

## Beyond therapy: Levinas and ethical therapeutics

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### Abstract

This paper is a reflection upon what is designated as modernist, commercial psychotherapy from the perspective of the radical ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas where the idea is put forward that prior to freedom and consciousness subjectivity *is* exorbitant responsibility for the other. It will be argued that the consciousness of modernist, commercial psychotherapy needs to incorporate openness to this ethical foundation of human being and that this will produce a new approach to psychotherapeutic practice for the therapist.

**Keywords:** *Ethics, praxis, therapist, other, call, approach*

The Sage helps all beings find their nature, But does not presume to act.

(Lao-Tzu, 1993)

### Praxis and Levinasian ethics

It is not the articulation of theory or its practical application but a certain manner of therapeutic praxis understood as a way of living that is the fundamental motivation of the ethical dimension of philosophy. And ethics, understood metaphysically as the calling into question of my spontaneity, according to Emmanuel Levinas (1982, p. 165ff.), is the most originary gesture of all philosophical practice. From this perspective, philosophy itself

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would be fundamentally an ethical undertaking, an ethical/therapeutic way of living.

The call to recollect the ethical foundation of philosophy is part of a larger call to recollect the ethical origin of the human, a theme resounding from the whole course of Levinas' prophetic speaking, involving a radical and disruptive awakening for the ethical philosopher, as I have described elsewhere (Walsh & Robert, 1989, 1998). In this present essay I would like to reflect upon the practice of modernist, commercial psychotherapy within the context of Levinas' basic claim that subjectivity *is* ethical responsibility for the other (Levinas, 1986, p. 111).

For Levinas, ethics, and not ontology as Heidegger thought, would be First Philosophy. Ethics is understood by Levinas as designating a becoming that is prior to the ontological distinction between being and beings that opens up the subject matter of 'onto-theo-logical' metaphysics; an invisible, ethical *praxis* prior to freedom and consciousness and the very possibility of Heidegger's *dasein*, of *being there*, i.e. of there being *a* being (Levinas, 1984, p. 13). For Levinas, ontology already comes too late upon the scene of human ontogenesis to see the ethical origin of this ontogenesis. Although not yet being, this coming-to-be of being before it gets to be something can be approached phenomenologically despite the fact that the originary ethical *praxis* by which we become the beings we are becoming – without ever getting there, remaining always otherwise, always on the way to ourselves, beyond being, otherwise than being – is an event (or non-event) in the realm of the invisible. Levinasian *praxis* is not causal instrumentation or implementation or intervention by an agent. It never achieves the sovereign status of being. Rather, it is response-ability, awakening, recollection, welcoming, substitution, being held hostage . . .

Ethics, in the context of a this interpretation of everyday *praxis*, would not indicate a philosophical action that could be chosen or not chosen by an autonomously existing agent, the way an autonomous Kantian actor, in the modernist mode, might decide to follow a consequentialist rather than a deontological course of moral action. Rather, the kind of *praxis* following upon Levinas' ethical phenomenology would entail a radical awakening from the slumber of an onto-theo-logical forgetfulness of the originary *ethical* foundation of human being, a re-calling of the intersubjective, ethical 'origin' of the human, a dialectical or dialogical 'origin' manifesting as 'an' otherwise-than-being in genuine speaking and listening; a recollection revealing an exorbitant responsibility at the heart of this human ontogenesis; a call to love so greatly you would lay down your life for your neighbor or your friend – for someone who is vulnerable, indigent, innocent, in need of *your* help, destitute like a child or a widow or even a stranger whose very destitution would be the most basic categorical moral imperative – in a self-sacrifice that would not be suicide but '*sainteté*' (Levinas, 1984; Poirié, 1987, p. 93).

Prior to the theoretical consciousness of freedom and knowledge there is a coming-to-be of the human that has not yet achieved the sovereign status of objective being. Levinas' phenomenology seeks to glimpse obliquely and without prejudice this coming-to-be of being before it gets there. In this way he is

true to Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existential ontology, but also surpasses these deployments of the phenomenological method *ethically*, for Levinas' phenomenology would show that human being is ethical *necessarily*; we cannot help but 'be' ethical (Walsh, 1991). We are ethical in our very being (in our becoming) and not merely neutrally existent beings who then may choose to act ethically or not. The human cannot be conceived outside ethical intersubjectivity. Levinas' ethical phenomenology is a wake-up call emerging from the infinite face of the other facing me.

What is the significance of Levinas' ethical understanding of praxis and the human situation for the practice of psychotherapy today?

### The disappearance of psychotherapy

I want to make the case that a psychology and psychotherapy based on a Levinasian ethics is a psychotherapy that does not exist to perpetuate itself.... Psychotherapy must become a cultural therapeutics.

(Robbins, 2004)

Thinking about psychotherapeutic practicing in the context of Levinas' philosophizing, I agree with Edwin Gantt (2002: 76) when he says that the focus of Levinas' ethical phenomenology is aimed primarily at me as the therapist, in my self-understanding *as* a therapist. Gantt is right on target, I believe, when he suggests that Levinas' descriptions of the relationship between the Same and the Other must not be interpreted as yet another theoretical orientation entailing yet another utopian vision of its own that would replace all other utopian visions of therapy – unless u-topia is understood in its literal sense as being no-place: a groping, homeless, transient idea that, like the proverbial wandering Jew, is never anywhere; *an-archē* therapy; invisible therapy. Levinas' speaking of exorbitant responsibility would call into question the forgetfulness of *all* utopian visions attempting to establish themselves somewhere *as* something, *as* some definitive, exclusionary practice – including the practice of psychotherapy today (Walsh, 1989).

It is not through the application of theoretically derived interventions by a certified technician, dispensed like prescriptions during the therapy hour based on differential diagnoses, that psychosocial or spiritual healing occurs. Rather, healing happens in and by the naturally occurring therapeutic interacting with a genuine other who *remains* Other, whose otherness is *not* reduced to a role designated by title as some kind of commercial therapy technician within a cultural power structure – which is the only place where such a designation could make sense. Genuine therapy would thus be a kind of invisible therapy, as I have proposed in my description of naturally occurring therapeutic interacting (Walsh, 1973).

It is precisely *as* a psychotherapist – indeed, as *anything* in Levinas' view – in my very being, in my claim to be and to persist in being in the sense of Hobbes's *conatus essendi*, asserting my right to be, particularly in any kind of claim that makes a pretense to being an authority about anything, the

one in charge, in the know, the one who has the power or the knowledge to heal or do anything else to someone else or even *for* someone else from this position of power . . . precisely in *this* way that I am called into question by the incommensurable otherness of the other escaping me into poverty and destitution and vulnerability, by the irreducibility of the other to any conceptual or theoretical framework that would make it possible for me to grasp or categorize or understand the other *as* this or that (*as* ‘schizophrenic’, *as* ‘bipolar’, *as* ‘manic-depressive’, etc.) and thus, by virtue of this objectification, reduction, and destruction of the otherness of the other, affirm the positing of me-myself in my identity, my sameness with myself, *as* ‘the’ therapist, as the one in charge.

That I am called into question in my being by the infinite otherness of the other approaching me, infinitely resisting my com-prehension and reduction of her *infinition* (Levinas, 1984, p. xv) to the identity of this or that being – as this is glimpsed in the invisible face of the other, for example – is already a challenge to me setting myself up as a therapist in the however subtly communicated officialdom of my office, with my officializing diplomas hanging officiously on the wall, charging an official fee for the therapy product I would sell to my consumer clients or patients like a prescription for their spiritual ills that otherwise would be withheld, say, if you were too poor to afford it, to afford me, the therapist.

Before I know it, before I have any choice in the matter, my being as a therapist is always already called into question by the alterity or exteriority of the other who faces me as ‘patient’ or ‘client’ or ‘student’, *in* that simple facing before it becomes conceptualized and reduced to a ‘face-to-face encounter’, by the metaphysical structure of that alterity, by the fact that, on the one hand, unquestioningly to reduce the *infinition* of alterity to the object ‘client’ or ‘patient’ or ‘student’ is already to perform an injustice to the other, already to harm her essentially and irrevocably – no matter how benign my conscious intentions motivating this reduction; and, second, stemming from and dependent upon this injustice, to posit myself as ‘the therapist’ is to set up a totalitarian regime (built, however subtly and supposedly benignly, upon *the effacement of the other*) that is a falsification and denigration of my own coming-to-be as well.

It is not as if ‘I’ can first exist as a therapist, sitting in my office, seeing clients or patients who come to seek my help, presenting myself, however directly or indirectly, as some kind of expert who would cure them or helper who would help them, and then, from this self-satisfied, self-full situation, this psychic self-authoritarianism, actualize or enact my benign intentions upon an other or others. Nor is it a matter of assuming a role or an attitude that is altruistic where ‘I’ exercise altruistic concern or care for the other unmixed with any egoism, where ‘I’ choose to do anything over and against the possibility of not doing something. The distinction between altruism and egoism already comes too late upon the scene to rescue me from the damage done by my totalizing perception and positioning of myself over and against ‘my’ client that would make this distinction possible; ‘I’ cannot save myself.

The assertion of a subjective Cartesian ego understood as an agent in possession of self-consciousness – a false notion of the ‘oneself’ (Levinas, 1986, p. 131) – already involves an effacement of the other. The ethical relation with the other is prior to the freedom and possibility of agency. The theoretical possibilities opened up by the altruism/egoism distinction already operate within a framework where the otherness of the other has been lost, obliterated by thethetic, data-driven intentionality of that helpful or selfish consciousness that has established itself as the identity of the same, as *the* therapist. It is my very identity as a therapist, as a substantial, self-directing, self-determining free will or free agency bent on doing good that is put into question, the very possibility of being someone who believes they have the choice to help or not to help. To think I have done the good is already not to have done it.

The kind of ethical responsibility Levinas describes is not a matter of purely conscious choice, not the result of an act; it occurs before the consciousness and possibility of choice on my part, a letting-go before the possibility of agency, immediately in every instant of my coming-to-be, before freedom understood as the possibility to have done otherwise, and thus before responsibility in the modernist, commercial sense based on the Kantian presupposition of autonomy, before the face of the other ever becomes visible and com-prehensible and judgeable as an object – in the space of an unthematizable instant that is otherwise than being; we live this even though we cannot grasp it or thematize it. Healing is more of a vocation, a being called, than a profession, where vocation is to respond to a call from the other before I really know what I am doing, as if against my will where I cannot help myself, passionately (like falling in love), to say automatically ‘Here I am!’ before the other, before we ever know what we are doing and, in the final analysis, not ever to really know what we have done. Someone else will write my epitaph, finally catching me up with myself at the end of my time.

Not only am ‘I’ put into question as this or that, *as* a therapist, *as* an educator, *as* a healer, *as* a caregiver, but the whole psychotherapeutic project that manifests itself as a power structure within a legitimizing sociocultural, economic, and ideological framework is also put into question by this unknowing, this radical skepticism stemming from our ethical ontogenesis. In this sense, ‘Levinas’ philosophy’, as an object of scrutiny, does not exist. Insofar as the psychotherapeutic scene contributes to the power structure that would reduce the otherness of the other to the role of ‘client’ or ‘patient’ or ‘purchaser of services’ over and against the establishment of my identity as *the* therapist, my taking myself *as* this or that, my having grasped myself, however tacitly, as ‘the therapist’... the whole psychotherapeutic scene is called into question in its forgetfulness of the ethical origin and ‘nature’ of the human. This psychotherapeutic ‘scene’ involves the production of theoretical frameworks aimed at establishing the boundaries of pathology and health that do not include a putting into question of every theoretical assertion by which these same theories would take up a position in regard to therapeutic parameters regarding definition, interpretation,

conceptualization, diagnosis, intervention, outcome, and validation of the supposedly healing process through quantitative research generating so-called ‘hard’ data based on spurious terms reduced violently from the incommensurable human situation of this or that person.

In what I have referred to as naturally occurring therapeutic relating based on a Levinasian interpretation of ethical praxis, my identity as a therapist or counselor disappears. Professional ‘psychotherapy’ and ‘counseling’, in their modernist, commercial format, disappear. ‘I’ no longer understand myself *as* anything; ‘there is’ just me becoming, me not-yet; me on the way to me; otherwise than being. Also, the other as patient or client disappears. Now ‘there’ ‘is’ just you, ‘there’, dynamically becoming, incomprehensible, mysterious, infinite, escaping my totalizing gaze, allowing me only a glimpse, commanding my responding wordlessly from the ‘height’ of a deep vulnerability. And finally the scene from within which therapy is dispensed for a fee disappears altogether.

### **Beyond therapy**

What is left after this phenomenological reduction of ‘psychotherapy’ is ‘me’ speaking with ‘you’, me listening to you as if being inhabited by you, being heard; you and me conversing where your desire and need to be heard have immediate priority over my wish to speak, as if I were being held hostage by you; where I am at your disposal – disposed of all, destitute, facing you; and where, in losing myself for you in this way, *mirabile dictu*, I find myself finding myself: ‘– ce qui ne serait pas un suicide ni une resignation, mais l’amour’ (Levinas, 1984, p. 231).

You sit across from me in the small room. I do not *know* definitively who you are. I do not know what I am doing exactly or what will happen next, but I am open to it. Together we are groping in the dark for some illumination from the process itself, from what is happening here and now for us that, if we allow it, if we are patient, will show us the next thing to be done; discerning together because we must, because it is better than groping alone (which is impossible anyway), because this is what we find ourselves doing as if compelled, as if moved by something outside us, passionately, subjectively, with little comfort from any theoretical understanding and knowledge which always arrives too late upon the scene to heal anything – yet with overflowing desire for the health and wholeness and well-being of the other.

It is not the power of theoretical knowledge or technical intervention that heals, but the passion of loving desire for the good of the other over my own good. That there is real danger on this ethical path of being-for-the-other in the world in which we live is perhaps why a false sense of safety and self-comfort is so often sought by well-intentioned but ill-informed helpers in the reduction of the other to commercial or pathological categories of understanding from which a profit can be made. Levinas’ ethical phenomenology looks forward to an overcoming of this modernist, commercial, and institutionalized model of contemporary psychotherapy.

It is not because I am ‘a therapist’ hired by you that I find myself listening to your fears, your sadness, your anger, your resentment, your despair, your loneliness, your confusion, your incomprehension, your suffering . . . finding myself opened to it, being opened by it, susceptible to it, wounded by it, beyond my control . . . not because I am ‘a therapist’ but because this therapeutic interacting is what I cannot avoid, as if *commanded* by you before I know it, my interlocutor, my partner in conversation or silence who approaches me unavoidably; because for me this response-ability outside of my control is like breathing, which I also do not choose but rather in the process of which I find myself already being an unwitting but willing accomplice; loving living and therefore not wishing to comprehend it.

It is not so much that ‘I’ ‘do’ this as an act performed by an agent. How could I be my own progenitor? Rather, I think that the moment of genuine healing in therapeutic interacting is accomplished in harmony with the way Taoism ‘understands’ *wu wei*: doing by not doing, being indirectly or obliquely or invisibly instrumental without acting, as is suggested by Lao-Tzu in the epigram to this present essay and reflected in the approach of some Levinasian-oriented therapists (Gans & Redler, 2001, p. 68). This healing process, *before* it is a healing process, is happening as if on its own, when it will and where it will, in secret, invisible, carrying us along, naturally occurring before ‘I’ ever arrive on the scene to accomplish it.

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