude, however, goes unnoticed. As Blok 2020 writes: 'The theoretical attitude is absorbed by the object and does not perceive the self-evidently presupposed attitudinal *relation* towards this object'. Due to this, we do not notice that our understanding of an object is determined by our attitude. This makes us not see *the things themselves*, which is, according to Heidegger, the main goal of phenomenology.

Heidegger's critique of the theoretical attitude runs parallel with Levinas' philosophy. The reduction to present-at-hand objects could be compared to the reduction to the Same. Both strip the singularity of the object, in order to comprehend it. But the most important parallel is the primacy of the social relation or, in other words, the proximity. The social relationship with the object (and in Levinas' case, with the Other) should be the starting point of philosophy. The world should be understood from out of itself, with close proximity between the observer and the objects.

Heidegger's theoretical attitude is mainly oriented on science based on principles and laws, i.e. science that is aimed at finding the universal truths; truths that hold for everything and everybody at every point in time. Think for example of Newtonian physics, aiming to find the universal law of motion and the universal law of gravitation. On a philosophical level, these deterministic sciences try to find the essence of things in isolation, without taking into account the Being-in-the-world. Levinas accuses Western metaphysics of the same, which, according to him, does not do justice to the singularity of the individual. Western metaphysics is also aimed at finding universal truths, for example, finding the universal truth about Being. For Levinas, however, Being is not that important. Levinas is appalled by studying Being in isolation. He argued that the social relation and the proximity between people is more important than Being; philosophy starts with ethics.

But, as Krüger, Daston and Heidelberger 1987 and Stamhuis 1992 show, this deterministic science got replaced by a probabilistic science. Science is now aimed at finding the degree of likelihood of certain things.[7] It, therefore, can now take into account outliers and things that are not conform to a universal law. Does this mean the theoretical attitude with probabilistic science can now do justice to the singularity of the individual and the proximity between the observer and the object?

To answer this question we move on to the econometric attitude. This can be considered the probabilistic version of the theoretical attitude. Where the deterministic science used

[7] In regards to econometrics, think for example of the likelihood function, maximum likelihood estimation and the likelihood ratio test (Fisher 1922, Neyman and Pearson 1928).

the theoretical attitude to find universal principles, the probabilistic science does not want universal principles and therefore adopts a new attitude, namely the econometric attitude. The econometric attitude does not, or to a lesser extent, negate the social relation. After all, the econometrician tries to capture the singularity of the to-be-studied objects or individuals through data. When the singularity is perfectly captured, the econometrician can predict the probability of certain things. Take for example a bank. The bank will extract all possible individual features in order to calculate the probability of mortgage default. By extracting as much features of the individual as possible, the bank tries to get as close to the singularity of the individual as possible. But no matter what, the true singularity is only known by the 'I' and exists only in Infinity. This has implications on the ethical relation with the to-be-studied object. Because while it is supposed that the econometrician captures singularity and, in Levinasian terms, the Face, in reality the econometrician merely reduces the to-be-studied individual to data. This process of datafication takes the to-be-studied individuals out of Infinity and makes a Face-to-Face encounter between the econometrician and the to-be-studied individuals impossible. Consequently, no ethical demand is made on the econometrician and the econometrician will not experience the primary call for responsibility.

Even though this is a disadvantage of the econometric attitude, it must be noted that it has major advantages as well. For example, the econometric attitude has been deployed to oppose the long-held view that a higher minimum wage leads to higher unemployment rates (Card and Krueger 2000) and it has been used to mathematize language, making large language models, deep learning and generative AI possible (Parr and Howard 2018). The major advantage of the econometric attitude is that it can extract a number of characteristics from a certain phenomenon, consequently making it possible to study these characteristics in depth. The significant scientific advancement the econometric attitude has provided shows that it is not problematic in a practical sense. However, it is one-sided. While pretending to capture singularity, due to the datafication needed, this is impossible. This unnoticed one-sidedness paves the way for ethical failure, which is why a Levinasian econometric attitude is necessary.

The essential insight to understand the incompatibility of the econometric attitude with Levinasian ethics, is the need for a datafying lens through which the Other is accessed. Econometrics cannot be practiced if the econometrician accepts the Other as *the thing itself* in all its wordliness, in all its singularity, in Infinity. The Other transcends the power of comprehension, until the econometrician uses force. Epistemic violence is needed to reduce the Other to a present-at-hand-object fit for modeling. Where the theoretical attitude reduces the world to present-at-hand objects, the econometric attitude applies a datafying lens to the world. This lens captures the objects in data, after which everything 'is understood as a dataset in the world of data' (Blok 2023, p. 9). It reduces the otherness of the Other to an object ready to be quantified. This makes the world homogeneous, since now everything can, in the same way, be statistically measured. The social relation with the real heterogeneous world is lost. When accessing an individual with the econometric attitude, the individual becomes a representation; it is a mere shadow of its former self. The individual is deprived of Being, or at least of Being-in-the-world.

In summary, the Other is deprived of its Face. As was shown before, the Face is the realization of the singularity and while the theoretical attitude reduces the Other to something universal, the econometric attitude *pretends* to take into account singularity by datafying individual characteristics. Nevertheless, we found that this datafication leads to a reduction of the otherness of the Other to the Same or Totality. Consequently, a proper Face-to-Face encounter cannot occur anymore. The Face of the econometrician is there, but the Face of the to-be-studied human is gone. Even though there are many ethical theories arguing that the Face is not necessary for ethics (for example, deontology), for Levinas the Face is a necessary (and sufficient) condition for an ethical relationship. This again raises the exigent question of how a Levinasian econometrics is possible.

4 The Standoff

Above, Levinas' work and the econometric attitude have been explained in detail. In this section, these will be placed *vis-à-vis*, exposing the friction between them. The key differences are presented in Table 1, whereupon they are discussed in detail in the text below.

Issue	Levinas	The econometric attitude
Universality	Criticizes universality and emphasizes the importance of singularity.	Pretends to use singularity, but fails due to datafication.
Alterity	Emphasizes the importance of radical alterity.	Does not do justice to alterity.
Ethics	Stems from an asymmetric and infinite demand from the Other.	Unclear how ethics relates to econometrics.

Table 1: This table contains the main frictions between Levinas and the econometric attitude.

When the econometrician views the world, ready to make a quantitative analysis, he must look for useful features of the world that can be extracted and, subsequently, quantified. The econometrician does this by trying to capture the singularity of the to-be-studied objects. This information will be the input in the model that calculates the probability of a certain thing. When the econometrician accesses the objects, he accesses them through the econometric attitude. Consequently, his access to the world is determined and limited by the econometric attitude; as if the econometrician has tunnel vision. The datafication of the object will inevitably lead to universalization. As was shown in Section 2, the true singularity of the object cannot be accessed by the econometrician.

When this attitude is applied to individuals, they become the to-be-studied objects. They are reduced to data. This makes them lose their radical alterity, because the econometrician does not accept them as an 'I'. Accepting them as an 'I' would entail that only speech could bridge the gap between the econometrician and the individuals. Here, however, the econometrician bridges the gap by means of reduction. He pulls the individuals out of Infinity, strips them from their radical alterity and ends up with knowledge in Totality.

There are numerous examples that show the loss of real-world meaning due to the econometric attitude. One of the most famous econometric studies is the income effect of education (e.g. Griliches 1977), in which education is measured as years of education. It is an essential paper for econometrics students and it is clearly an example of accessing the world with the econometric attitude. The individual characteristics are extracted, namely income and years of education. It is an influential paper, because Griliches 1977 uses instrumental variables to account for endogeneity. This means that they account for the fact that there are variables that influence both income and years of education, think of IQ for example. This is an econometric method of trying to account for a loss of context, due to the loss of meaning when only using two variables. The variables 'income' and 'years of education' do not tell the full story. There are countless other factors that play a role in this, even factors that cannot be quantified and that cannot be accessed through the econometric attitude. This shows that the econometrician acknowledges that the to-be-studied individuals cannot show their Face to the econometricians. This is where the friction with Levinasian ethics occurs.

Once someone is reduced to Totality, he does not show a Face anymore. This is because through the attitudinal access to the person, the econometrician solely has access to homogeneous data of the person. The Face, however, is that what escapes my comprehension and thus, the econometrician does not meet this Face. Metaphorically, the econometric attitude is a filter between the econometrician and the to-be-studied individual that filters out everything that makes the individual an 'I', i.e. it filters out singularity and the Face. The filter only lets quantifiable data through, which the econometrician subsequently can use for his research. This filter is the reason no Face-to-Face encounter occurs when the econometrician takes on the econometric attitude.

The implication of this is ethical. As we have seen in Section 2, the Face makes the ethical demand during the Face-to-Face encounter. Combining this with the fact that, due to the econometric attitude, the Face of the to-be-studied person does not reach the econometrician and no Face-to-Face encounter occurs, we can safely say that no ethical demand is made upon the econometrician.

In this section we discussed three frictions between Levinas and the econometric attitude. First, we saw that the lifeblood of the econometric attitude is data. Second, we saw that this implies that the econometric attitude cannot do justice to the radical alterity of the Other. Meanwhile, the lifeblood of Levinasian ethics is singularity and radical alterity, which constitute the Face. Hence, third, we saw that through the econometric attitude no Face-to-Face encounter can take place and as a result no ethical relationship is established. Because the econometric attitude is necessary for econometrics, this leads to the conclusion that a complete Levinasian econometrics is not possible due to these inherent frictions. But can we, with the right methods, at least shift a little towards a Levinasian econometrics?

5 Towards a Levinasian Econometrics

Throughout this thesis, it became increasingly clear that the econometric attitude increases the risk of ethical failures. There are, however, ways to safeguard econometrics from this risk, potentially making econometricians act more ethical. The first method is the dialogue. As explained in Section 2, dialogue is an important part of Levinas' ethical theory and can be used to install a feeling of responsibility in the econometrician. The second method is making the econometrician perform a performative speech act. This method is developed by Austin 1962 and, in an applied version, explained by Blok 2017.

5.1 Dialogue

The first method to reduce the risk of ethical failure in regard to the econometric attitude is dialogue. Levinas gave speech a central role in his philosophy, because he argued that in the transcendence of speech there is responsibility. Being spoken to by the Other uncovers the Infinity of the Other, while not reducing it. Speech could, therefore, be a method of achieving that what the econometric attitude cannot achieve: a Face-to-Face encounter. But how do we bring this into practice?

In times of big data, it is impossible to demand that econometricians talk to all the individuals behind the data. The data is simply too extensive and comprises too many data points. Besides that, responsibility does not have to be demanded from the econometrician by everyone. The demand for responsibility makes the econometrician infinitely responsible. It is sufficient to make the econometrician infinitely responsible for one individual, because that individual will get lost in the big data the econometrician uses. Once that individual is lost, the econometrician is infinitely responsible for every individual in the big data, because he cannot distinguish them from each other anymore.

This implies that we can install a feeling of responsibility in the econometrician by setting up a dialogue between the econometrician and one of the to-be-studied individuals. In this true Face-to-Face encounter the econometrician does not access the individual through the econometric attitude, but through speech. Therefore, instead of reducing the individual to data, the to-be-studied individual remains in Infinity and an ethical relation is established between the two. Levinas shows that in proper discourse the Other remains in Infinity, while we are able to communicate with each other: 'the fact that the Face maintains a relation with me by discourse does not range him in the Same; he remains absolute within the relation' (Levinas 1969, p. 195). This ensures that when a dialogue is set up between the econometrician and one of the to-be-studied individuals, an ethical relationship will be established between them. Subsequently, the econometrician will perform his quantitative analysis, while feeling the infinite responsibility towards this one individual. Furthermore, the feeling will be 'replicated', in the sense that it will be felt towards all individuals. This is because the econometrician cannot do justice towards this one individual, without doing justice towards all of them; that one individual is lost in the big data after all.

In order to illustrate this method, I will give an example. In 2018 it came to light that the Dutch Tax Administration (Belastingdienst) implemented racist and biased algorithms to detect possible fraud with childcare benefits. These algorithms particularly targeted parents with foreign backgrounds. The algorithms marked roughly 26,000 innocent parents as fraudulent, causing them severe financial problems. The scandal eventually led to the resignation of the third Rutte cabinet, showing the immense damage it had done. As Amnesty International 2021 show in their report, the problem started with racist algorithms. The algorithmic decision-making of the Dutch Tax Administration was biased and, therefore, violated human rights. These algorithms do not build themselves, they are designed by people who probably used the econometric attitude while doing so. They had to extract universal features from parents, e.g. ethnic background, to design a model (in this case, an algorithm) which makes a decision (in this case, a risk assessment).

This case shows that the makers of the algorithm did not feel genuine responsibility for the parents they were going to affect. This is due to their attitudinal access, merely seeing the parents as data instead of human beings in full context that can experience 'broken marriages, bankruptcy, jail-time and even suicide' (University of Amsterdam 2025). If the makers of the algorithm would have spoken to some of the flagged parents, it would have installed a feeling of responsibility in them. Consequently, they would have been responsible towards all flagged parents, possibly preventing the large scale ethical failure that took place.

In short, some people must adopt the econometric attitude in order to perform necessary research or studies. This is not a bad thing *per se*, but to reduce the risk of ethical failure, they should stay in (real) contact with one or some of the to-be-studied individuals. This can be achieved by a dialogue with a small subsample of the individuals. The dialogue ensures that the individual can demand responsibility of the econometrician in a Face-to-Face encounter. After this initial demand, the econometrician must act responsible towards all individuals in order to act upon his infinite responsibility towards the subsample.

5.2 Performative Speech Act

In 1962 John Austin first presented his speech act theory. This theory stated that speech can do more than just describe things. He showed this by distinguishing between constative sentences and performative sentences. Constative sentences are sentences that describe something in reality, while performative sentences are sentences that perform something in reality.

To illustrate this I will use the same example as Blok 2017. When a marriage officiant says: 'John and Mary are married', he *describes* the current situation of John and Mary. Therefore, the marriage officiant uses a constative sentence, that can be found to be true or false, based on the current reality. When the marriage officiant says: 'I pronounce John and Mary husband and wife', he *performs* something. This statement cannot be checked for correctness since it *does* something. It does not describe reality, but it changes reality. Thus, this is a performative sentence.

An important characteristic of performative sentences is that they are usually in the first person: 'I pronounce ...', 'I do ...', 'I promise ...', etcetera. This indicates that when a performative sentence is said, the speaker is actually involved in the performing. When I say: 'The marriage officiant is pronouncing John and Mary husband and wife', I am not making the marriage officiant pronounce, but I am describing the marriage officiant pronouncing. However, if someone can be made to say a performative sentence, he, consequently, has to perform the performative. A performative sentence can, thus, be a tool to make someone do something. If we can make someone say a performative sentence, we can force him to actually do the thing he is saying.

In general, the performativity of language is widely accepted amongst social scientists. For example, Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton 2005 showed that social science theories do not only describe reality, but also predict reality, essentially making them self-fulfilling prophecies. As Keynes, key-figure in the field of economics, put it: ‘The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood’ (Keynes 1936, p. 383). With this quote, it is again highlighted that performative sentences are not about true or false (right or wrong), but about altering the course of reality. The saying[8] of a performative sentence can commence the process of materializing the action of the performative sentence.

Besides this ‘practical’ interpretation of the performativity of language, Levinas himself also argues that language is performative, but in a more ethical way rather than in a practical respect. First, he addresses the way language is often perceived. He writes: ‘One can, to be sure, conceive of language as an act, as a gesture of behaviour’ (Levinas 1969, p. 67). Conceiving language as behaviour, however, omits an essential aspect of speech, according to Levinas. Namely, the ethical performativity of language. He argues that speech, by ‘the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the Face’ (Levinas 1969, p. 67), can *constitute* and ethical relation and *produce* truth. By this, he means that the Face encompasses both the one who is speaking and that what is said, creating a ‘revelation’. This revelation in language, or, in other words, the making yourself present to the Other, constitutes the ethical relation, because it brings about a Face-to-Face encounter. In this sense, language is performative for Levinas; speech performs the constitution of the ethical relationship. Levinas calls such a Face-to-Face discourse ‘justice’ (Levinas 1969, p. 71), after which he concludes: ‘If truth arises in the absolute *experience* in which being gleams with its own lights, then truth is produced only in veritable conversation or in justice’ (Levinas 1969, p. 71). With this, he argues that if truth only exists in an absolute experience (i.e. an experience in Infinity), then truth can only be produced by proper discourse. Language, thus, performs the production of truth.

In relation to ethical behaviour, Sulmasy 1999 argued that ethical oaths can be more useful to increase ethical corporate behaviour than, for example, codes. This is because codes are a set of rules, thus, constative sentences, merely describing a situation (in this case, a desirable future situation). About codes he writes: ‘No one promises anything, let alone swears anything. These are not performative utterances. The words do not commit future intentions’ (Sulmasy 1999, p. 337). Meanwhile, oaths are performative sentences in the first person; ‘I swear to ...’. Taking an oath is a speech act which performs a certain commitment towards the future, namely to act in line with that oath. Blok 2017 argues that Sulmasy 1999 simplified the matter too much and instead argues for a performative concept of corporate codes. He states: ‘A performative concept of corporate codes consists in the self-performative of the corporate identity, mission and core values of the firm; This performative code is demanded by and responsive to the stakeholders of the firm; Because of the structural possibility of infelicity of corporate codes, the embracing of these codes does not only consist in actual corporate behaviour in light of the code by firms and their employees, but also in the incessant recapturing of the code in their struggle against its possible infelicity’. Clearly, the performative aspect is crucial in both views. Even though the performative codes seem promising, I suggest using an oath as a performative speech act, as Sulmasy 1999 explains, to move towards a Levinasian econometrics. Because the science of econometrics is so broad, implementing a code or set of rules applicable to all

[8] Here, I both mean the everyday-version of ‘the saying’, that is ‘the articulating’ or ‘the uttering’, as well as the Levinasian version of ‘the Saying’ or *le dire* as discussed in Section 2.

econometricians is impossible. An oath, however, can be kept more broadly, making it applicable to all econometricians.

Though an oath could very well function as an individual self-performative speech act, it becomes more powerful in combination with the public context. As Blok 2013 argues, from a Levinasian perspective, the public context in which the oath is uttered, acts as a Face of an Other who, on the one hand, determines the self-performativity of the oath and, on the other hand, transcends the oath-taker. First, this means that the public context makes the ethical demand, giving the oath meaning and power, and second, that the public context transcends the oath-taker, implying that the ethical demand goes beyond the power of the oath-taker. In other words, the oath can be considered the linguistic realization of the infinite responsibility that the public context demands. This transforms the oath from a mere promise to oneself to an absolute ethical obligation towards the public context.

Yet the main question remains: how can this be implemented in econometric practice? First of all, the oath must appeal to both the *intention* of the oath-taker, as well as the *identity* of the oath-taker. The intention is quite clear, to act ethical and with responsibility towards all people. The identity might be more ambiguous. By this, I mean that the oath should be 'the entrance' to the field of econometrics and taking the oath should transform the oath-taker officially into an econometrician, like the Hippocratic oath turns a medicine student into a medical professional. In other words, without the oath you cannot be an econometrician. Combining these two conditions, an official procedure can (and must) be established. Enforcing every econometrics graduate to take the oath when receiving their diploma could be the moment to perform the procedure. This ensures that the oath appeals to the identity, since it would transform the econometrics student into an econometrician. Moreover, the exact words and gestures of the oath must be agreed upon and must be the same for everyone. This could be partly borrowed from the medical oath, which is also uttered after graduation, and the bankers oath, which has a closer relation to econometrics in terms of content.[9] Synthesizing these two oaths into a new econometrics oath, I propose the following: 'I swear / promise that I will act as an econometrician with a responsibility towards all people as individuals and that I will acknowledge their singularity. I will make every possible effort to act ethical and not mistreat anyone. So help me God! / This I pledge and promise!' This oath appeals to the intentions with 'I will ...', but also to the identity with 'act as ...' Together with an official procedure during the graduation, this performative oath *makes* the econometrician responsible. Thus, it is an adequate way of installing the feeling of responsibility in the econometrician, which cannot be done in normal practice due to the econometric attitude needed to practice econometrics.[10]

In summary, an oath consisting of a self-performative sentence combined with a predetermined procedure is a method to get the oath-taker to *become* responsible. Since the econometric attitude does not naturally lead to infinite responsibility as was shown in Section 3, an oath for

[9] For more information on the medical oath and the bankers oath, I refer to Nederlandse Federatie van Universitair Medische Centra 2003 and Foundation for Banking Ethics Enforcement 2025, respectively.

[10] It must be noted that there will always remain a probability that the oath fails and the oath-taker does not act according to the oath. After all, as was shown previously in this section, performative sentences cannot be checked for correctness. According to Austin 1962, failure occurs when one or more rule(s) of a set of six rules is (are) broken. Even though this goes beyond the scope of this thesis, these rules are taken into account in the proposal described in this section. For further reading on the rules I refer to Austin 1962. For further reading on the rules in relation to oaths I refer to Blok 2013.

econometrics students could artificially create a sense of infinite responsibility. This could be a step in the direction of a Levinasian econometrics.

6 Conclusion

In this thesis, we answered the question: How does the econometric attitude, i.e. the reduction of individuals to data, influence the experience of responsibility in the econometrician? The concept of 'the econometric attitude' was introduced and explained by building on Heidegger's notion of the theoretical attitude. Because of the friction between the universalizing tendency of the econometric attitude and the emphasis on singularity in Levinas' philosophy, the econometric attitude was put in a Levinasian light in order to examine the ethical implications.

To get to the answer we first discussed the crucial concepts of Levinas in Section 2. It was argued that ethics is a first philosophy and that it stems from the Face-to-Face encounter. Also Levinas' critique of Western ontology was discussed, because econometrics acts in line with this ontology. Lastly, the function of speech was discussed. This provided all the Levinasian tools to discuss the econometric attitude.

Second, the econometric attitude was discussed in depth. In Section 3 it was explained that the econometric attitude is an expansion of the theoretical attitude. This expansion is needed because science shifted from being based on universal laws and principles to probabilism. As a result, the econometric attitude aims to capture the singularity of the to-be-studied individuals, in order to calculate the probability of something. To capture the singularity, the econometrician collects as much data as possible through a datafying lens. This lens reduces singular characteristics to quantifiable and homogeneous data. Consequently, the econometrician does not access the Face of the to-be-studied individual. For Levinas, this has ethical implications.

After these sections, we acquired the necessary knowledge about Levinas and about the econometric attitude to place them *vis-à-vis*. This confrontation exposed the sharp contrast between Levinasian ethics and the econometric attitude. It became clear that due to the datafication of the econometric attitude it is inherently incompatible with Levinasian ethics, because Levinasian ethics is built upon the idea of singularity, which can never be fully captured in data. Another point of conflict is alterity, which the econometric attitude does not allow for, but is absolutely necessary for Levinasian ethics. These contrasts were summarized in Table 1 and further explained in Section 4.

Even though we now know that, from a Levinasian perspective, an ethical econometric attitude is not possible, Section 5 endeavoured to take a step towards a Levinasian econometrics. It became clear that a complete Levinasian econometrics is fundamentally impossible, nonetheless, two methods were proposed in order to get a step closer. These methods are both aimed at - albeit artificially - installing a feeling of responsibility in the econometrician. The first method does this by means of a dialogue with one person from the to-be-studied individuals. This forces an ethical relationship, which ultimately leads to a feeling of infinite responsibility towards all the to-be-studied individuals. The second method is to make econometrics students perform an oath. This oath functions as a performative speech act which makes the student responsible towards the public context.

In summary, the econometric attitude drastically alters the relation towards the to-be-studied individuals. It does not allow for a Face-to-Face encounter and, therefore, no ethical relationship is established. The call upon the econometrician for responsibility cannot be made. Thus, the econometrician does not feel responsibility towards the to-be-studied individuals. This means that the econometric attitude, due to its datafication of individuals, evades an ethical relationship between the econometrician and the to-be-studied individuals. The econometrician, thus, does not experience responsibility as he would in a Face-to-Face encounter. Even though this is inherent to econometrics, in this thesis two methods were developed that take a step towards a Levinasian econometrics: first, a simple dialogue between the econometrician and one of the to-be-studied individuals and second, forcing econometrics students to take a performative oath. So, despite the fundamental friction between Levinasian ethics and econometrics, this thesis contributes to a more ethical practice of econometrics.

Previously, Levinasian ethics has never been applied to econometrics in particular. The novel research in this thesis was needed for two main reasons. First, to keep Levinas' philosophy contemporary it needs to be consistently revised in combination with modern-day sciences. Although Levinas' work was developed in a specific time period, it can be consistently reinterpreted and applied to contemporary challenges. This not only aims to solve the contemporary challenge, but it also expands our knowledge of Levinas' philosophy and opens new perspectives on his philosophy. Second, with econometrics becoming increasingly important, the risks of ethical failure becomes increasingly dangerous. Therefore, this ethical failure has to be analyzed. Because of the friction between econometrics and Levinasian ethics, analyzing econometrics from a Levinasian perspective is an apt method to discover the roots of ethical failure in econometrics.

In the future it would be interesting to see more empirical case studies to ethical failure related to the econometric attitude. With more empirical evidence, developing a framework for a 'Levinasian' econometrics will become easier and the framework will become more tailored to real-world situations. Besides that, more research can be done on the econometric attitude itself. As the econometric attitude is probably also used outside of the field of econometrics, the situations in which the econometric attitude is used could be investigated. In addition to these empirical questions, it would also be interesting to examine the econometric attitude in the light of other ethical theories, such as deontology, utilitarianism, and consequentialism.

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