

**Altered Experience:**  
Towards a Levinas-informed Psychedelic Psychotherapy

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**Introduction.** In this paper, I intend to lay out two problems: one concerning the application of Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy to psychotherapy, and the other concerning the therapeutic use of psychedelic drugs. I will then suggest that these two problems dovetail into a complementary solution insofar as Levinas' philosophy is relevant to psychedelic psychotherapy. Lastly, I will discuss the philosophical and questions raised by the dialogue between these two visions of psychotherapy.

**SECTION I: An overview of Levinasian psychotherapy and a problem with it.** The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, as laid out in his most notable work, *Totality and Infinity* (2007/1961), presents us with a picture of human experience that is radically different from that of most modern schools of psychology. The defining aspect of his thought that sets him apart in this way is his dethroning of the egoic, isolated self that psychology takes to be the fundamental unit of study from which all motivations, cognitions, and meanings radiate. Levinas corrects this myopic view of the human condition by emphasizing the central importance of the encounter with the Other, my experience of his calling out to me for help, and my resultant responsibility to him. The core of his philosophy can be found in the maxim "ethics precedes ontology," which, contrary to earlier approaches to the question of the meaning of being, depicts human existence as primarily concerned with this fundamental responsibility to the Other. Levinas claims that, although this Other is experienced as ultimately unknowable, metaphysically superior, and irrevocably separated from me, my interaction with him is still the source of many key aspects of what modern psychological paradigms call my "self." Responsibility to this Other is thus seen as a cornerstone of both human existence and the attainment of psychological well-being within it.

This philosophical outlook on the human condition has much to contribute to the practice of psychotherapy. The implications of concepts like "responsibility" and "infinity" for the person of the therapist are numerous and have been described in part by Halling (197?). In his overview, he notes that to approach the client as an untotalizable Other is to approach him with the knowledge that my understanding of him will always be a hypothetical one that can only be confirmed or disconfirmed by his acceptance of it. This should provide pause to those who would let an overly hasty interpretation or diagnosis close their minds to any disconfirming evidence that comes up in subsequent dialogue. Additionally, Halling points out that the Other's untotalizability places him beyond my ability to control or coerce with disingenuous speech. Recognizing this changes the entire nature of the therapeutic dialogue, shifting it from a relationship between a subject and its object-to-be-fixed to a relationship between a client-as-teacher and his eager-to-learn, eager-to-help therapist. This discussion of Levinasian contributions to therapeutic stance is far from exhaustive, but it should demonstrate that Levinas' thought has clear value for anyone working in the helping professions.

However, it is not just the therapist who has something to learn from Levinas; the client may also benefit from a more Levinasian stance towards the Others in his or her life<sup>1</sup>. Kunz (1998) examines the ways in which modern egological conceptions of psychic well-being overlook the importance of respecting the ultimate value of other human beings. He then goes on to detail the many ways in which this oversight can undercut the forms of well-being that psychotherapy strives for. For instance, a valued goal of psychotherapy is the ability to be assertive, but without valuing the Other in an appropriately Levinasian fashion, this assertiveness can be unbalanced and will end up isolating a client. Or, consider how meaningless and circular the self-esteem building process of setting goals for oneself and achieving them can be if there is never a point of contact with the Other, who ultimately grounds one's reasons for self-improvement in something outside of the egoic circle. Even the ability to develop a secure existential platform for oneself can be an empty victory if one's worldview has not been subjected to the scrutiny of the others with whom one must ultimately enact it. Challenging clients to respect the Other's metaphysical height over them in these ways can help them overcome commonplace difficulties that a more cynical, egological view of the human condition would accept as unavoidable.

Even in rather severe pathologies, a client may be best advised to adopt a more Levinasian stance towards the others in his or her world. For example, the questioning away of the most basic assumptions needed to operate in the world, or "hyperreflexivity" (Sass, 2004), present in some cases of schizophrenia seems to be the kind of fruitless, groundless search for the foundation of knowledge within oneself that Levinas warns us against – a meutics taken to its most crippling extreme. If the client could be therapeutically led to a point where he felt able to expose his world and his questioning of it to Others in the process of genuinely open, dialogal critique, this might provide him with the kind of enduring ontological grounding that he needs. As another example, consider the rigid, dogmatic character that often accompanies certain neurotic styles (Shapiro, 1981). If Shapiro is correct in suggesting that this rigidity compensates for an inability to find an ethical ground from which autonomous decisions can be made, then perhaps these clients can be taught to find this grounding in the Other, as Levinas suggests we should, and build their autonomy upon it. Both of these examples, as well as the ones taken from Kunz above, point to therapeutic solutions that have one thing in common: they require that the client see the Other as inherently valuable and even superior in some ways in order to find some sort of grounding in him or her.

Nonetheless, in all of these examples of how a Levinasian stance towards Others may benefit clients, there remains the crucial question of how such a shift in relational style can be effected in practice. If we are to truly respect the client as an Other, whose ultimate needs are knowable only by him, then explicitly exhorting him to be responsible to Others – that is, telling him that he must relate to them in a certain way despite the fact that I don't know how this shift will interfere with the purposiveness of his old relational style – amounts to doing violence to his alterity. Instead of this overly direct approach,

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are also many pathologies that result from feeling too acutely aware of and/or responsible to others in one's life. Although Levinas can also contribute to our understanding of these pathologies, the arguments to be made there are beyond the scope of this paper, and I will thusly only be focusing on pathologies characterized by a lack of Levinasian relationship to the Other.

Levinas would suggest (and we would agree) that the client must be guided towards the source of responsibility itself: the face of the Other and its call.

In practice, this can be exceptionally difficult. More often than not, a client's pathology, regardless of the form it takes, alienates him to some extent from his fellow humans and, consequently, from the face. By virtue of the fact that he sees the world differently in some way – whether it's a depressed person's intensely pessimistic view of the future, or a schizophrenic person's paranoid belief in ubiquitous hostile intentions – he can truly be thought of as living within another distinct world (Van den Berg, 1972). And since any contact between this world of his and the overlapping worlds of others is bound to be confusing and threatening, the client may actively maintain a certain amount of alienation as a kind of defensive maneuver, making it a purposeful part of his pathology. The alienation may then enter into a feedback loop, contributing to the depression, paranoia, etc. that made the client feel alienated in the first place.

This circle of causality tells us two important things: (1) an intervention at any point within it may be useful in bettering the whole picture. In other words, a more Levinasian style of relating to Others doesn't have to be the outcome of treating the client's central pathology; it may be useful in the process of treatment. But, (2) since the alienation is a purposeful part of the client's pathological circle, addressing it directly amounts to changing the conditions of the client's entire lived world directly. If a therapist attempts to do this too strongly or gracelessly, he risks fooling himself into thinking that he is an expert about the client's inner world and its meanings, and this can be a rather un-Levinasian affair. Only the face has the authority to challenge the client in this way, and the face is not something that can be used with intent as a therapeutic tool or approached as a therapeutic theme. If it is to truly call to the client from its primordality, the face must be encountered in its nudity in a true face-to-face encounter.

Thus, the question we are left with is "how can we do it?" How can we, as therapists, bring a client to a therapeutic recognition of and acceptance of his responsibility to the Other without doing violence to the client's alterity or denying the irreducibility of the face-to-face encounter?

**SECTION II: An overview of psychedelic psychotherapy and a problem with it.** In the past few years, there has been a resurgence of research into the therapeutic potential of psychedelic psychotherapy (Friedman, 2006; Griffiths et al., 2006; Lancet, 2006; Moreno et al., 2006; Winkelman & Roberts, 2007). In the 1950's and 60's, this form of therapy showed promise in treating all sorts of maladies, from alcoholism to child autism, but the research was effectively shut down by legislative restrictions before any definitive conclusions could be reached. To boot, much of the research that had been published before the crackdown is now viewed as having been too sloppily conducted or as lacking adequate control groups by today's scientific standards. Nevertheless, the small bit of data that has accumulated in the past few years has all been positive and is showing promise of validating many of the conclusions hinted at in decades past.

In this more recent round of research, the therapeutic approaches used by the acting therapists generally fall under the umbrella of what has been termed transpersonal psychology. Briefly stated, this is a school of psychotherapeutic thought that uses the language of spirituality to explore arenas of human experience that extend beyond what most psychological paradigms label the self.

In many ways, it makes sense that this psychic framework is the one most often used to make sense out of the confusing and chaotic phenomena found within the psychedelic experience<sup>2</sup>. For one, a great deal of transpersonal thought grew out of the aforementioned 1960's research into the therapeutic use of altered states, so its language has much to say to the experience. And beyond that, the relationship between psychedelics and spiritual experience has historically been a very tight one, the two phenomena parting ways only very recently and only in select regions of the world. It thusly seems understandable that many people are often inclined to view their psychedelic experiences in the spiritual terms used by transpersonal psychology.

However, something is lost in the exclusive use of transpersonal thought to make therapeutic meaning out of psychedelic experience. Its reliance on spiritual conceptions of the mind in its navigation of psychedelic mind states imposes a great deal of preconceived interpretations on what is largely a freeform experience. While some sort of interpretive lens is certainly needed to make therapeutic meaning of the client's bewildering experience, transpersonal therapists run the risk alienating clients who are not inclined to see their experience as an overtly spiritual one, or even those whose notions of spirituality differ from those of transpersonal psychology<sup>3</sup>. The feelings of confusion, unsettledness, and heightened suggestibility given rise to by the psychedelic experience present the imprudent therapist with an opportunity to do serious violence to the client if his or her experience is not treated with the authority that it should hold in the interpretive process.

Thus, what is needed is a phenomenological return to the therapeutic core of the experience – one that relies on a minimum of metaphysical and psychological assumptions. This new approach should strive to give the client sufficient freedom to make therapeutic meaning out of her experience in the way that follows most naturally from the way in which the phenomenon presents the seeds of this meaning to her. The question that we, as therapists, are then left with is the following: what theoretical lens (or lenses) can we use to discuss the client's psychedelic experience with him or her in a way that offers interpretive grounding without straying too far from the phenomenon itself?

**SECTION III: How psychedelic psychotherapy can bring clients into a Levinasian mode of relating to Others, and how Levinasian thought can phenomenologically ground psychedelic psychotherapy.** This section will be divided into two parts. The first will argue that one of the central features of a therapeutically-productive psychedelic experience is a increased sense of responsibility to Others in one's life. The second will attempt to reconcile this phenomenon with Levinas' phenomenological account of how the face of the Other normally calls one to this kind of responsibility.

*Evidence of psychedelics' Levinasian potential.* One of the more consistent outcomes of successful, growth-stimulating psychedelic experiences is a positive change in one's relationship to others. A considerable number of empirical studies provide

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term "psychedelic experience" will refer to an experience induced by any of the common tryptamine psychedelics (e.g., LSD, psilocybin) since these are the only psychedelic compounds likely to be used in a therapeutic situation in the foreseeable future.

<sup>3</sup> Transpersonal psychology is often criticized for its decidedly Eastern leanings, despite its occasional paying of lip service to Western spiritual traditions.

evidence for this. For instance, a research group that provided people with a psychedelic psychotherapy session and then sent them questionnaires between 3 and 14 months later found that 78 percent of participants reported "a sense of greater regard for the welfare and comfort of other human beings" and 86 percent claimed "a greater understanding of the importance and meaning of human relationships" (Savage et al., 1964). Several other studies, too numerous to go through one-by-one, ask similar follow-up questions after a stint of psychedelic psychotherapy and receive equally impressive response rates (see Leary et al., 1993 for an extensive but dated review; Lerner & Lyvers, 2006).

Recently, a group at John Hopkins University (Griffiths et al., 2006) went so far as to visit the Others in their participants lives, eight weeks after the participants received a psychedelic session, and to ask these Others about changes in their loved one's behavior. These friends and family members reported significant increases in qualities of the study participants' behavior, such as patience, interpersonal perceptiveness/caring, and compassion/social concern.

At the level of qualitative research, a therapist named Oscar Janiger gave psychedelics to around 1,000 clients in his career and collected reflective narratives from them after the course of therapy. One of the main themes that emerged from an analysis of these narratives was a positive shift in interpersonal relations. Some quotes from these narratives, which he shares in his book (Dobkin de Rios & Janiger, 2003), read, "I feel compelled to advise or to help other people," "I feel like wanting to do things for people," "Acts, done out of consideration for someone else's happiness, seem somehow more numerous now." Without belaboring the point any further, there is clearly something within psychedelic experience that has the potential to awaken individuals to their responsibility to Others in their lives.

*The relevance of Levinas' thought to psychedelically-instilled responsibility.* However, it still remains to be seen whether or not this awakening to responsibility bears any similarity to Levinas' account of how we are called to responsibility by the Other. After all, his philosophy stresses the primordial importance of the face-to-face encounter with another concrete human being. What would he have to say about a psychedelically induced religious experience that calls people to responsibility, even if there are no other individuals (or their faces) in the room at the time?

Fortunately, Levinas' 1975 essay "God and Philosophy" spells out his thoughts on religious experience and its ability to induce responsibility in the experiencer. He begins by connecting the way in which God is encountered within the experience to his notions of Infinity. Borrowing some language from Descartes' meditations on the subject, Levinas characterizes the experience of God entering one's consciousness as "the breakup of the *I think*." He states, "The idea of God is God in me, but God already breaking up the consciousness which aims at ideas." In other words, although it is convenient to speak of the experience of God as an idea, this is only a pragmatic use of the term "idea." The "idea of God" is an intrusion into our consciousness that is not thematized in the same intentional, subjectivity-bound way that most ideas are thematically constructed. The "idea of God" is an "idea" that defies our normal processes of ideation. This "non-includability," this "overflowing of every capacity" of consciousness leads Levinas to call the idea of God the idea of the "Infinite put in me."

Moreover, there is more to this idea than its disruption of my subjectivity. What is so unique about this "idea of God" or the "Infinite in me" is that it does not achieve its

status as infinite only by virtue of its ungraspability by ordinary thought; in its ungraspability, it is also experienced as something *more* than simply a negation of my ability to grasp via thought<sup>4</sup>. It brings with it a more positive definitional quality than this. The idea of God within us, by nature of its uncludability and its bypassing of our normal thought processes, enters our consciousness as "an idea signifying with a signifyingness prior to all presence." In other words, this experiential fact – the fact that we cannot find the idea's roots in our subjective consciousness – imbues the experience of the idea of the Infinite with a strong sense of alterity that, like the alterity of the human Other, insists that its manifestation to me is a mere pointer to a source of meaning and worth beyond my ability to attribute meaning and worth to things. Again, although we are calling the idea of God an "idea," it is an idea that disrupts my thematization, denies my attempt to trace its roots to here, and thereby presents itself to me as an alterity.

So far, Levinas' account of religious experience falls neatly in line with phenomenological accounts of psychedelic experience. A common phenomenon reported by psychedelic users in a variety of contexts – from the shamanic, to the recreational, to the therapeutic – is an overwhelming sense of alterity, a distinct, entity-like presence that accosts the user from within the experience. It has been thematized, after the fact, with a number of names, "the spirit of the plant," "the Overmind," "the entelechy," "the Logos," or even "the transcendental Other" (McKenna, 1991, p. 18). Of course, the most common thematization of this transcendent entity coming from on high is "God<sup>5</sup>." Like Levinas' "idea of God," or idea of Infinity, this sense of an alterity within disrupts one's ability to thematize in an ordinary way<sup>6</sup>, and thus finds one in a state of "passivity beyond all passivity<sup>7</sup>."

In sum, it seems clear that Levinas' conception of religious experience agrees with the phenomenology of psychedelic experience. This should not be too surprising, since, as noted above, psychedelic experience has historically been equivalent to religious experience. It still remains to be seen how this encounter with alterity in the "idea of God" brings one to responsibility.

Levinas sets up this question and promptly answers it, asking "What can this antiquity [i.e., the "idea of God's" roots in something beyond me] mean if not the trauma of awakening – as though the idea of the Infinite, the Infinite in us, awakened a consciousness which is not awakened enough?" Levinas describes this "trauma of awakening" in terms very similar to those that he uses to describe the trauma of the human Other rupturing me, since, like the alterity of the human Other, I find the alterity

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<sup>4</sup> This is in line with Levinas' notion of Infinity, as laid out in *Totality and Infinity*, that views the idea of the infinite as more than just a negation of my finite capacities.

<sup>5</sup> This process of thematization is often transpersonal psychology's "jumping off point," from phenomenology to metaphysical claims.

<sup>6</sup> This disruption of one's ability to thematize, the "overturning of that presence to self that consciousness is," is a key feature of another psychedelic phenomenon: ego death. This is often described as an experience in which "the usual sense of individuality seems to die or fade away while pure consciousness of what is being experienced paradoxically remains" (Pahnke & Richards, 1968, p. 411), or as seeing one's idiosyncratic "categories...falling away" (Masters & Houston, 1966, p. 205). All philosophical questions about "pure consciousness" aside, this sounds a lot like the sort of non-intentional, "passivity [of thought] beyond all passivity" that Levinas speaks of as a necessary condition for the idea of the Infinite to manifest itself in one's mind.

<sup>7</sup> Quick note: One of the mostly widely agreed upon bits of psychedelic folklore is that "bad trips" are brought about by an attempt to exert control over the experience, i.e., to cling to one's intentionality.

of the idea of the Infinite to be inassimilable into the Same (i.e., my subjectivity). By virtue of this trauma – the trauma produced by the Infinite's ultimate ungraspability<sup>8</sup> despite its proximity to me – the idea of the Infinite drives me to passion, it "hollows out a desire that cannot be filled." So, simply stated, the idea of the Infinite is "Other" enough to rupture me and lead me into a relationship of Desire with it.

The next question that Levinas raises is that of how this Desire doesn't immediately fulfill itself and collapse into the structure of a need by virtue of the fact that the desirable, i.e. the idea of God, is still within the desirer. In other words, why doesn't the Desire stimulated by the idea of the God simply become an already-fulfilled Desire for the idea of God?

The answer to this question lies in the structure of Desire itself. Levinas reminds us that "in Desire, the approach [to the desirable] distances, and enjoyment is but the increase of hunger." There cannot be "a complacency in desiring, as though [the desirable] is grasped by this intention." Desire, by its nature, moves towards that which cannot be taken into the self, that which Levinas terms the "non-desirable"<sup>9</sup>. So, in order for the Desire stimulated by the desirable (i.e., the idea of the Infinite, or God) to remain as Desire, Levinas claims that, "this can only be if the desirable orders me to what is non-desirable, the undesirable par excellence – the Other." The idea of God within me awakens me to the Desirous mode of relating, but it just as quickly informs me that I cannot have this relationship with it. It tells me that I can only enjoy an enduring relationship of Desire with a concrete, human Other, and this relationship must take the form of responsibility to this human Other<sup>10</sup>.

**SECTION IV: Conclusion.** A final quotation from "God and Philosophy" sums up, clearly and poetically, this notion of responsibility found in religious experience:

"In this ethical reversal, in this reference of the desirable to the non-desirable, in this strange mission that orders the approach to the other, God is drawn out of objectivity, presence and being. He is neither an object nor an interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility...for the Other. And this analysis implies that God is not simply the 'first other,' the 'other par excellence,' or the 'absolutely other,' but other than the other, other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with another."

So, what has Levinas contributed to the practice of psychedelic psychotherapy? In a nutshell, he has given the psychedelic therapist a way of helping clients explore the

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<sup>8</sup> As he says in *Totality and Infinity* (p. 179), "the relationship with the Other, or the idea of Infinity, accomplishes [Desire.]"

<sup>9</sup> Here is a striking example of where a Levinasian psychedelic psychotherapy has an advantage over a transpersonal psychedelic psychotherapy, which sees merger with the Infinite as the highest state towards which the therapeutic use of altered states should aim. One of the texts I reviewed even went so far as to cite this inability to merge with the "idea of God" as one of the primary limitations of psychedelic experience in comparison to other altered states of consciousness (Cortright, 1997). Someone hasn't read his Levinas!

<sup>10</sup> At the risk of stepping outside the boundaries of my knowledge, I would almost say that Levinas has phenomenologically grounded the Buddhist Bodhisattva – i.e., the saint who reaches the enlightened point at which he can enter eternal Nirvana, but decides instead to return to the Samsaric world in order to find greater pleasure serving others.

feelings of love, connection, and responsibility that arise in their experiences without forcing them into or out of any metaphysical claims.

The therapist can begin discussing the client's experience of encountering this inner presence, this "idea of Infinity," and – whether the client is still bewildered by the strangeness and alterity of this presence, or even he is certain that he has seen the face of his version of God – the therapist can focus primarily on the quality of this relationship, using the map that Levinas has provided us. From here, the therapist can discuss the limitations imposed on this relationship by the transient nature of the experience and, finally, begin discussing where else and how else that state of feeling simultaneously disrupted, subjugated, enthralled, grounded, and enamored can be enacted in the lived world<sup>11</sup>. All of the truth-grounding, freedom-granting, and meaning-verifying power of a responsible relationship with the Other have already been instilled in the client by the experience. It is up to the therapist to help clarify it and up to the client to then act on it.

In this Levinasian fashion, the therapist accomplishes this goal phenomenologically, in that he strives to "make visible...the particular way of being open...that characterized...[the client's] Dasein for the duration of the [experience]" (Boss, 1977, quoted in Craig & Walsh, 1993) with a "faith in the power and potential of the manifest" (Craig & Walsh, 1993). He no longer has any need to first convince the client that he just encountered something like an "Oversoul" or a state of "Cosmic Consciousness" (Campbell, 1999), upon which the meaning and value of his experience must then hinge. This way, the client, the Other, and the psychedelic experience – the other otherwise than the other – are done no violence.

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<sup>11</sup> Such an approach to psychedelic insight fortifies the more modern, less spiritual conception of psychedelic experience as a "way shower" (Stolaroff, 2002, p. 99).

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