

The idea of a possibility

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This essay reviews others which apply Levinas' work to the fields of psychotherapy and psychology. Our ways of knowing, interpreting and relating, particularly in their more dogmatic, commodified and professionalised forms, have been challenged and found wanting as ethical practices. A Levinasian perspective offers a radical reconception, where ethics, the fundamental relation of oneself with an Other, calls for responsibility and – therefore and consequently – investigation, knowledge and interpretation. This turn to Levinas of course leads us to rethink our epistemologies and knowledge claims, but we should not be too quick to think we have found the solution to our problems. We may share 'the idea of a possibility', but patience and attention are still called for.

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Insoluble problems

These seven essays, which bring the thought of Emmanuel Levinas into the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, sent me back to the concluding paragraphs of his 'Beyond dialogue', in *Alterity and Transcendence*. In the context of Judaeo–Christian relations, Levinas writes of a 'maturity and patience for insoluble problems':

What can it be? The presence of persons before a problem. Attention and vigilance: not to sleep until the end of time, perhaps. The presence of persons who, for once, do not fade into words, get lost in technical questions, freeze up into institutions or structures. The presence of persons in the full force of their irreplaceable identity, in the full force of their inevitable responsibility. . . . [A] new religiosity and solidarity – is loving one's neighbor

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anything other than this? Not the facile spontaneous *élan*, but the difficult working on oneself: to go toward the Other where he is truly other, in the radical contradiction of their alterity, that place from which, for an insufficiently mature soul, hatred flows naturally or is deduced with infallible logic. . . . The presence of persons, proximity before persons: what will come of this new spirituality, that proximity without definite projects, that sort of vigilance without dialogue that, devoid of all definition, all thought, may resemble sleep? To tell the truth, I don't know.

(Levinas, 1999, pp. 87–88)

Then he reminds us of Saint-Exupéry's little prince who demands the stranded pilot draw a lamb for him. The pilot tries but fails, eventually satisfying the boy only by drawing a parallelogram, a box in which, he says, the little lamb lies sleeping. Levinas concludes:

I do not know how to draw the solution to insoluble problems. It is still sleeping in the bottom of a box; but a box over which persons who have drawn close to each other keep watch. I have no idea other than the idea of the idea one should have. The abstract drawing of a parallelogram – cradle of our hopes. I have the idea of a possibility in which the impossible may be sleeping.

(Levinas, 1999, p. 89)

In these papers, we draw close to each other, keeping watch over the possibility of an ethical practice of psychotherapy and an ethical theory of psychology.

The social and ideological tendencies which move psychology (and philosophy, for that matter) towards ever more 'commodified and professionalised' forms, in Richard House's term (House & Bates, 2003), or to ever more mechanical 'economic and ideological dogmatism', as Clegg and Slife write, have been passionately and articulately critiqued for decades. We know the charges; several of them are raised again within these pages. We recognize and are offended by the brutality and injustice of our practices of knowing, interpreting and relating. We recognize and are offended by their impoverishment of meaning.

Recognize and are offended because this was not the end that was intended. Psychology: *logos* of the psyche, a would-be science of behaviours, emotions, mental states and their disorders, intended to describe and explain, and so to inform our psychotherapies, to allow us better to understand and to treat psychic distress. And just see what it has come to. James Hillman and Michael Ventura said it a decade ago already: we have had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world is getting worse. What now? Can we simply do it better, reformulate and recalibrate in order to produce a different outcome? Or was it a misbegotten exercise from the first? And, if so, what are we now to do with the suffering around us, and within us?

A Levinasian perspective

This question of human suffering, and how to respond to it, seems to be the quintessential insoluble problem. But we cannot ignore it. And some of us think we see a way forward, a way out, in Levinas's work and thought. But *why* Levinas?

How we answer that question will shape how we read these papers, and since we surely will not all answer identically, let me confess what attracts me to Levinas's work. First of all, it is because of the way he sees this root situation and because he asks the right questions. Here is the situation: living in the world, we find ourselves concerned with both our own suffering and also that of others. How could this be? That we have a concern for our own being seems self-evident and without need of justification; that we might have an equal or even greater concern for the being of an other is absurd. And yet, there it is.

And the right question to ask? In the arena of intimate relationships – including of course those which want to be 'therapeutic' – one could do worse than this one from *Time and the Other*. Levinas asks, 'How can a being enter into a relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?' (Levinas, 1985, p. 77) And, one should add, also *without crushing the other*.

Second, it is because Levinas sees our infinite responsibility for others as constitutive of who and how we are. Or, as R. N. Williams says in his paper here, Levinas sees 'the fundamental nature of the ethical and the ethical nature of the fundamental'. And it is because, having seen that, he does not shy away from any of its implications or any of its harshness.

Third, one is attracted by the thoroughness, rigour and propriety of his argument and method, which offer firm and deep-rooted support to further researches.

And, finally, I look to Levinas's work for a way through 'insoluble problems' because it is radical enough – Copernican enough – to turn the world upside down. If the self-identified and self-interested egoic subject is not at the centre of the human cosmos, then everything we egoists know is not, after all, as it seems. And so, there is hope.

The face of the Other is where we start from

Levinas is one of the core influences of my practice as a counselling philosopher. From that perspective, Robert Walsh is easily my nearest neighbour here. If psychotherapy (and philosophy, for that matter) is to be first of all the practice of ethics, it must begin not in theory and knowledge, but in simply being together with another, face to face.

I think he is right to say that this ethics prior to knowing puts into question not only oneself *as* therapist and the other *as* client, but also 'the whole psychotherapeutic project that manifests itself as a power structure within a legitimizing sociocultural, economic and ideological framework'. I would also support his notions of 'invisible therapy': of a 'naturally occurring therapeutic interacting', and of the healing power – 'happening as if on its own' – of 'the passion of loving desire for the good of the other over my own good'. We need to think more about these things.

This therapeutic co-presence does indeed come down to the straightforwardness of 'you and me conversing where your desire and need to be heard has immediate priority over my wish to speak, as if I were being

held hostage by you'. There is you and me and *what arises between us* to which we both come to attend. It is with that attention, with discernment and 'groping together in the dark', that healing may be accomplished. In this, Walsh declares, there is 'little comfort from any theoretical understanding or knowledge'.

Well, yes, but.

One senses a disingenuousness here: the therapist is after all there *as* a therapist, and the client is there *as* a client. Or, to introduce philosophical counselling's analogous terms, the counsellor *as* a counsellor, and the guest *as* a guest. As a counsellor, one is expected – and required – to know at least a thing or two. The expression of oneself in the face-to-face, *me voici*, is not enough. Pure saying must become something said.

In our being together, there are two scenes playing simultaneously which could be thought of as 'field', which is *proximity before a person*, and its 'focus', which is the other's trouble, a so-far insoluble problem around which we draw near, side by side, in solidarity and vigilance. The face-to-face (field) commands me to the side-by-side (focus), which in turn calls for consciousness, knowledge and understanding. So, for a therapist or counsellor who wants to take her responsibility to the Other seriously, what is it necessary to know and to understand? We will look to the essays here for some guidance.

The first thing we know: The primacy of ethics

R. N. Williams, in his 'Self-betraying emotions and the psychology of heteronomy', rightly insists that our understanding begin at the beginning. For a 'Levinasian psychology', the first issue to be resolved must be the priority of ethics over being, simply because everything to do with Levinas follows from this.

Williams points out that psychology (and, yes, philosophy for that matter) has failed to 'come to grips with the ethical', usually by reducing it to the mechanisms of rational principles or biology. It fails because it starts with ontology, with a human being who is a fundamentally self-concerned but reasonable beast, one for whom 'to be or not to be' really *is* the question. For this one, the Other can appear only as a 'someone like me', perhaps a competitor or enemy, perhaps an ally or even a lover. How then, does he find himself deferring to the other – even, as Levinas says, in something as simple as letting the other enter first through a door, 'After you, sir!?' As Williams neatly puts it: 'When ethics is rooted in reason, the fundamental question of reason – the question of certainty – overshadows the fundamental question of the ethical – the question of right.' And so, from this mistaken priority of ontology, ethics becomes a matter for epistemology and knowing, in the process continuing to mishear and misrepresent the 'still small voice' which is the 'most authentic and aboriginal voice' of the ethical.

However, it is precisely when ontological reason fails to account for the ethical that we may start to think of the possibility of the ethical accounting for reason, which is the crucial turn towards Levinas. Here, there is an

‘always-already’ relation to the Other that precedes and transcends being. The self-interested thinking animal is stripped down to the naked expression of a sacred responsibility for the other, without recourse to being or its reason.

This is the first thing a Levinas-inspired therapist has to figure out. Walsh makes a helpful distinction between therapy as a *profession* – where one professes to apply ‘theoretically derived interventions . . . dispensed like prescriptions during the therapy hour based on differential diagnoses’ – and therapy as a *vocation*, a ‘being-called . . . to respond to a call from the other before I really know what I am doing’. Knowing the truth of this is not a matter of studying the collected works of Levinas and training oneself in vocational correctness. To find the difference between counselling as a profession and as a vocation, all that is needed is to stop running the show and begin to pay attention to how it takes place.

In ‘Epistemology and the hither side’, Clegg and Slife quote Levinas on the inadequacy of thematic knowledge for comprehending the other: ‘the face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure’. Think about what that means. As a professional – and we all must be professional – you take note of this person coming through your door: his appearance in terms of social categories, his mental and emotional state, whatever. Maybe you are even inclined to do some testing of the client, or take an inventory. You want to get some idea of him.

But suddenly, in the midst of all this, there comes a moment when this person will say something, or nothing, when he looks at you, or stares at a wall, when he slaps the chair or struggles with tears, and suddenly all your expertise and certainty and diagnostic treatment plans are like dust in your mouth. A knock-your-socks-off experience of *contact*, of the proximity of the Other, of your own presence solely as one called to serve. For the ‘professional’, this loss of mastery can be a nightmare (and it will be a strange moment for the client as well, if he catches it), but it is where one truly begins.

Figuring out the priority of ethics over ontology is not a matter of taking Levinas’ word for it. It’s a matter of noticing and opening to this cataclysmic experience of the alterity – the uniqueness and precious singularity – of the Other. But Levinas’ words for it are certainly very fine:

The face with which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face. To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated.

(Levinas, 1969, p. 215)

This is the first thing a psychotherapist (or philosopher) needs to know: that one’s presence is required, in *the full force of one’s irreplaceable identity*

and in *the full force of one's inevitable responsibility*; that it is necessary to *go toward the Other where he is truly other, where he cries out for justice.*

James Faulconer, in 'Knowledge of the Other', calls this *welcoming knowledge*, where my knowing the other takes place purely as 'encounter or welcome'. Clegg and Slife distinguish it as well from Kant's transcendental knowledge: "The hither side [proximity, the Face] is not, like the noumenal world, assumed but unexperienced; it is experienced but beyond fully adequate articulation within the categories of being. The hither side is " 'an anteriority that is older than the *a priori*'."

Such a strange scene: one needs to know this, but to know this is still to know nothing at all. The revelation of the Face interrupts and suspends the project of objective knowledge of the other, but immediately also reinstates it in service of one's responsibility to the other.

Reason is my welcoming response to the other person, who calls my solitary possession of the world into question, who calls my arbitrary freedom into question . . . Objective knowledge and its objects are the content of the rational response that I offer when I am questioned. To put it in Levinas's terms, objective knowledge is ethical response.

(Faulconer)

Say what?

Might it not be enough to simply stop with that, to say that, once you recognize the significance of ethical responsibility and as long as you can proceed in harmony with it, *what* you do does not particularly matter? Shades of St. Augustine: 'Love, and do as you will.'

Most of the papers here are concerned with ways of knowing and knowledge claims, and with the adequacy and legitimacy of these after one has accepted that the desire for 'sure things' serves a more fundamental desire for the other's good. This is no doubt necessary work. If the revelation of the Other and of one's responsibility is really significant – if Levinas is right – then the objective knowledge and reason it gives rise to must be somehow, and unpredictably, different from that which began from a study of the being of beings. We may well be in the same position as the astronomers who followed after Copernicus: some things we have believed to be true will remain the same, some must be reinterpreted and some will simply fade away into the ether.

Still, research and writing are at a remove from the face-to-face of being with another in therapy. I worry about reason's power to enchant us, leading us to *fade into words, get lost in technical questions, freeze up into institutions or structures . . .* To neglect or forget *the difficult working on oneself* (can we be reminded of that too often?).

Here is what worries me: that we hold back from the extremes proximity demands; that we might say too little, too vaguely, from fear of saying too much and going astray; that some of us who recommend a certain way to proceed – whether a route or a vehicle – inadvertently neglect Levinas's claim that '[l]ike a shunt, *every* social relation leads back to the presentation

of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face' (Levinas, 1969, p. 213, emphasis added). I worry that some of us might think it is our business to preach Levinas – which is impossible anyway. If I am unable to comprehend the other, how much less can I know her responsibility, her business with the ones who face her?

I also wonder what remains of psychology's scientific project when the psyche is no longer simply the site of private mental states, but rather signifies substitution and the-other-in-the-same (Levinas, 1981, p. 112). I am not sure that research psychology's object of investigation has not simply disappeared, and I wonder if the turn back to philosophy – such as the hermeneutical and phenomenological exercises here – does not indicate something like this. The impossibility of a god's-eye objectivity, which has proved such a challenge to the projects of scientific psychology, shows its positive aspect here. We are moved to become more humble about our apprehension of truth – to look for the sort of relational epistemologies and methodologies discussed in these papers – not because of some inadequacy or error, but because of a goodness which first concerns us with justice.

Of course, if philosophy would also turn to rediscover itself as a practice of relationship, ethics and justice, who knows how these disciplines will eventually sort themselves out. Perhaps the open-heartedness of psychotherapy can ally itself with the open-mindedness of philosophy. In the meantime, here we are, gathered together, and all of our fallings short are at least opportunities to practise the *maturity and patience, attention and vigilance* proper to insoluble problems.

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