

A Hopeful Stance: How ethics, compassion and empathy can elicit change

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Abstract

In this work, we explore certain aspects favorable to the occurrence of a client's change in psychotherapy. We focus primarily on the foundations and potential influence of what we call a "hopeful stance," a therapeutic approach that is founded in a particular kind of ethical regard for the client centered in the acknowledgement and espousal of the existential possibilities present in every human being at any given time. We explore how this stance can become part of the life our clients, within the context of intimate and empathic relationship, and we discuss how this stance and our work *from it* can be germane to change. For the purposes of our argument, we try to establish a dialogue between Levinas and Buber around the notions of otherness and intimacy, and how these notions inform our understanding of the emergence of a *dynamic ground* that makes personal change in the life of our clients more likely to manifest. We inquire into how a Levinasian ethical stance and Buberian intimacy can *work* together for the benefit of our clients. We believe that the hopeful stance we are outlining in this study is mainly defined by three *movements*: a) giving in to the principle that the other (our client) cannot be fully understood in the infinite (in the Levinasian sense) intricacy of his or her lived experience; in the second movement b) entering an intimate and empathic conversation (as we understand it from Buber) with our client that inspires *the client themselves* to recognize themselves as an *other* who is susceptible of purging themselves of fixed patterns of existence; and finally c) establishing an intimate relationship with the clients informed by our hopeful regard of them, improving the client's ability to harness their own potentialities to achieve the personal change they need to create and live more fulfilling and meaningful lives.

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Introduction

The Mystery of Change

The occurrence of change is as fundamental to the realm of psychotherapy as it is elusive. Psychologists and clients alike would likely mention the client's growth and personal change as one of the primary focuses of their therapeutic endeavors (Gendlin, 1964; p. 101). However, the centrality of change to psychotherapeutic theory and practice does not imply that there is consensus among psychologists and psychotherapists as to what constitutes or inspires it within a human being. Every school of psychological thought defines and addresses human change differently, making a discipline-wide agreement on the nature of change virtually impossible (ibid). Still, in spite of its nebulous and ephemeral nature, the phenomenon of change remains a central focus and pursuit of all psychotherapy: its importance and power are matched only by its mystery.

The goal of our present project is not to add yet another definition of change to the many that already exist across the spectrum of academic and clinical psychology. Instead, we intend to focus our inquiry on the combination of factors that create the *dynamic ground* in which our clients change within the context of psychotherapy. Central to our work is our belief that the said dynamic ground *becomes* when, in a therapeutic encounter, a therapist is able to assume a non-totalizing ethical stance towards their client and is able to engage in a compassionate and empathic dialogue with those whom they intend to help. It is our contention that by establishing a relationship of complementarity between a non-totalizing stance and an empathic engagement

within the therapeutic endeavor, we as therapists might come to bring our clients closer to the fulfillment of the needs that bring them to us. In so doing, we assume a *hopeful stance* in relation to our clients, cognizant of our client's limitless potentialities and seeking to reflect this recognition back to them, that they might come to see their own human possibilities more clearly.

This potentially transformative kind of relationship can be founded upon a dialogal reading of the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber. We believe that Levinas' "radical altruism" (Kunz, 1998; p. 9) or "alterocentrism" (ibid; p. 19) stance can be coupled with what Buber calls an *Ich-Du* relationship for therapists to develop the kind of therapist-client setting in which a client's transformation is most likely to occur. Levinasian and Buberian thought can be complementary and conducive to the betterment of practicing psychotherapists, insofar as they impart to us a deeper understanding of our role in the ever-dynamic process of personal change that our clients so often seek.

Discussion

1. Levinas: An ethics from which to feel

The character of the hopeful stance that we are describing is founded upon Emmanuel Levinas' emphasis on the alterity and infinity of the Other can provide to our work as psychotherapists. Furthermore, we will strongly emphasize the hopefulness that caring responsibly for the Other can bring to our work as therapists.

To better understand the radical and transformative nature of Levinas' philosophy, we feel it is first necessary to make note of what it is not. Outside of Levinas, a great many philosophers and ethicists have constructed intricate and often beautiful frameworks of thought intended to address the questions of how and from what perspective a human being engages their world, their fellow humans and themselves (Kunz, 1998; p. 9). More frequently than not, the implicit baseline and cap of such constructs is the ego, or "I", the solipsism that Levinas would call "the Same" (Levinas, 1998; p. 52). The I is primarily concerned with and responsible for *itself*, over and above the *Other* (Marcus, 2008; p. 34). Further, the I often gravitates toward believing it can fully understand its fellow man, when in fact it is only rendering it as another manifestation of itself (the Same), disregarding the Other's existence as a wholly unique and infinite being. Such "I-centric" (Marcus, 2008; p. 34) philosophies and theories, intellectually illuminating and philanthropic though they attempt to be, bestow upon the ego a solipsistic centrality and a level of prominence that leaves the unknown or Other in a place of secondary concern in its view of its world. In its self-centrism, the I cannot see the otherness of the other, intrinsically limiting possibilities of existence and understanding for itself and the Other alike.

Psychotherapeutic theories, for the most part, have been built as self-centric "egolog[ies]" (Kunz, 1998; p. 9) that advocate, as Marcus points out "a way of being in the world that seems to encourage us to orient and justify our actions and efforts to be responsible for ourselves, and only secondarily and instrumentally to others largely for reasons of mutual utility." (2008; p. 33).

For the majority of the practitioners and thinkers in this field, one form or other of the "I" is presumed to be the nexus from and toward which all humans beings live, think and act or must live think and act in the world. Like Marcus, Kunz notes that "psychology has a difficult time describing human experience and behavior other than as events of an ego-centered being solely concerned with itself" (Kunz, 1998; p. 9). Nonetheless, we feel that psychology is also more than an egology, and furthermore can be an alternative a self-centric and self-referential framework of understanding human existence.

It is this alternative to ego-centered thinking which Levinas talks about, and on which we base the first movement of our contention. Levinas calls into question egologically-oriented philosophies when he asserts that “the psyche in the soul is the Other in me, a malady of identity” (1998; p. 69). For Levinas, in the words of Rimbaud, “I is another” (Rimbaud in Borer, 1991; p. 78). An undefined and foreign self finds not only its true center but its gratification and fulfillment in the other, and struggles when it is enclosed in the solipsistic “I.” As Levinas puts it: “The I [...], the center around which [the self’s] existence gravitates, is confirmed in its singularity by purging itself of this gravitation [...] and is confirmed precisely in this incessant effort to purge itself. This is termed goodness.” (1969; p. 244-5)

Marcus further underscores Levinas’ emphasis on the primacy of our responsibility to the other, and how such responsibility dramatically changes one’s relationship to the self: “To Levinas, being-for-the-Other, having an unending responsibility for the Other, implies a loss, if not eradication, of one’s taken-for-granted, normative, felt sense of self-identity and selfhood” (Marcus, 2008; 29).

When we encounter a human being as Other, every form of totalization of them shatters. When we receive this being as someone who is fundamentally and absolutely unknowable, an infinite being who transcends any effort to be fully understood, categorized, and compartmentalized, we open the door to their “otherness, [their] infinity, [to someone who] cannot be made intelligible by consciousness” (2008; p. 26). In this tenor, the clients we see in our works as therapists are to be revealed as fundamentally and intrinsically infinite, withstanding any and all efforts to be encapsulated, regardless of the efforts we might make to do so. Quite simply, “the Other is irreducible” (Kunz, 1998; p. 38) and it is fundamental part of our labor to give in to this revelation from our clients and ourselves.

It is of great importance here to note that, while Levinas defines the other as absolutely and irrevocably *not the same* as us, he would also say that we ourselves are *also* others, infinite and incomprehensible, and deserving of the same respect and responsible concern as the person in front of us. Levinas is asking us to not only recognize the alterity and infinity in others, but the absolute infinity in ourselves: we too are impossible to categorize or totally understand.

In not assuming that we can fully know, categorize or comprehend the other, we are not totalizing their being, and in so doing we are allowing the client’s otherness to be respected. “Every reduction - by systematizing, classifying, pointing, even describing - is, for Levinas, a violence, a violation, a form of murder” (Orange, 2010; p. 81) upon the other. Yet this crime can be obviated if we are capable of acknowledging the other in their unmitigated infinitude while suppressing our need to render them as the Same. There may be considerable relief in acting as if we fully grasp the intricacies of the other, as doing so might unburden us of the stress and pressure we often feel in the face of the client’s uncomfortable and ambiguous unknowability. Yet acting in such a self-serving way is a detriment to the clients in front of us as well as ourselves. “When I totalize,” Kunz notes, “I only succeed in reducing my own understanding of [the other.] I don’t distort them; I distort myself. I deny myself, not the Other” (1998, p. 37). Achieving a stance of openness and confirmation towards our client’s limitless potentiality, difficult though it may be will assist our clients to be free of totalizing regards bestowed upon them by themselves and others in their lives.

A “radical” (Marcus, 2008; p. 33) understanding of the alterity and irreducibility of the person in front of us is, in our eyes, the gateway to a relationship in which change is possible for our clients. Levinas places an ethical demand upon us to respond *responsibly* to the other’s “call” (Levinas, 1974; p. xxviii) with the acknowledgement of the other as being “always-more-than”

as a central concern of *our* lives and work. In the context of psychotherapy, if we hear our client's "call" in this way, our response to them will carry in itself a glimpse of their possibilities of transformation and growth. In the same way, if we are incapable of hearing their call and responding to it, choosing instead to become and act as psychotherapists for our own benefit, we will be speaking and taking courses of action that perpetuate the suffering of our clients.

Further, if we, as therapists, are capable of placing in abeyance our knowledge, suppositions and preconceptions about our clients, it will be revealed to us that they, in their impenetrable otherness, are more than the mental diagnoses, emotions, affects and history that they share with us in the therapy session. Surely, they *are* everything they bring to us; their trauma, conflicts, and past and present relationships are all deeply reflective of who they are in the subjective worlds they inhabit. Still, they are *always* more, and have the *potential* for more, than we can perceive or understand, just as we are always capable of discovering new edges and landscapes within our ever-broadening selves.

In terms of alterity and change, we feel that our therapeutic endeavors should begin by taking up an ethical stance that will reveal to us our client's infinite possibilities and patterns of living. Regardless of the breadth or depth of change sought by our clients, we must recognize the alterity in them, if we are ever to help them harness the potential for positive growth and change that exists within them in every moment of their lives. As therapists, we are to believe in their possibilities before they do: we are to be hopeful when they are not.

2. *Ethics and Intimacy*

As we said, Levinas' portrayal of an other-centered self can inspire within us a hopeful ethical stance founded upon our undeniable respect for the other's infinite existence. In the context of psychotherapy, however, it is not enough to merely acknowledge the Other as a being rife with possibility: we must help them see themselves in the same light. It is our belief that psychotherapeutic work demands from us that we help our clients, as Others, recognize the infinity within them, and use this revelation to create a space in which their potential for change, growth and healing is more likely to be actualized. In other words, we feel that one of our challenges as therapists is to reflect, in our gaze, our client's infinite possibilities as Other *back to them*. Bridging the interpersonal distance that exists between the therapist and the client is essential for the endeavour of helping our clients recognize and regain their own possibilities. Between therapist and client, the mutual revelation of our otherness is the *return*¹ of hope that we consider the second movement toward the construction of what we have called the dynamic ground for change.

For this ground to *become* in the therapy room, it is essential that we *pass on* our hopefulness to our client. We must put the possibility of change in the horizon of our clients: we must not only see hope in those who come to us for help, but we must also help elicit in them a measure of hope in their own possibilities for growth and transformation. A way (most surely not the only one) of sharing our hopeful stance in therapy with our client is walking with them down the path to the revelation of their own otherness in the context of an intimate and open relationship. We must engage in a face to face encounter defined by a "mutual responsiveness" (Marcus, 2008; p. 24), an interhuman venue in which the revelation of the other's infinity to themselves can happen. By engaging our clients in a genuine relationship, we can help them see

¹Our use of the word 'return' is not only intended to express recovery but also acquisition. This is relevant to us because even if we know that hope can be regained by some of our clients after being lost, in more tragic circumstances, it has never been part of their life.

themselves as Other, purging themselves of their painful gravitation toward the Same (Levinas, 1996; p. 19).

When we depart from a hopeful stance and establish a genuine relationship with someone, they will see us seeing them as a person who cannot be defined by the prescriptions and assumptions that until then they held as immutable (Levinas, 1998; p. 152). Through this dialogue, we are to show our clients that inherent to their life is their privilege as humans to establish “by the hidden activity of [their] being [...] an impassable barrier to objectification” (Buber, 1965; p. 75), by others or by themselves. We must regard the human being in front of us as “*mysterium tremendum*” (Buber, 1970, p. 127), a unique *some-one*, not an object to be scrutinized or possessed, but a being that we are immensely fortunate to have revealed to us. Our humble reception and response to this revelation can give the client a glimpse of the possibilities they have not yet seen in themselves. When we respond to our client with the highest level of “devoted care” (Halling, 1974; p. 215) we are introducing them to the “*idea of the infinite*” (Levinas, 1996; p. 19) in themselves, and with this the possibility of a self that is bigger than its present suffering.² To be regarded by someone as *always* more than can be known, to be seen as an Other full of potentialities and unbounded by totalization, is the beginning of believing that one *is* such.

When met in a genuine dialogue, the Other comes closer to us in a relationship of mutuality that paradoxically acknowledges their (and our) otherness while bridging the emotional and experiential distance between us. In so doing, the Other becomes “You” (Buber, 1970, p. 46), a human being that is both intimately known to us and revered by us for their sacred unassimilability. This movement into intimacy is central to our contention. The need to bridge the distance, to establish a genuine dialogue to listen and to communicate (Buber, 1970; p. 22) is essential for our client to acquire a hopefulness toward their own self.

In the therapeutic setting, when we are attempting to relieve the suffering of an Other who comes to us for help, we enter into a relationship with them. In so doing, we activate the paradox of mutuality and otherness that ensures not only that the client will regard *us* as Other in return, but that they will also assume a hopeful regard for *their own* otherness: in this way, both therapist and client become the Other of each Other to no end (Halling, 1974; p. 215). To create the conditions for a transforming experience, we must make the passage into an intimate and non-totalizing relationship in which our clients see us *seeing them* in their infinite potentialities. A hopeful stance opens for us the infinite possibilities of our client, but we feel our clients must discover these possibilities as well, so that they in turn can also be hopeful about themselves. For this to happen, both therapist and client must be “two human beings that reveal the You to one another” (Buber, 1970; p. 95).

3. *The Dynamic Fertile Ground for Change.*

So far we have established two moments that shape our presence in front of and with our clients. In the first moment we propose that, by accepting that we cannot ever *comprehend* the human being in front of us, we acknowledge their *always-more* possibilities of being. We have explained, returning once and again to Levinas’ thought, that these possibilities become evident when we stop forcing our “I” to be the restrictive frame of understanding through which we regard the person in front of us. When we effectively succeed in “purging” (Levinas, 1964; p. 244-5) ourselves of our usual gravitation toward rendering the Other as the Same, we acquire the

²This is what we consider a point of coincidence between Buber and Levinas, the Other is a being to be held in the highest regard, and

“response-ability” (Halling, 1974; p. 215) needed to assist our client in purging *themselves* from gravitations that have, so far, *held or patterned* their existence in deleterious ways. In so doing, we are affirming the “inassimilable surplus” (Levinas, 1996; p. 19) of potentiality residing in them.

In the second moment, we engage in reflecting the client’s unlimited potentiality back to them, possibly “for the first time in his or her life” (Van den Berg, 1971; p. 348). This, in our view, can help the client to see themselves and their lives in a more open and hopeful way. If we engage in genuine dialogue with the person in front of us, our alterocentric stance can not only be conducive to the revelation of the other to us, but it can also enable the client to see their own otherness; that is, their yet to be realized possibilities of change. In the first moment we established that our clients are infinite even if they do not see it. Then we contended that if they are revealed to us and we enter into genuine dialogue with them, we will be revealed to them too, along with their own infinity.

We have described that the alterocentric ethos provides the base line for our responsibility to the those we encounter. This ethos calls us to situate the “facts,” “knowns,” and “saids” we may have about a client in the periphery of our encounter with them, that their otherness can be revealed to us. By renouncing these “saids,” we make room for the potential realization of the possibilities of the other. By making room for the other in this way, we arrest our natural tendency to self-reference, or render the Other as the Same. When we stop using the “I” as the point of reference for what we understand as being human, the human Other can be revealed to us. In other words, when we enter genuine empathic dialogue from our hopeful stance, the intimate recognition of the infinite within us and our clients happens.

When we bestow upon our client an alterocentric regard, they stop acting in an “I-centric” fashion. When we treat them as always more, they act as always more and the inassimilable surplus that they are is revealed to them. According to this, as therapists, our obligation to the other is not only to not totalize our clients, but to *engage* in intimate relation with them. If Levinas’ ethos acknowledges *possibilities*, given that it confronts us with the revelation of the infinite of the Other, Buber’s closeness provides the therapeutic endeavour with an intimacy that introduces empathy. In itself, it carries acceptance of the other and flexibility from what Buber calls “the dogma of some running down [that] leaves no room for freedom or for its most real revelation whose tranquil strength changes the countenance of the earth: returning” (Buber, 1970, p. 106).

We believe that regardless of the change or transformation that is or may be needed by the client, it is contained in the infinite potentialities of their otherness, and it is given to them by our hopeful regard as we enter the reciprocity of genuine dialogue. When we no longer try to assimilate the other into the “I”, and we treat the person in front of us as always-more than can possibly be known, they will catch a glimpse of their otherness and will be given the opportunity to act accordingly. In our eyes, the formation of the dynamic ground of change *is* the beginning of change: when our hopeful and nontotalizing regard for the client enters their horizon, their personal transformation has already begun, and cannot be undone.

Conclusion

With this work we have not attempted to define change nor to recreate a formula for it to happen. Instead we have focused our efforts on depicting a *setting* that we have called *dynamic ground* in which, we believe, change can occur in the context of psychotherapy. Even if change, given its personal and intimate nature, is undefinable as a phenomenon, we still feel it is bound

to occur in the life of a human being within the sphere of their unique possibilities. Once a client's unique possibilities for change become visible to us, they in turn will become visible our clients.

Our understanding of these factors has been given deeper nuance and breadth by our dialogal reading of Levinas and Buber. In our eyes, a reverence for the infinity of all human beings bestows upon all psychotherapists the understanding that all clients, no matter how familiar to us, are always-more-than could ever be fully known or scrutinized. From this ethical and philosophical foundation, we feel that we can begin the process of entering into genuine dialogue with our clients, one that reveals our clients as unique and nonobjectifiable beings, to us *and* to them. If we are able to create a dialogue of humility and respect for our clients, we can reflect our client's infinity back to them, in the hope that they might see themselves not as they always have been, but as they *potentially can be*.

A hopeful and human approach to psychotherapy, infused as we feel it is with the irrevocable acknowledgement of our client's (and eventually our own) ceaseless potentialities, can lead to an intimate therapeutic experience that is bound to help our clients change what they need to change in order live more meaningful and fulfilling existences. We feel quite strongly that we can work to create a mutual respect for openness and intimacy flourish between our clients and ourselves, providing the foundations of the dynamic ground within which our clients might come to understand and live their lives more honestly and openly. Such a ground can inspire clients to propel *themselves* towards the growth and self-transformation that they otherwise might not attain. A hopeful stance, in our eyes, provides our clients the opportunity they need to experience themselves differently and refreshingly, a beautiful happening that is part and parcel of the occurrence of change that is enduring and meaningful; a kind of personal transformation our clients so often need.

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