

The Implications of Levinas's Philosophy for Understanding Psychotherapy with Children
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A focus on ethics is one of the most crucial elements present in psychotherapy. Due to the highly sensitive nature of this work and the vulnerability of patients it is of utmost importance that psychotherapists concern themselves with the study of ethics and keep it foremost in their practices. Of all the different populations we may work with I feel strongly that children top the list of the most vulnerable, thus requiring us to vigilantly attend to how we are treating them with regard to ethics. The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas offers one way to begin examining ethics. His work is comprehensive enough to serve as a guide in this somewhat complex terrain. In order to understand how Levinas' philosophy can be used as an ethical guide for therapy it is essential to look at some of the key elements, which are foundational to his work. The key elements I will cover in this paper include the absolute Other, infinity and totality, need and desire and some of his beliefs pertaining to the value of the face-to-face encounter. After I sketch out these various concepts I will use them to illustrate how Levinas' ethics can be used as a guide for treating children in therapy with respect and compassion.

One of the most powerful ways in which Emmanuel Levinas distinguishes himself from other western philosophers is through his focus on the other rather than the individual. In the west we have a long-standing tradition of individualism, which is evident in the philosophy that promotes the experience of the individual in isolation. They have neglected to acknowledge the context in which the individual is situated resulting in, at times, a very distorted understanding of how that individual experiences life. This staunch individualism is evident in most mainstream psychology and it would certainly be possible to use Levinas' work to begin to unravel our individualistically distorted biases in our approach to therapeutic treatment. Since this paper is addressing ethics specifically I will refrain from opening up that line of inquiry even though I believe they are tied into each other.

Levinas' philosophy is both incredibly simple and astoundingly complex. It is incredibly simple because it taps into our fundamental nature to act ethically and with compassion. It is astoundingly complex because, despite our nature to be compassionate, we are simultaneously selfish and what he offers us requires a degree of presence we do not practice regularly within this culture. His solution to this tug of war is to focus on the other. "It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught" (Levinas, p.51). It is Levinas' point that we are able to move beyond our own selfishness when we are able to see the face of the Other, which displays for us the idea of infinity.

When Levinas refers to the face of the Other, he is not speaking of the physical face, but rather the essence of that person. "The Other does not only *appear* in his face, as a phenomenon subject to the action and domination of a freedom; infinitely distant from the very relation he enters, he presents himself there from the first as an absolute"

(Levinas, p. 215). “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea” (Levinas, pp. 50 – 51).

At the very core of Levinas’ work is relationship. His study is about the face-to-face encounter. In this way he deviates from mainstream western philosophy by not focusing on the individual’s experience in isolation. He strives to illuminate how crucial it is to acknowledge our context and our relations with one another. In the words of Steen Halling, “His writing can be characterized as presenting a philosophy of intersubjectivity and of ethics directed to our encounters with concrete others in our daily world” (1975, pp. 206 – 207).

In order for there to be a face-to-face encounter it requires two discreet participants. Even though Levinas focuses on the power of the Other to call us to respond he also states clearly that this call has to be heard by someone. “The same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and *absolve* themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated. The idea of Infinity requires this separation” (Levinas, p. 102). Levinas’ concept of responding to the other is not in an attempt to merge with them. In fact, it is this focus on separation that makes Levinas’ philosophy available as a model for ethics. Ethics is defined by Webster’s Dictionary as, “The branch of philosophy dealing with the rules of right conduct”. Through maintaining the integrity of the individual in relationship he provides room for an examination of how individuals conduct themselves within that context.

It is impossible to understand any of Levinas’ work without a basic understanding of the characteristics of the absolute Other, or as he often refers to it as the face of the Other. When he refers to the “face of the Other” he is not referring to the physical face, but rather the essence of the person which is presented to another individual. When the face of the Other is presented, it elicits a reply to a call for help. This call for help is One of the clearest way he describes the face of the Other in a way that tells us he is not speaking of just the physical face is when he writes about how the face always exceeds our expectations and prejudices. It is the idea that the face of the Other always reveals more than what we expect that leads us directly into the concept of infinity and totality.

Working with children in any capacity provides a perfect opportunity to apply Levinas’ philosophy as an ethics. Not only are children often treated with disrespect and a severe lack of compassion they are also so clearly the face of the Other. Because of their very dependence on others to care for them while they grow they constantly send out a call that requires a response. In addition to sending out the call they are more willing and able than adults to heed to call of Others. In fact, they show us that we have this natural tendency which gets dulled over time as we get more wrapped up in attending to our own needs. The fact that children not only send out a call, but are particularly sensitive to the call of others forces ethics to the forefront when interacting with them.