What in the Life World is Levinas Talking About?

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Abstract

What stance should one take in regard to Emmanuel Levinas' claim that ethics is rooted in interpersonal relations? More generally, how should one "read" Levinas, in the sense of bringing to bear his philosophy on our everyday relationships and our practice as psychotherapists? Should one take him as an "authority," as (to use his own language) the Other who brings into question our assumptions and our freedom? David Fryer (2004) situates Levinas within the phenomenological tradition, broadly conceived, and argues that therefore his descriptions should be seen as "descriptions of the very structures that underlie our experiences of the world, in particular as descriptions of the structure of subjectivity and intersubjectivity" (p. 7). But this is where we live, is it not, since our existence is relational at its very core? Accordingly should our response to and questioning of Levinas not come from our deep rootedness in the territory that he addresses?

Obviously there is no one way to interpret Levinas' thought and there are many ways in which one's conversations with him can be fruitful and meaningful. In this presentation, I proceed from the evidence of everyday life, that is, the evidence provided by concrete first-hand accounts of profound, even if subtle, coming face-to-face with other as Other as the basis for a conversation and even a struggle with Levinas. This approach takes the life world as the mediator and common thread between ourselves and Levinas.