

## Levinas: Need, Desire, and Therapeutic Change

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2005

In the therapy situation it is crucial to have openness between the client and the therapist. One of the most important aspects of a successful therapeutic relationship is the safety that the client feels which enables him to disclose himself in the company of the therapist. Yet, arguably, the most important component to achieving positive change in therapy is the rapport that is experienced between the client and therapist. How this genuine rapport is established depends largely, but not exclusively, on the motivations of the therapist. If the motivations are self-centered by nature, as is the case when the therapist is operating from a position of need, the relationship will suffer. If, on the other hand, the therapist's personal needs are not a factor then the desire with which one meets the client will blossom and deepen, and the likelihood of therapeutic change will be increased. As Levinas points out, there is an exchange, but the exchange comes from a genuine discourse where the truth can finally be revealed. This truth will not reveal itself if desire is not present.

In therapy, there are at least two ways in which a client can be approached from a motivational standpoint. One approach to a client is from the therapist's need, and the other from their desire. You may probably guess where I am heading with this, that the therapy relationship is more fruitful if it is sprung from the therapist's desire and that the therapist's need will only get in the way of productivity in therapy. First we will explore what both need and desire mean to Levinas and then we will look further into what the implications for therapy might be in both scenarios. Perhaps then we can begin to understand how powerfully negative these needs can be upon the well-being of both the client and the therapist.

So what is need? Is it really as selfish as it sounds? The answer is two-fold, really. We all have needs - this is true. I have a need to eat when I am hungry and to sleep when I am tired. Need comes from a void, a wish to fill the space which exists because something is not already present. We find enjoyment in satisfying our needs, and other times we suffer from the failing of happiness of not having our needs met. But in therapy, the client - the Other - turns to us and presents themselves as needy. The client's immediate need is to be heard, to have their call for help answered by the therapist so they might find their ultimate truth. For the therapist, need is something that can put the brakes on the healthy progress of therapy. By entering into the therapy relationship with a motive to "fix" the client or to gain some particular result, the real discourse that is needed to bring about truth will not have a chance to flourish and, thus, the progress will be impeded.

Desire is an aspiration, an endless want that cannot be fulfilled. There is also a generosity involved with desire because one is called to give to that which is desired. And this giving does not satisfy in the way a need can be sated. The other is needy, and our desire that comes from the other is spurred on to further itself due to the paradoxical nature of desire. Since the Other is transcendent, they can never really be known by the one who desires. The infinity of the other further deepens the desire because one can never really reach the fulfillment that one wishes. In therapy, what is needed by the client is to find their truth, and this can only be done when the desire reaches the therapist by way of the client. And, it is said, desire can only come when there is no need. In

therapy, this means that true discourse and ultimately truth for the client can only be found when the therapist has nothing invested in the outcome. There can be no need on the part of the therapist, only need from the client.

The truth for the client is the freedom that they experience by being able to actualize their own self in their reality. In so doing, the client will be able to face their suffering along with their happiness, knowing that their existence is dynamic and full of change and potential. If the client, for whatever reason, begins to go faster than reality might merit, as van Kaam would say, the client is in “untruth.” This may occur because the therapist’s motivations have slipped from desire for the client and the responsibility to their client that comes from that desire to a need to see positive results. This shift in motivations on the part of the therapist may result in the client feeling the conscious or unconscious need to achieve for the therapist’s sake in order to make them happy. This can be dangerous because the client is not allowed to find their truth while they are traveling down the therapist’s own misguided road.

It might be easy to see how need could take over as a motivation for helping a client find their truth through insight. In our individualistic society, it is no wonder that everyday involvement in the world leaves one preoccupied with oneself. Van Kaam points to the importance of “being present” to the client, and one cannot help but see the difficulty in this if attention is diverted for whatever reason from the client. If one is coming to the aid of the client out of a need to achieve results the therapist then runs the risk of only attending to the surface issues and not addressing their more important search for truth and meaning in their own reality. Of course, by achieving these short-term results on surface problems, the therapist’s needs can be sated. However, they will most likely find that they have not solved the clients problems at all but have perhaps deepened them or created new ones. This propagates the same kind of need in the therapist that requires another positive result to alleviate it. The cycle continues, but quite differently than the way that desire is spurred on. The need grows because the real result has not been achieved. In desire, it is the desire that comes from the other that spurs on our desire, not a simple need being met.

Another risk that results out of the therapist’s need is that by providing for one’s own need to see results the client may be acting *for* the therapist and not acting with the freedom that he is rightfully deserved. The client’s freedom has been secretly taken away from him by the therapist, and this theft cannot serve the client well if his quest is to discover his own truth in reality. Freedom, for Levinas, is reason, and by acting *for* the therapist the client has acted without his own reasoning and has used the therapist’s reason in his place. Not only is this dangerous to the dynamic of a free and safe relationship in therapy, but this may cause the client to question his ability to think and choose for himself. Ultimately this can jeopardize the whole therapeutic experience, all so that the therapist can feel that satisfaction that comes from being perceived as “correct” or “effective.” Obviously, the glory is short-lived once the therapist is faced with either the smaller problems having multiplied and the larger problem still looming in the distance.

The client’s need is pure. It is the client that comes to us in therapy - they turn to us and they need for us to hear their call for help. The recognition that the therapist gives to the client that lets the client know that they have been heard is, according to Levinas, a “gift.” But there is another gift from the client to the therapist when the person with

which the therapist sits also helps to free the therapist. The therapist becomes aware that she is *for* the client, and there is an investment of freedom that the client has placed with the therapist that is undeniable. As Levinas has pointed out, by recognizing the illusion of freedom one comes to understand that one cannot truly be free because there is always the responsibility to the other. Once this is known, the therapist can better understand herself. This is truly a gift, but it should never be a motivation.

Desire, for the therapist, is the best motivation for therapy. In desire, the client finds their own freedom, their responsibility, and ultimately their truth that will help them to change their life. By the therapist being there, being present and able to sit with the client and let them *be*, the client is able to be free and feel themselves heard. This fosters discourse where the real truth can be found, for without the recognition from the therapist the client would again be denied, just as they have experienced in their life prior to therapy.

Truth can be found in discourse. When the therapist is truly present, the client can be heard. As a therapist, the responsibility to the client is the ethical bond between the two. Each are separate, but the bond brings the therapist and client closer in the union of genuine discourse. Van Kaam believes that the therapeutic encounter allows the client to just *be*. This freedom that the client enjoys can help to heal him by allowing him to experience himself in ways that can help him to grow. If the therapist is respectful and caring of the meaning that the client has attributed to his world and the things in it then the client can begin to make the world a new experience where growth and change can take place. This respect and care come from desire, for if need was the driving force for the therapist then respect and care would most likely felt by the client to be absent or lacking.

Perhaps discourse is the key to finding truth. A case can be made that a constant dialog between one and one's reality as it unfolds is also key. In this exploration, desire is needed from the therapist in order to foster a safe place to experience these realities that may be very difficult. By being present to the client, by caring and respecting the client no matter what is said, the client can find the truth they are searching for. If the therapist is driven by need, it may be far more difficult to hide shock from a client that has just made a surprising revelation because the client will believe that the therapist is not unconditionally supportive. Being surprised by something a client might say may throw back several weeks or months of therapy and progress because the relationship of safety and trust has been blown. If true discourse were happening, if desire was driving the therapist, then the client would indeed be safe to explore anything within that session that they cared to. The client would feel supported by the therapist unconditionally.

With the client sitting across from the therapist comes desire. If there were no other then there would only be need. But the client in their need calls the therapist to responsibility. The good therapist heeds the call, and by the client's position of higher stature in that they call into question the therapist's freedom by presenting themselves, the therapist's desire spurs her on to further discourse in their search for truth. This is important because without this desire, true discourse cannot happen and truth for the client, which is their reason for therapy in the first place, will never be found. To use the client for the therapist's own need to solve other's problems is to render the client powerless, stealing their freedom and removing their ability to find the truth that they seek. By presenting a safe place where the client's freedom is securely invested in the

therapist, and the therapist acknowledges their responsibility with that freedom, discourse and ultimately truth for the client can be found. A constant check from the therapist on whether they are true to their motivations is in order, because one's motivations can easily shift and become a problem to the therapy situation. If this happens, if need replaces desire as the driving force in the therapist, then the relationship will be compromised and truth through discourse will be elusive. But, when monitored closely, the good therapist can hopefully shift back her motivations to the ethical position of desire once again.