

The Tender in Therapy

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When Levinas refers to “the feminine” in *Totality and Infinity* he is not making a reference to gender, rather, his use of the feminine implies a category of being. The feminine as a category of being intimates a special *receiving* on the part of the interlocutors in discourse.

As a therapist, my starting point is the face of the other, looking back at me. As the other is looking back at me, I am receiving her face and in that reception I am called to be responsible. The occasion of therapy is an occasion of vulnerability. The client in therapy is opening up to the therapist the most tender areas of her life. As her face breaks through, I am called to my higher moral self. In our therapeutic relationship, I am called out of chronological time and into human time. Paradoxically, measured time both stops us and calls us back for more. As a therapist I am not present for the other to exact a fee, for the face of my client calls my self-centeredness into question. In a way, I don’t need my client, rather, I desire her.

The distinction between need and desire for Levinas is grounded in the position one takes in regard to oneself and an other. Everyone has certain needs. My needs, however, are only enough for me. The things I need for myself are things such as food, shelter, and clothing. Levinas points out that as social beings we have a *need* to be with other people. The way that need plays out *in relation* to other people is important.

My need for my client is not a kind of need that seeks to fill a void or compensate for a lack of one sort or another. That kind of a “needy position” taken toward her would seek only to make deals with her in order to satisfy certain deficiencies or fill parts of myself that for my own reasons, I find lacking. For Levinas, such a need is self-serving. What draws me to my client is not a need, but rather desire. Thus, I don’t seek to need my client. What I seek is to freely choose to *be with* her such that she is desired.

Need is not at all the basis of desire. As Levinas puts it, “desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolute other.” Desire for the other goes beyond need. Desire is being able to be called out of myself for service to the other. Desire calls me beyond mere need to act ethically toward the other not for the purpose of mutual exchange because I want to cash in on a favor at a later date. I have truly abused my client if I use her for my own needs.

My client is present to me not as one to whom I extend the mere knowledge of my chosen profession. To totalize my client would be self-serving and would not recognize her as absolute other. Totalization would engulf my client and consume, control, and make the effort to comprehend her not as a resonant other, but as a totalized other. The totalized client is merely the client that, as consumed, I totally digest. The totalized client is merely the client that, as comprehended, I totally grasp. The totalized client is merely the client that, as controlled, I totally control. Totalization reduces my client to my object fulfillment, and in that reduction, I reduce my client *only* to my understanding of her.

As a therapist, I can never know my client perfectly. Such a stance toward my client broaches totalization. Levinas tells us that the other is infinitely other. The other is always more than I will ever know. From this, “infinity overflows the thought that thinks it.” The other as infinitely other transcends every thought I can have. The transcendence

that is the infinite other calls me beyond my thoughts, out of myself, for service to the other. My relation with my client as infinite, transcendent other calls me to be responsible. In my desire for my client as other, I will never totally comprehend, never totally consume, and never totally control her because as a transcendent, infinite other she is always beyond me, shining through with more than I will ever be able to know. As my client, her dignity as infinite other transcends the boundaries of rigid notions of personhood (e.g. classical psychoanalytic theory) that cannot see outside the realm of scientific explanations and definitions of what it is to be human.

“The refusal to totalize is lived as the recognition of the face of the other. The face (of my client) resists totalization and as such conditions the life of our therapeutic consciousness.” Levinas tells us that systems of totality, such as political systems and classical psychoanalysis, reduce the other to an explanation. In explaining the other, I constitute the other as a failure because I can never hope to see the other as infinite other by explanation alone.

Systematic explanations embrace the homogeneous. Any effort to homogenize the other will fail because we are all so radically unique. The other (my client) is not the same as me. The other is radically other in the sense that the other transcends sameness. To transcend sameness is to move beyond sameness toward an immanent separateness that makes it possible for me as a therapist to receive the other as an other. The immanent separateness of the client in therapy transcends the boundaries of definition and thus resists totalization.

The face of my client brings me as a therapist to the sphere of the ethical, and in that realm, truth will become manifest. As a therapist, I receive my client as one who comes to me from on high. My client is no mere object before me as a problem to be solved. The face of my client calls me to be responsible before our discourse in therapy ever begins. Levinas says, “discourse is...not the unfolding of a prefabricated internal logic, but the constitution of truth in a struggle between thinkers, with all the risks of freedom. The relationship of language implies transcendence, radical separation, the strangeness of the interlocutors, the revelation of the other to me.” And so it is possible in therapy that the immanence and transcendence of my client can reveal an unseen side, previously hidden.

My therapeutic discourse with my client will always offer a surprise; the other will always surprise me. I will never know what the other will give to me in therapeutic discourse, yet I will receive it with gratitude. At the same time, I give to my client freely. I gain a sense of authentic freedom when I see my freedom from a stance of humility different than a “free-for-all” type of freedom. The freedom that characterizes our therapeutic discourse centers around *talking to* my client as opposed to *talking about* something such as an abstract theory of personality that would move us no more than what we would gain by shifting our weight as we sit. The other, my client, gives or invests in me my freedom to call me out of individual spontaneous freedom *to* responsible freedom which enables (creates possibility *for*) me to engage (see) her thus reconciling the tension between *freedom from* and *freedom for*- freedom for the other.

I am freely in a relationship with my client. Our discourse in therapy is directed to and received each by the other. This is no trivial thing for Levinas. He says, “and if the other can invest me and invest my freedom, of itself arbitrary, this is in the last analysis because I myself can feel myself to be the other of the other. But this comes

about only across very complex structures.” In this arena, because we are speaking to each other, receiving each other, it is possible for truth to come out in our discourse. Truth arises as meaning from within the situation I am in with my client in the course of our dialogue. My relation with my client as it is revealed by way of language makes it possible for truth to come forth. And even as my client and I are receiving each other, my relation to her is also characterized by separation. The separateness of my client as the other is a paradox that makes it possible for truth to be experienced between us. To assume that my client is not separate and that perfect unity is possible in therapy assumes that it is possible for me to completely know her. As infinite, transcendent other, my client is always more than I will ever know. Thus, the separation between us is experienced as a desire by me to choose to adhere to the other. Language is what brings out the experience of truth between us.

The face of my client calls me to be responsible to her. Embedded in that responsibility is the ethical call of honest discourse. My desire to choose to adhere to my client as other comes to life or atrophies in relation to our discourse. When I see the face of my client, I am called to be responsible. If our discourse grows, we will experience a meaningful relation with one another. In other words, our relation will come to life because our honest discourse with each other gains a life that allows us to experience truth in our desire to adhere to one another in the face of our separateness. Aside from the ideal view that the discourse with my client will proceed in the way I’ve described, is the fact that discourse might proceed rather slowly even though the other sees me seeing her and I see her seeing me.

What becomes visible in therapy is never the same from one client to the next. For the client who has never experienced an unconditional, infinite other (therapist), discourse in therapy would go slow at first. Let’s suppose that a client has experienced the world as non-differentiated. That is to say that the client sees all people the same way and in relation to that, is largely treated by people according to her expectations, or treated by people the same way, not too differently overall. If the therapist can move with the client, provided the client is willing to work, there will be a moment where otherness will break through even in the face of sameness. If the client can see the therapist seeing her, the client will feel her unconditional moral worth from the therapist at some point. This is no doubt a different experience from the world of the same the client has known up to that point and it all begins with and moves forward from the therapist seeing the face of the client, and likewise the client seeing the face of the therapist. The therapist is receiving the face of the client. The client thus gets more from the transference because the therapist is there to receive her experience. When the therapist sees the client seeing him, the therapist sees that there is recognition of a receiving. The client is revealing her *who she is* to the therapist. The therapist is receiving the client and the client sees that and engages the therapist in discourse.

The therapist presents himself as a face, and the client presents herself as a face. Levinas tells us that “the question that asks about the quiddity is put to someone.” He goes on to say,

he who is to respond has long already *presented* himself, responding thus to a question prior to every question in search of quiddities. In fact, the “who is it”? is not a question and is not satisfied by a knowing. He to whom the

question is put *has already presented himself*, without being a content. He has presented himself as a face. The face is not a modality of quiddity, an answer to a question, but the correlative of what is prior to every question. What is prior to every question is not in its turn a question nor a knowledge possessed a priori, but is Desire. The *who* correlative of Desire, the *who* to whom the question is put, is, in metaphysics, a “notion” as fundamental and as universal as quiddity and being and the existent and the categories.

We go to therapy for understanding, specifically, to find out *who* we are. If we did not desire to find out who we are, we could look up a definition from a scientific manual or even go to the self-help books for a prescription. The face of the therapist desires to serve the client, to facilitate the client’s becoming an infinite other in the face of the finitude of sameness. The therapist as other to the client, makes visible. As that other, the therapist is the light that shows the client the infinite within herself and ultimately others. Other people change the way I see things. The therapist changes the way the client sees things as a subjectivity that is the light of consciousness in the world, given to the client in a generous way. It is not the light itself that gives to the client, it is the face of the therapist that generously gives, and the client receives. As it could be applied to therapy, Levinas puts it nicely:

The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality. This extreme attention does not actualize what was in potency, for it is not conceivable without the other. Being attentive signifies a surplus of consciousness, and presupposes the call of the other. To be attentive is to recognize the mastery of the other, to receive his command, or, more exactly, to receive from him the command to command. When I seek my final reality, I find that my existence as a “thing in itself” begins with the presence in me of the idea of Infinity. But this relation already consists in serving the Other.

Although intended as a philosophical treatise, what Levinas wrote in *Totality and Infinity* offers an important foundation for the practice of existential-phenomenological psychotherapy as both client and therapist, in revealing and receiving each other, can come to a deeper understanding of their own existence.