

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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## **Levinas in Practice**

### *Face to Face and Side by Side*

HELEN DOUGLAS

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

*How can a being enter into relation with the other  
without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?*

– Emmanuel Levinas

### **Abstract**

In a Levinasian philosophical counseling practice, the work of the counselor or therapist is two-fold, both face-to-face in proximity with the other and side-by-side, engaged together with the other in the work of dialogue. These roles, or phases, are interdependent; each in turn gives rise to and interrupts the other. The counselor or therapist primarily bears responsibility for maintaining the relationship face-to-face, while the guest (patient or client) leads the work side-by-side.

**Keywords:** *philosophical counseling, philosophical practice, psychotherapy, Levinas, face-to-face*

### **Introduction**

This is a report from the field of a philosophical counseling practice, grounded in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, that attempts to discover philosophy as *good practice*<sup>1</sup>, as a practice of ethics which transcends and is prior to any ethical code or principles; engaged dialogue with and for the other, with no prior convictions, ambitions or theoretical ground, an event that takes place in the relationship and relatedness of persons, each one unique, irreducible and irreplaceable.

### **Philosophical Counseling**

Although its roots go back as far as philosophy itself, contemporary philosophical counseling is a relatively new profession. It is often presented as either a form of, or an alternative to, psychotherapy, and to a fly on the wall, they would look very similar. Both engage in dialogue in order to alleviate human distress.

The fundamental difference between them would be psychotherapy's theoretical commitment to psychology as "a scientific study of mental processes and behaviour" in which the psychologist has expert knowledge. The counseling philosopher has expertise in the skills and traditions of philosophy, and draws on these to help guests to examine their own lives, that is, to clarify and understand their own experience, beliefs, reason and values in order to live a life worth living. Philosophical counseling can take many forms. Within the broad field, counseling philosophers may specialise in work with a particular population, or, as in my case, work from different philosophical or therapeutic platforms.

This distinction between psychological and philosophical counseling may be less sharp in the more philosophical schools of psychotherapy, e.g. phenomenological or existential psychology, but I would suspect it still remains. I also suspect that the essential difference has to do with ethics and, because this is precisely where Levinas steps in, the distinction between Levinasian practices of psychotherapy and philosophical counseling might be even more subtle.

## The appeal of Levinas

For several years now, the psychology department at Seattle University has hosted an annual Levinas seminar called “Psychology for the Other”. A special issue of the *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counseling and Health* (Loewenthal and Kunz, 2005) featured several of these papers. The contents included

- Beyond therapy: Levinas and ethical therapeutics
- Taking therapy beyond modernity? The promise and limitations of a Levinasian understanding
- Towards an ethical-hermeneutics
- Toward a therapy for the Other
- Epistemology and the hither side: A Levinasian account of relational knowing.

Notice all these *towards*, *beyonds* and *hithers*: everyone is on the move. Mostly, it seems, they are trying to get *beyond* a medical model of psychotherapy that is felt to be reductionist, mechanical and generally unsuited to responding ethically and meaningfully to some one who suffers. Mostly, they’re heading *towards* psychotherapy as an ethical practice.<sup>2</sup>

My contribution, “The idea of a possibility” (Douglas, 2005), reflected upon the seven main essays. It seemed to me that we had all gathered around the same starting point: that Levinas’s work establishes a subjective orientation for the therapist or counselor that begins with the Face of the Other, with a responsiveness to the other that both precedes and calls for understanding, for ways of knowing and interpreting that do not do violence to the person before us. That being face-to-face with the other indeed “reveals my being-for-the-Other and the inexhaustible responsibility contained in this structure”. (Peperzak, 1995, xi)

For Levinas, the crucial orientation of subjectivity, of an *I*, is always to the Face of the Other; that is, to the approach and appeal of the other that finds me and calls for my response—the stranger, the widow and the orphan who bring me trouble, the nearest one who calls me to love. In Levinas’s words, the Face

preserves an exteriority which is also an appeal or imperative given to your responsibility... One can say once more: the face, behind the countenance that it gives itself, is like a being’s exposure unto death; the without-defence, the nudity and the misery of the other. It is also the commandment to take the other upon oneself, to not let him alone... (in Robbins, 2001, 48)

That this responsibility of the one for the other is prior to knowledge is the first thing that a Levinasian counselor or therapist knows. Irrevocably and implacably, the Face makes known the priority of the ethical order over the orders of being. There’s just no arguing with it. Every time I think I’ve got a handle on the other, on who she is, she will astound me again. And this thunderbolt lets me know, for sure, each time, that I’m not just wrong, but I’m *in* the wrong, and in danger of missing what might matter most. One is called to welcome the other without knowing who calls, and who shows up will always be a surprise.

But then what happens? What comes to pass between us? Most of what I have read doesn’t seem to go all the way with Levinas. It slips back into ontology or joins forces with hermeneutics or epistemology or postmodern approaches to psychotherapy. This isn’t a bad thing—but I’m not sure that such a departure is necessary and, if it is necessary, I’m not sure one needs to go off so quickly.

So this is what I have been thinking about: *if we stay longer with Levinas, what then could we say about what happens in the work with the Other, in the practice of philosophical counseling or psychotherapy?*

This paper begins to answer that question in the following terms:

- The work of a Levinasian philosophical counselor or therapist is two-fold, *both* face-to-face in proximity with the other *and* side-by-side, engaged together in the work of dialogue.
- These phases, or roles, are interdependent; each in turn gives rise to and interrupts the other.
- The counselor or therapist primarily bears responsibility for maintaining the relationship face-to-face, while the guest (patient or client) leads the work side-by-side.

### **Proximity: face to face**

Someone, let's say "he", arrives at my door. Or we could say it in French, as if of an event: *il arrive*. And, before I intend or choose to (before I intend or choose anything), I find myself already involved with this other who faces me, already saying *yes, here I am, come in*. We can say that in French, too, with a nod to Jacques Derrida: *me voici, viens, oui oui*.<sup>3</sup>

Here are two subjects, face to face, each one in *proximity*, in contact with the other in exposure and sensibility. We may find ourselves in the same boat here, but we two are not the same. Our relationships with each other likewise are not the same.

I am the one at home here, a subject living in and from the world, in perfect freedom, the world at my command. In relation to me, he is (I'll say this in Latin) *hostis*, a stranger, coming from who-knows-where for who-knows-what. But, beyond mere unfamiliarity and difference, the *alterity* of his Otherness is expressed in this way that one is immediately called to hospitality, in this way that recalls one to oneself as host, hostage, as the one-for-the-other. The radical alterity of his Otherness is expressed in the passivity by which one opens and is opened. *Yes, here I am*.

*He* himself is homeless, itinerant, destitute in some way. Found wanting. He comes to me concerned with his own being, with his own suffering, desire, fear and need. In relation to him, I am *hostis*, a stranger—but one who offers refuge, makes of him a guest. Beyond mere unfamiliarity and difference, the alterity of my otherness comes to him as an opening from beyond himself, "news from elsewhere", a pledge of the possibility of deliverance from himself.<sup>4</sup>

This is the moment of the face-to-face which sustains the work of this philosophical practice as its ground and condition. It takes place in proximity, in an unmediated relationship between two unique terms, the *irreplaceable subject* and the *incomparable other*. Maintaining this relationship—that is, attending to the other—is the counselor's first order of business.

Maintenance here is not servicing, but service. Maintain: *manu tenere*, to hold in one's hand, like a small bird, a heart that beats, fragile and precious; to keep. Attend: *ad-tendere*, to stretch to and to be present, to wait and to listen, to regard; to apply oneself to the care or service of. Tending, tenderly, toward *something, out there*. Something that calls, strangely, from within.

This relatedness between us is not brought about through an act of will. Neither is it prescribed by our positions or roles: rather, our positions or roles are prescribed by this relatedness. It is not simply an addition of entities. This "we" cannot be constructed. But still, its maintenance is my responsibility; always mine more than the other's.

Why? Because, being the one at home, with all the resources in the world, I can. Because I can't *not* without blame. But mostly—with responsibility, as with love and other catastrophes—there is no why. It's just so.

### **Beginning to speak: *entre nous***

The counselor's role cannot be purely passive. Making welcome and attending to the one who has come calling is not good enough. The guest arrives with a question, with a situation that must be seen to. Something has to happen. Something has to change. The work begins with the guest introducing the counselor to his situation and his world. We begin to speak.

In this moment, there is a tension or suspension in the timeless immeasurable distance between *I* and the Other. Proximity opens up into a field between us, *entre nous*, where we can work: an empty space where what comes up can take place (just between you and me). From the immediate approach of the Other in proximity—which really is *much* too close for comfort—we find a little breathing space, a here-and-now, here and now.<sup>5</sup>

This field between us requires and arises from co-presence. Both of us need to show up as well as we can, separate in relation. Then we begin to engage together with the guest's concerns. The field takes focus. The space becomes inhabited.

But here is a question. How is it, actually, that talking *cures*?

An answer, by way of Levinas: because of the way it relates us. Firstly, language is the “manifestation of a reason” (Levinas, 1998, 25). We hold in common this language and its reason, with which we find and create meaning. We find ways of understanding, of explaining and predicting. We draw together as we speak about our experience of the world. We try to make sense. We test our beliefs and assumptions: “*Is that right?*” we say, “*Do you know what I mean?*” We come together in expression and recognition.

At the same time, discourse also expresses and preserves our singularity. It is because we are not one and the same that we need to speak to each other. It is *I* speaking uniquely with *you*, and *you* with *me*. “The *I* is ineffable because it is speaking par excellence; respondent, responsible. The other as pure interlocutor is not a known, qualified content, apprehensible on the basis of some general idea, and subject to that idea. He faces things, in reference only to himself.” (Levinas, 1998, 25-26)

And finally we come to the question Levinas posed in *Time and the Other*, one that must be crucial for any ethical therapeutic or philosophic practice: “How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?” (Levinas, 1985, 77) Or, indeed, without crushing the other.

The imperative to work together, to talk things through, side by side, comes from the guest in his predicament, but it resounds to the counselor within the structure of the one-for-the-other, face to face. It would therefore be a betrayal if what followed did not serve, or even violated, that bond. So: how do we safeguard both the other and oneself in the work? How can we be present together without violence and violation, without the two collapsing into one? How do we get into this so that we both come out alive?

“*An exteriority without violence is the exteriority of discourse.*” (Levinas, 1998, 22) You call, I answer. We talk, engaged together in this discourse that is made up of the words we speak, but also always takes in the silences, the laughter and the sighs, the flash of an eye, our all gestures and hesitations.

### **The work: side by side**

The counselor and the guest join in the work together, in partnership. This is the practical level of investigation, perception and interpretation, the phase of a therapeutic relationship most evident to theorists, flies on walls and other observers.

Again, although we are partners and co-conspirators in this work, our roles are not the same. I can admit my unavoidable obligation to the other, in the face of his need and command, but when we sit down together, I am pretty much at sea. I have to be there for him—not in the sense of an easy banality, but in all sincerity. But how? *He faces things, in reference only to himself.* He is not a *known, qualified content.* He is not *apprehensible on the basis of some general idea* (i.e. man, African, schizophrenic, Other). If I am to take part, to take his part, I can only join and follow after him. I depend on him to let me know, to refer these *things* he faces to me, even when he doesn't know how. My questions to him are sincere, neither idle nor rhetorical. Face to face, his interest is mine and my desire is for his good.

And so, as we work side by side, there is a kind of inversion in our situation, one which confronts my mastery and sufficiency: it is his world that matters, and he who must lead our way. Relying on his authority, his sense of direction or purpose or *telos*, the meaning we find together must be meaningful, and feel meaningful, to him. Truth is not my first order of business. If it is imperative for me to know “what's what”, this is first of all for the other's sake. *Philo-sophia*, before it is the love of wisdom, is “the wisdom of love at the service of love”. (Levinas, 1981, 162)

In practice, I have found it easiest simply to believe everything I'm told—or at least to believe that I'm always being told *something*, even if it's not always clear what that is. While I'm at it, let me also confess that I believe we all are pretty much doing the best we can, given our situations, and also that we can probably do better. With Plato, I believe (more or less) that no one does wrong deliberately. With Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonians, I am a sceptic of the old school. And, with novelist Dorothy Allison's aunt, I do happily admit that “there are two or three things I know for sure. But they're not always the same things, and I'm not always so sure.” (Allison, 1996)

### Notes from the Other Chair

In the writing of this paper, it became clear that, if the side-by-side work is indeed primarily the work of my guests, then I can't speak for philosophical counseling alone, in a monologue. To find out what might be going on in the other chair, I asked some of those who had sat there. I received the following note from “Wanda”, a woman who came to see me for a couple of months in 2005, and then again for six months in 2006. I was glad to hear from her because she's someone who put the space to good use and was very aware of doing so. This, slightly shortened, is what she wrote:

*The journey there: I would not put the radio on, so that I could think—what is happening here? What have I been thinking that should be brought into conversation? What is mixed with the feeling of anticipation?—because there was always anticipation. Sometimes I spoke about what I needed to, sometimes it took a few weeks of saying other things before I chose to get there. Wherever things were particularly tender. Wherever I felt some shame.*

*The drive was almost always beautiful. It took that kind of journey to look up and see the space, and it was filled with a kind of excitement, being on my own and under no obligations for a precious little while.*

*And then walking up the hill to the room—and arriving I would see your silhouette making wonderful-smelling coffee, and the light was on. It felt like walking towards sanctuary—something very old. After the first few weeks where there were more*

*nerves than anything else, the time felt very much mine, a time of coming into my own.*

(As a teacher of mine would say, “Look! Free therapy!” Wanda’s sessions started well before I came on the scene, and according to her own agenda. On my side of town, I was bringing my attention towards her, reading notes, remembering what may have occurred to me since we had last met, putting on the kettle.)

*I don’t remember much except for fragments in the conversation. And your presence—which was incredibly stable and full. I can’t map out what you were doing.*

(This, I think, observes the two levels of practice—my presence face-to-face with her, and her role in guiding the work side by side with me. My guess is that she can’t “map out” what I was doing simply because *I* was following *her*. And, although these notes are concerned more with form than content, I’m fascinated that only “fragments” of conversation remain, even a few months later. In Levinas’s terms, the significance of the Saying has endured longer than what was said.)

But some things made a big impression on me, like:

*The first conversations, talking about a stuck and conflicted situation... Fleshing out metaphors rather than just repeating them endlessly to myself as confirmation of what I was thinking... gave me the chance to get out of the initial “I” and look around... look at multiple motivations. It made some space in the situation...*

(Some space, between us.)

*... When clarification was necessary it was mutual because you and I both weren’t sure what I was saying, not that you didn’t understand what I was saying when I was sure of what I was saying.*

(There was no need for clarification when she was sure of what she was saying.)

*You consistently brought me back into intimacy with my thoughts and feelings. You didn’t (generally, and increasingly over the time I spent with you) allow me to externalise them so as to go off on a tangent. And you noticed that that was what I was doing. It gave me the skill to sometimes notice too—so that I would be able to remind myself to stay close.*

*You brought so many inheritances—a literacy of language and symbol. That completely worked for me... It validated for me a whole realm of thinking and feeling that was sidelined or flattened out. That and the importance of modesty and staying close to my own experience are really the things I’ve kept close by since I stopped coming to you... And I’ve thought a lot about working on conditions for the arising of things rather than trying to attain some sort of result, and also about patience—an active open anticipation with time’s generosity. That feels very new for me, quite profound.*

*I felt that you liked me and that I was welcome. Some familiarity or commonality in the way we think or use language.*

*It was a space in which to work—and while there was lots of support for attention to the self, you made sure that it was not self-indulgent. I remember making a flippant*

*comment once and you responded with a very firm rebuke, a reminder that this was not to be taken lightly... It was a space and a conversation to honour.*

*Your memory of the elements and specifics of what I was talking about and how I phrased them was definitely part of why the space felt very trustworthy and welcoming. It was clear to me that your attention was secure. You reminded me a few times of dreams or metaphors that could be kneaded back in again when I wasn't sure where to go.*

*There was lots of laughter that was very kind—wise laughter about how funny and strange life and being a person are.*

Wanda is, of course, not typical; she's unique, like everyone else. Each guest has arrived with his or her own concerns, goals, difficulties and skills. Some want to get to the heart of things, while some simply want a "sounding board" to help think through a particular decision. Some want a lot from me, some want me to keep my distance. Most have need of patient encouragement to be able take up their own part. I go along as best I can.

I don't know where we're going. All I can do is help to support the work the other does. I trust the one who is lost to lead the way, and by leading, find it. That by speaking, she will learn to speak, to find her voice, her idiom, her native tongue. That she will direct the work by the lights of her own desire, her own beliefs and values—and so discover them. And so (God willing, *inshallah*), come to live with more confidence and clarity.

### **Future Considerations**

There is much more to be said about these two moments of an ethical counseling relationship and their interdependence, both in practical terms and in terms of Levinas's philosophy. I close with a gesture towards three areas that are open for future reflections and "field reports".

*Community or group practice:* I host a monthly philosophers' salon where about a dozen people come together to speak about "things that matter". Again, this is a confluence of *hostis*, of strangers and neighbours. At its best, it takes on the spontaneous life of a "true society": "a configuration of wills which concern each other through their works, but who look one another in the face" (Levinas, 1998, p.20). In my experience, this *hostis* community is trickier than the straightforward welcoming of a single guest. There are now other others and the question of justice for them. There is a greater risk of hostility. And, while I remain "the most responsible", I can also take part as an equal among equals. I would like to take this work further, in some form that would correlate to psychotherapy groups, or with existing organisations.

*Issues in "professional development":* In the radical passivity of the face-to-face, what is required of the counselor or therapist is a certain openness, a willingness not to will, a readiness to respond. Levinas is, I think, right to speak of

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. (1999, 87-8)

This work—on oneself, for and with others—is a practical art: one learns by doing, and many philosophical traditions offer useful technologies for working on the self. Perhaps one also needs "to learn how to learn", continuously. For me, Taoist and martial arts practices have proven helpful.<sup>6</sup> One's own engagement with philosophy, with examining one's own heart and mind, is essential.



The appeal of a Face can call on anything that we know and everything that we are. And call it all into question. There's no saying in advance who we'll be able to work with (though it won't be everyone), what exactly they will want from us (other than everything), or whether or not we'll be able to offer the right bit in the right way in the right moment. We run what Levinas would call "a fine risk" when we are called both to love and to know. Fear and trembling always come with the territory.

But we do indeed need to know a thing or two about the world and how it works. What tools should be in our toolbox, what provisions in the cupboard? From the origins of such a practice—being called to respond in every moment in one's own self to this very person before us—it seems that this "knowledge base" can hardly be standardised. But what should we be studying?<sup>7</sup>

### Philosophy in Practice

Finally, what has this work to do with philosophy? As a noun, "philosophy" is a field of study, the canon that provides a counseling philosopher resources both for the "difficult working on one-self" and to open up new ways of thinking for our clients. Then there is the activity of philosophising, as we muse and puzzle our way through the world.

But according to Levinas, philosophy is "good practice" from the first. He claims that all of the materials and instruments of philosophy and philosophising—consciousness, cognition, analysis, judgement, language—arise from, and because of, our non-indifference to the difference of others. This is surely a rather surprising point of view for many academic philosophers. But if Levinas is right, then it seems that a philosophical practice that acknowledges this insight, that takes place with others and for others, face-to-face and side-by-side, would produce a different, and vital, body of philosophical material. *What would it be?*

But, in the meantime, there is the simple practice of philosophical counseling, inspired by what inspired Levinas, where all of our verbal and nonverbal conversation is underpinned by a sacred responsibility for and before the other, leaving to him his freedom and his care, being with him without coercion or ambition or attachment, staying in proximity, in contact, sensibility and exposure. And all of this not from any principle or good will or goodness of mine, but simply because it's what *I* do, singularly and unavoidably responsible, face-to-face with *you*, unique and beloved. Where, when you ask if I know what you mean, the only possible answer is *Of course, you mean the world to me.*

### Notes

Dedication: For Andrew Feldmár, for good company.

1. "Instead of seeing *theoria* as the ultimate level of human perfection, [Levinas] maintains that good practice – the practice of the good – transcends contemplation." (Peperzak, 1995, xi)

2. Which, again, is somewhat different from my own project of philosophy as an ethical and therapeutic practice.

3. With Caputo (1997), following Derrida: "Yes is only yes if repeated".

4. It is the problem of the *il y a* for him, of unremitting existence, and *you* are the possibility of escape other than death. "For pure suffering, which is intrinsically senseless and condemned to itself with no way out, a beyond appears in the form of the interhuman." (Levinas, 1998, 93-4)

5. In Levinas's technical term, there is a "thirdness" here that is possible because the guest is, at once, both the transcendent Other and this person of qualities and history.

6. Three quick examples: Taoism conceives of *yin* and *yang* as principles or forces which each in turn give rise to and oppose the other, an interrelated and interdependent relatedness that is not a bad model for understanding the two-foldedness of ethics and ontology in Levinas.

Second, practice in the "negative sensibilities" of the *wu*-forms can develop a proper disposition towards a guest in a counseling relationship: (i) *wu-wei* or non-doing: "non-coercive action in accordance with the *de* ('particular focus')

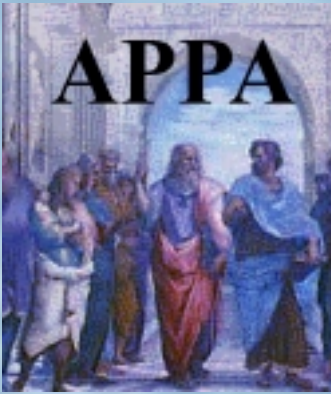
of things”; (ii) *wu-zhi* or non-knowing: “a sort of knowing without resort to rules or principles”; (iii) *wu-yu* or non-desiring: “desiring which does not seek to possess or control its ‘object’” (Ames and Hall, 2003, 38)

Third, *taiqiquan* (tai ch’i), like other martial arts, builds up a skilful physical and mental awareness that can help to maintain the relationship with the other without harm and without getting in the way.

7. This question might reveal the difference between Levinasian psychological and philosophical practices. My basic approach is philosophical in nature, but the ideas that I bring into play can come from any discipline, from political theory to literature to psychology. I would, however, expect psychologists to hold an underlying understanding of persons as psychological beings and to speak primarily in psychological terms. But to the extent that Western psychology is based upon notions of discrete individual subjectivity and autonomy, this would appear problematic (if not downright antithetical) for a Levinasian practice.

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# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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### Aims and Scope

*Philosophical Practice* is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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