

Ethics, Alterity, and Psychotherapy: A Levinasian Perspective

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Abstract Current psychologies of religion reflect the modernist context in which they are situated. Religion is reduced to what is researchable, generalizable, individual and “thin.” This essay suggests that a psychology of religion which takes seriously the implications of Emmanuel Levinas’s emphasis on ethics and the alterity of the Other would result in a different model of psychotherapy. Levinas’s view of the Other as the trace of the transcendent radically changes our understanding of the client within the therapeutic relationship. Levinas begins with ethics and so healing would be, by implication, an ethical enterprise. In a highly secularized, individualized, objectivized culture, a therapy which recognizes the sacred, which models how to view the Other as transcendent, and which does not presume to know, is a gift to the client.

Keywords Levinas · Alterity · Ethics · Psychotherapy · Enlightenment · Modernity

Introduction

Psychotherapeutic approaches attempting to include religion in the therapeutic relationship tend to reflect the Enlightenment project in which progress relies on scientific consensus on definitions of “core constructs” and their “measurement.” Such attempts have led to multifarious attempts to operationalize “religious” and “spiritual” as variables for inclusion in experimental and epidemiological studies. Each is reduced to an empirically derived and measurable expression of the “individual” and structurally similar across individuals. Psychotherapy as an Enlightenment project construes religion in ways it can investigate

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and in the end the research hardly reflects the religious language of the client's original community. Within such a framework, attempts to relate religion to therapy tend to make spirituality secular and capitalist and to represent spirituality as essentialist, individualist, and foundationalist (Dueck & Parsons, 2004). We will explore a model of psychotherapy which addresses these modernisms.

Religion in modernity leans toward essentialism when it makes representational assertions about the invariable and fixed properties which define the "beingness" of a given entity. Nicholas Lash (1996) has pointed out that modern conceptions of religion presume the latter to be knowledge of objects (albeit transcendent) and hence religion is reduced to beliefs about objects, much like the natural sciences. Such a notion of generic religious beliefs may be useful in a society where the public square is assumed to be religiously neutral. Religion is, like art and music, allowed to be about the Beautiful but the business of religion is not about public morality. Such religion is less about a grammar of motive, emotion, and practice. Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1998), who will be the point of departure for our explorations of therapy without foundations, proposes an ethic that clearly has implications for a public morality.

Lash argues that generic notions of religion mask particularity. Accordingly, Diana Fuss (1989) has pointed out that essentialism tends to be articulated in a binary manner and may "be restrictive, even obfuscating, in that it allows us to ignore or deny the differences within essentialism" (pp. xi–xii). Religions are not simply different paths to the same goal but different paths to different goals. The spiritual goal is tradition-specific. How then is a generic religion within therapy even possible without violating the particularities of religious traditions? How are differences, the alterity of the other, recognized and honored?

While the therapeutic community appears to be moving toward a more open perspective on matters of religion within the therapeutic relationship, modernist justification for religion in therapy emphasizes that the resources for change, the locus of responsibility, and the center of spirituality all reside within the individual. The modernist understands the person as an isolated self whose intuitions can be trusted apart from tradition (Taylor, 1989). From the perspective of critical psychology, James Carrette (2001) points out that when psychologists discuss religion they would do well to recognize the implicit assumptions of their discipline. Specifically, he suggests that their view of psychology and of religion is "parasitic on the present cultural registers of what it is to be human" (p. 121). He proposes that we examine critically and ethically the historical roots of human image construction, the religious ideas that infiltrate psychology, and the model of the human proffered. The "religion" of a Levinas is not a pale reflection of modernist assumptions.

If both our conceptions of religion and psychotherapy are shaped by modernity, we might well expect that the role of religion in therapy will reflect those prior commitments. If religion is a foundationalist enterprise that endeavors to be a rational process of ordering truth and developing generalizable propositions about reality, then the role of religion in therapy will be didactic. Much modern research on religious psychotherapy aims at developing a unified body of knowledge in which religious interventions can be scientifically corroborated as effective (Koenig, 1998). Paul Watson (1993) has challenged the foundationalist assumptions of psychology from a model he calls the "ideological surround" of psychology. In particular, Watson points out that the notions of objective reason, value free empiricism, and the construction of a universal human nature are integral to modernist perspectives on psychology and religion. We hope to demonstrate that alternative models of pastoral psychotherapy are possible provided we begin with "thicker" versions of ethics and sociality.

Finally, we refer to the work of Charles Taylor (2002) who critiques William James's view of religion, a view that seems to dominate the religion in therapy literature. Taylor

contextualizes James within an emerging secularism, Romantic expressivism, and loss of tradition. Twice-born individuals leave behind the dogmatic religion of the church for an intense personal experience. Exteriority is played off against interiority, head against heart. Such a construal of religious experience is presumed to be universal but, Taylor points out, it is more Protestant than it is Catholic since corporate ecclesial life does not mediate between the believer and the Divine. The religious community that nurtures belief plays no significant role. The practices of the sacramental community appear irrelevant (See Dueck, 1995).

What is lost in an Enlightenment view of religion is the richly referential and culturally resonant nature of religion reflected in a symbolic system or network of meanings (Geertz, 1973). Hence, the “thick” or overt religious language is “thinned” or converted to make it more appealing in the public domain (Walzer, 1994; Dueck & Reimer, 2003). Psychotherapy and religion are both “thin” when they are, respectively, limited to secular, operationalized language, and when it restricts communities from expressing their particularity in the public square. A thin psychotherapy results in a loss of its thick ethos (Dueck, 2006).

With these concerns in mind, we turn to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. What manner of psychology or religion would one construct if one’s family members had been murdered in a Nazi concentration camp? How would one’s views of psychotherapy change if one’s academic mentor, on whom one was beginning a major manuscript, suddenly accepted an academic position in an institution governed by the Third Reich? If, in addition, one was Jewish, how might that affect one’s view of psychology and of religion?

The answers to these questions turn out to shape the contours of Emmanuel Levinas’s life (1906–1995). He was a Jew born in Lithuania whose family was slain in the Nazi death camps. When Martin Heidegger, his philosophical model, accepted a position with German National Socialism in 1933, Levinas was demoralized. Out of his response to this crisis emerged an anthropology that is profoundly Jewish, pacifist, relational, theological, and ethical. It has ramifications not only for psychological anthropology but also for psychotherapy and personal transformation.

In this essay we propose an anthropology which takes seriously the thought of Levinas and contrast it with the Enlightenment model described above (See Gantt & Williams, 2002; Halling, 1975; Kunz, 1998). Contrary to the Enlightenment model, Levinas begins with the *Other* and the ethical demand he or she makes. We think that an extrapolation of Levinas’s views would emphasize a particularist, peaceable therapeutic. With Levinas, we hope to preserve the “thick” texture of religious discourse while maintaining the benefits of a “thin” ethical contribution to the larger public arena. This essay explores the implications of the primacy of ethics and alterity (from the German “alter,” which means “other”) as point of departure for developing an alternative paradigm for religiously sensitive psychotherapy. By “alterity,” Levinas means an “Otherness” that calls into question notions of the “Same.” According to Levinas, “Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge” (Levinas, 1969, p. 33).

We will begin with a brief overview of the central tenets of Levinas’s philosophical approach. Because of his rejection of ontology as foundational, there emerges a different understanding of knowledge and ethics. The call of the Other in the context of a face-to-face encounter makes a demand on the self and constitutes personal identity. The ethical demand that emerges from an encounter with the Other takes on fuller meaning when contextualized in Levinas’s understanding of the face of the Other as the trace of God’s face. We then explore the ramifications of viewing the client as bearing the trace of the face of God, as absolutely other and as making an ethical demand on the therapeutic relationship. The therapist, from

a Levinasian perspective, is obligated by the ethical demand of the client and constituted by this relationship.

Ethics rather than ontology

For Hamlet the critical question, given his dilemma, was “To be or not to be?” Heidegger had asked: “Why are there beings at all and why not rather nothing?” Both questions assume ontology. In the tradition of the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, being is construed as that from which everything emerges—“being” signifies the substance, nature, and essence of anything existent. Further, discussions of being refer to being itself, a property common to all that can veridically be said to be (Gilson, 1952). Being is what we all share. As such it is monist rather than pluralist, universal rather than particular, and total rather than partial. It assumes sameness as the foundation of what is real within a single horizon, the source of universal participation. Levinas’s approach is a critical response to Heidegger’s (1962) philosophy of being. When Heidegger made evident his sympathies with the Third Reich, Levinas lost confidence in ontology as a foundation for philosophy.

As Llywelyn (1995) has appropriately argued, Levinas’ ideas are best understood genealogically. In each text one finds a development of previously introduced perspectives. This is important for an understanding of Levinas’s relation to Heidegger, since Levinas’s (1990) writings are “dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror” (p. 291). In an early essay, Levinas (1991) contended against Hitlerian ideology that located being in foundational material substances. In a later work, Levinas (1987) updates this critique and criticizes Heidegger for conceptualizing being as an eternal, unmoving, self-subsistent substance. Instead, Levinas describes an “ontology” in terms of that which is relationally produced.

Ontological reality can be recognized, comprehended, and thematized. In Western philosophy, knowledge is knowledge of being. For us to know something is to possess it in our mind, to thematize it as a representation or image of an object. Following Descartes’s “rational subjectivity,” the rational ego assumes that to think is to exist. This subjectivity was clarified by Kant’s discussion of the *ding an sich* (thing in itself) and Husserl’s development of the phenomenological method. Heidegger argues that Husserl’s method entails a solipsistic representational or rational consciousness. Levinas (1985) points in a different direction, to a quest for exteriority, for otherness: “The most audacious and remote knowledge does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not take the place of sociality; it is still and always a solitude” (p. 60). Rather than extolling knowledge of what is, that is, the objectification of what is said, he is concerned about the conditions for, or the process of, saying. Levinas states: “The humanism of the other man [sic—person] is the answer to the problem posed by the crisis of Western liberalism, inasmuch as Western philosophy has otherwise failed to find a humane alternative to the idealist tradition. Modern man (sic) is reduced to an object of sociology or psychoanalysis, a plaything of technology, a pawn of ideology” (Smith, 1983, p. 197). For Levinas, this epistemology needs to be challenged by the radical exteriority of the other person. Totalizing occurs when something is nothing more than what we call it but we reduce it to the nameable. The Other is always much more than what we know - surplus. Totality is knowledge constructed on an ontological foundation.

For Levinas the Other is not the sum of one’s cognitive constructions. Neither the other person nor one’s response to the Other are instances of universals. Levinas contends that the face-to-face relationship with the other person, the Other, expresses infinitude. As such, it is not to be reduced to ontology and cannot be totalized. Hence, one can never totally know the

Other because the Other exists prior to the subject and ontology. Dostoyevsky's underground individual complains that he is not an instance of some general concept of the human being such as an ego, self-consciousness, or thinking thing (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2002, p. 22). The consequence of such rationalism is a kind of violence.

Western philosophical ethics addresses issues of moral conduct, principles and precepts, while removing God from the discussion. Levinas, however, views ethics as an interruption on a primordial level. Ethics as first philosophy means for Levinas (1969) that ethics is not derived from being, from an ontological metaphysics: "The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy of the attributes of God" (p. 78). We might ask if our life is righteous but Levinas asks whether it is righteous to be. Ethics emerges from the demand of the Other upon us, not from abstract ethical principles. What it means to be human must begin with an ungrounded ethic. He rejects an ethic which argues: "Do so and so because . . ." For Levinas (1969), our obligation to the Other is based not on reasons, or a God concept, but an encounter: "A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is the spiritual optics" (p. 78).

Approaches to psychological anthropology which assume human nature is co-extensive with nature imply a substrate of being that is common to all humanity. This commonality is capable of being observed, measured, and described. Levinas would chart a different course. That which confronts us is not being in general, but the specific face of another person, a face that makes a demand on us rather than inviting us to discover an order in human nature. It is not simply the visible face that psychologists encounter but the vulnerable, defenseless face that emerges in the context of crisis and danger.

There are two issues at stake here. First, there is the issue of the otherness of the face and second, the ethical demand of the Other. The face of the Other is particular and cannot be reduced to totalizing, ontic beingness. The temptation is to see the Other as composed of the same substance as oneself. Levinas rejects all encounters with the Other that reduce the person to what is universal, neutral, or objective. The person who faces us is irreducible to categories, generalizations, or essences.

Second, the Other makes an ethical demand on the psychologist. The ethical obligation implicit in the face of the Other is the command not to do harm. Totalizing perspectives of the Other as the Same are for Levinas ethical violations of the Other. Not only can the universalizing impulse generate violence, it is violent in that it forces all to lie on the Procrustean bed to be measured and cut to the right length.

It is the face-to-face encounter that is the basis of moral awareness and freedom. Moral consciousness for moderns is usually construed as an awareness of one's own values, convictions, choices, and decisions while for Levinas the source of the ethical is *exterior* to the self. Similarly, freedom is not the opportunity to satisfy our own needs or to pursue our own ends but to respond to the presence of the Other and to be commanded by the Other. Freedom emerges from submission to the Other. We are then not equal; the Other is absolutely transcendent.

Finally, how does Levinas view the self? While much contemporary psychology assumes the self to be autonomous, unencumbered, and individual (Cushman, 1995), Levinas recognizes this self pejoratively as the Cartesian ego that functions in a mode of unrestricted freedom. The Other is there for the ego: the Other gives the sensory experience of pleasure and pain. When the ego reduces the Other to sameness, the Other becomes an extension of the self. The ego is the "melting pot" of otherness.

Since Aristotle we have assumed that to love others one must be able to love oneself but Levinas would not agree. For him our subjectivity is constituted in our prior response

to the Other. We have been called to respond to the Other; it is a matter of election. This passivity of the Levinasian self contrasts sharply with the agentic, modern, autonomous ego that lives by taking initiative. Levinas points out that such Aristotelian notions tend to forget that collective thought and action are built on the particularity of face-to-face relationships. He critiques Enlightenment approaches because human existence cannot be constructed as a panoramic totality, on a foundation that is solid and self-evident. Science, rationality, and agency are derivative of the face-to-face relationship. Ethics is prior to cognition, sensibility, praxis, knowledge, and history.

Implications for psychotherapy

Since much of contemporary psychotherapy assumes a secular and operationalized language that is grounded in universal ontological perspectives vis-à-vis clients, Levinas's approach poses a thorough challenge. Secular psychotherapy subordinates the alterity of the Other and the ethical responsibility present in the face-to-face encounter with the Other to empirically defined themes and to successful therapeutic outcomes. Therapeutic progress is defined in terms of the correct application of a diagnostic category together with a therapeutic method selected on the basis of empirical evidence of efficacy (Heaton, 1988). We suggest that Levinas's (1969) presentation of the Other qualifies the use of diagnostic categories or empirically verified causal models.

In this section we will explore the implications of Levinas's approach for an ethical and other centered therapeutic. Levinas's contribution has implications for the way we view the client, the therapist, and the therapeutic process. First, from an ontological point of view, the client is construed as essentially similar to the therapist in human nature. Such an understanding presumably makes communication possible. Levinas would aver that the Other is different. Secondly, the therapist viewed from a Levinasian perspective would be one who recognizes the *good* more so than the *true* in the client, takes responsibility for the client, is radically open to the ethical confrontation of the client, and affirms the particularity of the client. Therapy is usually construed as the exchange of two autonomous selves where the client is presumably in greater need than the therapist. However, for Levinas, the therapist's self is constituted in response to the ethical demand of the Other. Thirdly, the therapeutic process is implicated by Levinasian assumptions. Contemporary therapeutic process can be viewed as problem solving, resolving transference issues, validating the Self, self-actualization, and so forth. The process of therapy from a Levinasian perspective would be systemically ethical, a recovery of therapeutic communication rather than the therapeutic points communicated, an appreciation of restraint rather than unbridled freedom, and finally, an affirmation of peace rather than violence.

The alterity of the client

Levinas begins with the ordinary, everyday fact of another person looking at me. Viewing the face of the client as Other is the therapeutic equivalent. Levinas's understanding of the encounter with the Other as fundamentally vulnerable suggests that the therapeutic encounter quintessentially exemplifies Levinas's notion of the face-to-face meeting.

How do psychotherapists working within a modernist psychology view the other? Modernists may perceive the Other as both like themselves and different. While the client is a human being, he or she may be viewed as a person with a significant, debilitating emotional problem (distinguishing him or her from me) needing a diagnostic category and operationalized techniques to address the problem. The client may be viewed as a person with a problem

needing a solution or we may view the symptoms of an identified patient in a family from a systems point of view. Insurance companies will request a diagnosis. All of this presumes sameness, a single continuum along which there are markers where our client's life events are instances of what is universal. To do so is to construe our client ontologically. Levinas (1969) rejects the thematization of the Other and by implication the client ought not be reduced to diagnostic categories or subsumed by empirically verified causal models: "The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity" (p. 194). The client as Other is embodied mystery.

While the modernist may construe the client as other (deviation from a norm), a Levinasian perspective suggests a different direction. In the face to face encounter the client would be seen as making an ethical demand on the therapist. For Levinas (1969) ethics is "A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics" (p. 43). In this section we will explore the client in terms of the trace of the Other, alterity, and ethical demand.

First, it is in the face of the client that we see a trace of the Other. The face of our client bears the trace of the face of God. The Other comes to me as the hidden God (*deus absconditus*) whose face bears the partial image of the face of God. Levinas (1989) maintains that one cannot simply approach God without first encountering the other: "Is divinity possible without relation to a human Other?" (p. 247). Our tendency, however, is to totalize the Other by making the face of the client into an object. The ego reduces the distance between the self and the Other. The Other is not assimilable but the ego seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. What is incomprehensible and mysterious, we reconstruct as explicable and natural. Relationships are totalized when they are conceived in terms of understanding, correlation, symmetry, and reciprocity.

Second, the client is radically other, different. Levinas describes the Other as naked. Our client is the naked other, beyond our conceptualizations who comes to us in ways that are concrete, historical, sensory: "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). The client we can describe is not the radical other who demands of us that we experience his or her pleasure or pain. The client's face is not simply one phenomenon among many. If our first response is that of seeking to understand, then the client becomes an extension of our rational, conscious ego. The personality of the client does not simply fit into the universal order of beings, the usual categories of beings. The client as Other disappears when we thematize or interpret him or her. The client is not an instance of a universal dressed in the clothes of cultural roles. We will begin to know the Other when she reveals herself to us as she speaks. The client is a witness to him or herself and who may surprise us.

Third, the client makes an ethical demand. If the face of the Other comes to us as a trace of the face of a holy God, it follows that the client as the radical Other places an ethical demand on us. Otherness and ethics are related. The otherness of the client means we begin with issues of goodness rather than truth; the face-to-face encounter with the client means that an ethical obligation emerges. For Levinas (1998), when we are "being faced," we are held hostage by the face of the other: "The condition of being hostage is not chosen; if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his 'as-for-me'" (p. 136). Our clients confront us with a command and prohibition: "You shall not kill me." Anything that diminishes the life of the Other is tantamount to killing, Levinas suggests.

The therapist

The dialogue partner with the client as Other is the therapist. What is the therapist's role? Is she a container, technician, blank slate, problem-solver, researcher, or dialogue partner? In most contemporary psychotherapeutic models, the therapist's ego/self is central. Her or his inner life, skill in applying techniques, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors are the focus of training. From a Levinasian perspective the self of the therapist would *not* be the point of departure. Levinas (1985) would begin with the presence of the Other and her/his impact on the therapist's ego: "The face of the other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, as a 'first person,' I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call" (p. 89). The therapist would remain passive and receptive to the ethical demand, recognizing the other's vulnerability, accepting the fundamental mystery of who the client is.

We are invited to respond to our client with obedience to the Transcendent One, with awe in the presence of Life, and with wonder at the mystery of the Other. According to Levinas (1986), we are to place ourselves in service, in the "welcome of the absolutely other" (p. 353). The best training for a therapist is learning to be open to the Other, to the mystery of God. Our client is fundamentally incomprehensible, irreducible to our categories, to that which is the Same. If God comes to us as mystery and we are made in the image of God, then our responsibility to the other, our client, is to learn to see them as mystery, not as a problem, not as a diagnosis, and not as generically human.

First, our response to the client as Other is one of recognizing the good more than the true. Rather than seeking first to understand our client, we search for goodness and justice that is prior. Only a desire for goodness will do justice to the face of the other. Goodness is, for Levinas, greater than truth. The Other is an absolute transcendent, a moral height, an obligation, a call to justice. Ethics is recognizing the good in the client and putting into question the freedom and spontaneity of the therapist's ego by the other. In this stage there is an appropriate passivity on the therapist's part in contrast to an autonomous ego that lives from taking initiative.

Second, the therapist is responsible for the welfare of the client. Therapists do not usually speak of being responsible *for* the client; the *client* is to take responsibility for change. The therapist is responsible to be present, care, and facilitate the healing process. For Levinas, the Other poses to me an infinite *responsibility*. Lingis (1998), one of Levinas's translators and interpreters, writes in the introduction to Levinas's book *Otherwise than Being*,

I am responsible before the Other in his alterity, that is, not answerable for his empirical and mundane being only, but for the alterity of his initiatives, for the imperative appeal with which he addresses me. I am responsible for the responsible moves of another, for the very impact and trouble with which he approaches me. To be responsible before another is to answer to the appeal by which he approaches. It is to put oneself in his place, not to observe oneself from without, but to bear the burden of his existence and supply for its wants. I am responsible for the very faults of another, for his deeds and misdeeds. The condition of being hostage is an authentic figure of responsibility. (1998, p. xx).

The deepest relationship with the Other is one of vulnerability and radical responsibility. I am responsible for the very problem my client brings to therapy. In response to Cain's question (Gen 4:9), as therapist, I am indeed my brother's/sister's keeper.

Third, the therapist is open to the ethical confrontation by the client. Levinas's view of the ego is developmentally two-fold and this can point to how therapists may progress in their

relationship to a client. In the first stage, the ego joyously experiences the world's pleasures. In this mode the ego absorbs, incorporates, and assimilates the world. The therapist's ego in this state has not yet encountered the ethical demand or the alterity of the client. The therapist's ego, in this stage, would be primarily one that strategizes, intervenes, and encourages change. In a second stage the therapist is awakened, contested, and interrupted by the client in two ways: alterity and ethical demand. First, the self of the therapist is traumatized—fissured—by the otherness of the client. Subjectivity begins with sensation of the other. The Other contests our consciousness by surpassing it, by excess, surplus, exceeding our capacity to absorb the infinity of the other. Alterity is not what we as therapists already recognize in the Other but what we receive as sensory stimulation. This is unmediated by thought and so the client as Other is not a phenomenon but an enigma. The face-to-face encounter is incomprehensible; it is only being that is comprehensible.

Fourth, the therapist affirms particularity. Moral sensibility in the therapist is awakened by the specific other. The absoluteness and transcendence of the Other creates an earthquake in the therapist's soul. It is not the voice of Being in general but that of the particular Other who faces us that disrupts our life. In our therapeutic relationship to the particular Other we are demanded, we become a hostage to the specific other.

Psychotherapy

The therapeutic process has been construed as a “talking cure.” Healing is assumed to be a consequence of accurate empathy, clear communication, gentle confrontation, unconditional care, creative assignments, or skillful containment. Religion, more recently, has been added to the therapist's armamentarium of techniques. Religion is valued for its effectiveness, its contribution to mental health. Levinas (1969) would argue against such thin conceptualization of the divine, for “divinity keeps its distances” (p. 297). Instead of a thin theology, in which prominence is placed on the benefits of religious observance, Levinas emphasizes a thick understanding of God's identification with the other. Idolatry is the process of reducing the *imago dei* to sameness. For Levinas (1969), “Speech proceeds from absolute difference” (p. 194). In this section we will discuss Levinas's thoughts on ethics, language, and freedom and their profound implications for a peaceable psychotherapy.

First, if ethics is first philosophy then therapy is an ethical event. It is ethical not simply because ethical principles govern the relationship and the ongoing process. It is ethical because the client as Other presents a claim on me just as God makes a claim on the created human individual. The client's claim on me is to respond in life-furthering ways. We submit to the client as a trace of the here-and-now face of God. We speak from a position of subordination and obedience rather than authority and autonomy.

Ethics, then, does not enter after, or in the midst of, but before the therapeutic encounter. It is the primordial that is ethical; relationships are not an example of the ethical. The ethical in the relationship is evidenced in simple acts of civility, hospitality, kindness, and politeness. Civility is to recognize the ethno-religious particularity of a client. It is polite to defer to the meaning framework of a client.

Second, language and ethics are connected in the therapeutic relationship. Ethics is the original relation to the Other that occurs in speech. In the process of speaking we elicit the other, a process in which one submits to the other. Levinas makes a distinction between the saying and the said. The ethical encounter is the saying; the conversation that follows is the said. The said is our speech within a system of language while the saying is the speech

inspired by the call of the Other. One role of language in therapy is to move behind the said to the saying, beyond being to the encounter. In saying “Here I am” to the client as before God, I take seriously the process, the saying over the said. Language is not simply the objective meanings we share but that which precedes what is said. In conversation with a client, I am not contemplating; I am praying.

Third, therapy is not necessarily a matter of enabling freedom but of circumscribing arbitrary freedom. Therapy is not in the service of society when individuals are unable to limit their freedom for the sake of others. How does the therapist model such a limitation of freedom? How does one question unfettered individualism? Therapists do so by sacrificing themselves for the sake of the client (Sorenson, 2004). We respond to the client’s ethical mandate rather than exploring, chatting about irrelevancies. We do so when we carry the pain of the other. Such a model of the therapeutic requires a kenotic therapist, an ethic of sacrifice and the patience to deconstruct the said into life-giving speech. Such therapy is an act of grace and love, a moment without the desire for gain.

Finally, psychotherapy in Levinasian perspective would be viewed as peaceable. At the heart of his approach is the image of the prisoner in the death camp whose face was not seen as sacred but instead was to be annihilated. So also the client says to the therapist, “Do not kill me,” “Care for me.” Therapy is peaceable when it acknowledges the sacred and does not assume the client is simply part of being, of sameness. It is peaceable when it preserves the sacred life of the client, nurtures the good, and empowers him/her. Therapy is then an act of love. Levinas comments:

The idea of the face is the idea of gratuitous love, the commandment of a gratuitous act. Commanding love signifies recognizing the value of love in itself The face is not that which is seen. I began today by saying that the face is not an object of knowledge [*une connaissance*]. There is no evidence with regards to the face; there is, rather, an order, in the sense that the face is a commanded value. Consequently, you could call it generosity; in other contexts, it is the moment of faith. Faith is not a question of the existence or non-existence of God. It is believing that love without reward is valuable. It is often said ‘God is love.’ God is the commandment of love. ‘God is love’ means that He loves you. But this implies that the primary thing is your own salvation. In our opinion, God is a commandment to love. God is the one who says that one must love the other. (Wright, Hughes, & Ainley, 1988, pp. 176–177)

Conclusion

This essay is an attempt to extrapolate from Levinas’s anthropology the implications for a religiously sensitive psychotherapy. As such, it is not an essay which critically assesses the assumptions of Levinas’s theory itself. While the dialogue between faith and practice in this essay emphasizes the ethical and the alterity that emerges from a specific theology, it does not, for example, examine the implications of Levinas for Christology (See Ford, 1999) nor for ecclesiology and, in turn, for psychotherapy.

Levinas’s work has served as a stimulus in this essay to take seriously the possible implications for therapy of otherness, that is, the alterity the client and otherness of God. Admittedly, the outline of a therapeutic is still quite blurred and the actual practices of healing undefined. What remains clear to us after this review and exploration is the importance of the ethical demand central to human life and hence for therapy. Secondly, the privileging

of the Other is in stark contrast to the Cartesian ego that dominates modern psychological paradigms.

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