Levinas psychoanalysis

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I was asked by an editor, Paul Marcus, to outline a psychoanalysis inspired by Emmanuel Levinas by answering three questions: 1) What is human about the human? 2) What is pathological about pathology? And, 3) What is therapeutic about therapy? Here is a short version of my response.

I. Question: What is human about the human? Answer: Ethical responsibility!

It is the task of the philosopher to awaken us from slumber. Trauma shakes us, but alone does not awaken. Reflection on suffering urges us to wake up. Levinas’s philosophy concerning trauma disturbs us into reflection about the psyche, its pathologies, and its therapy.

Most philosophers recognize some kind of dualism about the human. Each person is distinguished as unique and shares a commonality. Each has a material and spiritual flavor. Each is immanent (here and now) and transcendent (beyond this place and present time); both subject and object, a being-in-itself and a being-for-itself. Essential for psychotherapy is the awareness that each client is vulnerable and has the means for recovery. This fundamental characteristic of being easily torn apart and amazingly resilient is the paradox of the human. What Levinas adds to this ancient and persistently described paradox is that each human is conflicted between being driven by self-interest and haunted by the call to rise above self-interest to be responsible for others: the self is simultaneously for-itself and for-the-Other, and the for-the-Other calls the for-itself into question and even provides the foundation for the for-itself. The psyche seeks its identity filling and enjoying its needs, and yet is identified as the one commanded to serve. Each is a subject and subjected to ethical demands of other subjectivities. This conflicting ambiguity is the source of its malady and its healing. This ambiguity helps us understand what makes pathology pathological and therapy therapeutic.

In Otherwise than Being (1981), Levinas offers an extraordinary description of the enigma of being human:

The psyche is the form of a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity: the same prevented from coinciding with itself, at odds, torn up from its rest, between sleep and insomnia, panting, shivering. It is not an abdication of the self, not alienated and slave to the other, but an abnegation of oneself fully responsible for the other. This identity is brought out by responsibility and is at the service of the other. In the form of responsibility, the psyche in the soul is the other in me, a malady of identity, both accused and self, the same for the other, the same by the other (pp. 68-69).

This quote contains a most extravagant claim: “the psyche in the soul is the other in me.” In an even more extraordinary and disturbing end-note, Levinas challenges further the traditional notion of human subjectivity: “The psyche, the one-for-the-other, can be a possession and a psychosis; the soul is already a seed of folly” (1981, p. 191). The needs of the Other calls the self out of itself, away from its happy and absorbed self-possession (p. 99), and despite its self sabotaging self centering, the self can be transformed into an authentic identity. Levinas says “…from the start, the other effects us despite ourselves” (p. 129).

We’ve called this enigma within the human psyche the paradox of power and weakness (Kunz, 1998). This human paradox challenges existentialism, and the existential foundation for many theories of pathology and therapy.
Existentialism offered a challenge to the *essentialism* of psychology and psychotherapy. Levinas does not dispute this challenge, but identifies existentialism as another “egology,” another theory based on the centrality of the self and the self’s freedom to do what it wants to do. This existentialism cannot offer a real ethics for the science and practice of psychology.

Martin Heidegger describes the human as Da-sein, the *being there*: “Dasein is the being that in its being is concerned *about* its very being” (1996, p. 10). Dasein takes itself up by its own power: Dasein is radically free. Levinas points out that “Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics” (1969, p. 45). Dasein’s freedom (1996) preserves its own being, perpetuates itself, achieves distance from itself in self-reflection to serve itself. Dasein knows it is a being toward death and can take a stand toward its own death. Facing death and being free inspires authenticity. Dasein is the being who knows, behaves, and emotes to define and defend itself.

It is the being, however, in its *conatus essendi*, its “will to be,” the being that can sabotage itself with its own freedom. Heidegger misses this.

**What is human about the human?** I will quickly review the thesis of *The Paradox of Power and Weakness*.

* A. The paradoxical nature of the human psyche.

A fundamental truism of any psychoanalysis is that power is powerful and weakness is weak (Kunz, 1998). The self uses power to gain power with good judgments, choices, and emotions. At the *cognitive* level, power is *intelligence*: perceptive and rational for better *understanding*. At the *behavioral* level, power is *exerting effort*: motivated and courageous for *success*. At the *affective* level, power is *fulfilling needs*: satisfying its wants and being *happy*.

Correspondingly we learn the truism that weakness is weak through failure, suffering abuse, seeing others fail and abused, and what the self calls “just plain bad luck.” The self is weakened through poor judgments, choices, and feelings. *Cognitive* weakness is ignorance: insensitive and irrational, *naïve* and *foolish*. *Behavioral* weakness is *lazy* and *cowardly*, risking *failure*. *Affective* weakness is being *unfulfilled*, *dissatisfied* and *discontent*. The weak suffers. These two obvious truisms (power is powerful and the weakness is weak) are the implicit themes of most psychologies explaining pathology and practicing psychotherapy.

But beyond the obvious, we experience the *paradox of the weakness of power*. Lord Acton wrote of political power: “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Power can be its own source of weakness: we sabotage our own power. Our egoism and lack of concern for others weakens us into self-isolation.

*Intelligence* can sabotage itself with *arrogance*. Self-righteous obsessions about what it knows and how right it is deceives intelligence. This is the Gyges complex named after the mythical Greek shepherd who found himself an “unseen seer,” given the power to see others, and not be seen by them. All of us suffer a bit of this seduction and illusion of being perceptive about others, and pretty good at hiding our own flaws. Levinas says, “Gyges is the very condition of man, the possibility of injustice and radical egoism, the possibility of accepting the rules of the game, but cheating” (p. 173). The “unseen seer” is wrong about others and wrong about his own secrecy. He is reduced to an isolating lonely pathology.

*Behaviorally* *exerting effort* can sabotage the self when it *manipulates* others. This *Zeus* complex after the god who felt entitled to control not only mortals but also other gods, also defeats itself with its self-serving *compulsions*. We are all vulnerable to the self-seduction of the illusion of *control*. The control freak deceives himself, and fools nobody. Others resist and
avoid his control, and he becomes controlled by his own delusion. This also reduces him to an isolating lonely pathology.

At the affective level fulfilling needs can sabotage the self by turning greed. Narcissistic self-indulgence is self-destructive with addictive consumption. We all suffer a bit of the seduction of consumption: concern about the satisfaction of our needs before others. Narcissistic self-indulgence alienates others and reduces the greedy to an isolating lonely pathology.

We are all vulnerable to these tendencies, and we can all have hope of recovery from our self-sabotaging obsessions, compulsions, and addictions when we are confronted by the neediness and worthiness of others. Always already our self-interest is called into question. This is the paradox of the power of the Other’s weakness calling us to responsibility. Paradoxically giving up power for ourselves to give to Others gives us authentic freedom.

The weakness of others questions our arrogant comprehension and certainty and commands us to be attentive, to be open, to listen to and be touched by their needs. This radical self-skepticism and attention to Others is the gift of simplicity, non-judgmental openness.

The weakness of others questions our manipulative control and commands us to be obedient, to serve their real needs. This radical self-substitution is the gift of humility, serving others for their sake without expecting reciprocal benefit in return.

The weakness of Others shames self-indulgence and inspires us to be compassionate, to suffer others for their good. Radical self-sacrifice is the gift of patience, suffering others because they are worthy, yet they suffer, and because we cannot suffer their suffering.

This paradox of the power of weakness is illogical, irrational, against self-interest; it haunts us as difficult to understand and difficult to adopt. On our own, we fall, by the gravity of human nature, into self-interest until another person interrupts and calls us out of the prison of our ego-centrism, and we respond responsibly.

Levinas provides a set of distinctions revealing not only the enigma of our struggles between self-interest and concern for the good of others, but also how the Other comes first and how our responsibility for the Other has priority over self-interest and even legitimates self-interest. Yes, for Levinas, the other comes first.

B. A brief review of Six fundamental distinctions from Emmanuel Levinas

First distinction: totality and infinity. The face of the Other expresses her uniqueness, her infinite otherness. Her singular hereness facing my singular hereness challenges my escaping her neediness. Her existence here cannot be denied, nor can I hide my being here from her. I cannot get out of my own skin here before the Other here in her skin, her incarnate neediness and infinite worthiness.

When I reduce her singularity to a commonality with a label to totalize her as an anonymous other, in order to escape my singularity, I reduce her to nothing more than... She is then not worthy of my responsibility.

Totalizing another with categories and labels is convenient and efficient, but misses her. It may be easy, but it narrows understanding. My convenient totalizing is my loss, not hers. She cannot be reduced from who she is; she remains her inviolable self.

The Other reveals to me that she is always more than... She reveals infinity. Her infinite otherness calls me into question and awakens me from the slumber of self-absorption, and into responsibility.

Second distinction: Need and desire. A need is a lack in the self. A need can be satiated when filled. Fulfilling a need for comprehensive and certain understanding, or a need
for controlling action, or a need for indulgent consumption are exercises in the power of power.

Desire is the experience of the self “transcending” itself toward the Other for the sake of the Other. Desire is insatiable, not because it is too great a lack to be satisfied, but because it is deepened by desire. Desire is the response to the otherness and neediness of the Other. Desire is from the desirability of the Other, not from my neediness. Desire has priority over need. Love is greater than satisfaction.

Third distinction: Passivity and activity. Radical passivity is prior to activity. We actively initiate thoughts, actions, and feelings. But, we are passive to what is other than self, to the hardness of materiality, to the limits of our own body, to the rules and regulations of society, to the incessant flow of time, and especially to interruptions from others. What is difficult about our radical passivity is the interrupting revelation of the Other as infinitely Other and the command to be responsible for her. We are more passive to the call to be responsible than any other passivity. We do not initiate responsibility. It is given before any choices. Yes, we decide how to respond and then act, but obligation is given before choices and action.

Fourth distinction: self-initiated freedom and invested freedom. Freedom is invested in us by others, and has priority over self-freedom. Freedom is not primarily capricious. It is invested in us by the Other to be used for the good of the Other. Freedom is loaned to us to serve others. We ought not squander this invested freedom nor use it to hurt the other.

Self-initiated and self-directed freedom to enjoy life is not negative; it is the source of our identity. Levinas proclaims, “Life is the love of life” (p. 112). We live from good soup, good music, good conversation. However, when freedom violates others, it is unjustified, because freedom is not our own. It is a gift from others to serve others.

Fifth distinction: social equality and ethical inequality. Democratic equality is considered our highest value. However, this equality presupposes a primary ethical inequality where “the Other has rights over me” (p. 98). Unless we recognize this unequal, non-reciprocal responsibility to and for the Other, we cannot justifiably involve ourselves in the social, political and economic structures to fulfill our equal rights. A social equality not founded on ethical inequality dissolves into conflict with everyone protecting their rights against others. Only when we recognize our fundamental inequality can we define ourselves as the other to others; only then can we become equal citizens; only then can we claim social equality to protect our rights and those of others against the abuse of other Others.

Sixth distinction: the said and saying. Saying is fundamental to any said. The said is information passed on. However, the Other’s saying “Here I am” is the first word before exchanging any said, any information. In return, my saying “Here I am,” is witnessing the truth of her saying, “Here I am.” Responsibly facing the Other facing, I say, “I am here. I am the one before you witnessing your saying ‘Here I am.’” The Other’s saying is the revelation of her infinite otherness, her infinite dignity, her call to me to be responsible. Saying is the breaking through of the Face, the revelation of the Other. Levinas says, “The face speaks,” (1969, p. 66).

Each of these six distinctions challenges the egologies of not only Dasein, but also the theories and practices of psychology. They challenge the reduction of others to make my knowledge of them comfortable.

But how can we understand others, those who are radically other than our own psyches? Are we not stuck in maddening solipsism? The psyche of the other is invisible. We can neither look into the consciousness of another, nor look through the other’s consciousness to see his world laid out before him. However, through his behavior, expressions, and descriptions in dialogue with us, we can metaphorically look over the other’s shoulder to glimpse his world.
The face of another facing us is more real than any other reality. He is the reality principle. His speaking and his face presenting his story as real give us his world. His looking back not only announces that he is here, but that he owns his reality, that his psyche constitutes the meaning of his reality, and he is opening it to us. He makes his world here real not only for himself, but also for us in dialogue in a kind of apresenational way. Husserl’s term.

Levinas tells us that the presentation of the Other cannot be an object of my perception. I cannot really see her as she is. I can try to reduce her to an object of perception, but she is always more than my perception. My perception misses her. Levinas (1985) says, in Ethics and Infinity, “I think rather (than perception and knowledge of the Other) access to the face is straightaway ethical” (1985, p. 85). Facing another is not first an epistemological event, an event of knowing. It is primarily an ethical event. Any knowing, acting, and feeling for the Other, separated from the ethical is violence. An indifferent look is as abusive as a scornful looks. A look purely for the enjoyment of the self is voyeurism. A look of her usefulness for my self-interest is petit bourgeois capitalism.

The other presenting her hereness is straightaway an ethical call to responsibility. She simultaneously presents herself as the one calling for my response and the one always beyond my understanding, skill, and feeling to adequately respond. The Other is infinitely close, “In my face,” and infinitely far away, always escaping my grasp. She invades my center from below and escapes me from above (Levinas, 1969, p. 215). Below asking for help, and above infinitely worthy beyond my reach.

With the Other not quite in my sight, only presented to my perception, her revelation as Other alters my perception of things, own body, other others, and time. As I try to empathize with the Other, try to see the world over her shoulder, I find the world changed. My own needs and meanings are called into question. My perception is no longer simply of my things, my body, my others, and my time. I am directed toward the world of the Other. Let’s try to describe the world as if from over the shoulder of another.

1. Things. When I am comfortable in my own world, things are not objects separated from my subjective experience. They are within my subjectivity; they are the content of my psyche. They are mine. Levinas says, I “live from” things toward other things in the world (1969, p. 110). Separated from others, things are not separated from me; they are my milieu. It is a subjective world. Its contents grace my world.

However, when I responsibly look over the shoulder of the Other, things lose their quality of being mine. They are for the Other. Especially when the Other is needy my things are owed to her to reduce her lack. Things leave my exclusive subjectivity and become objective for me to be given to the subjectivity of the Other. I am called to see and provide things for the needy Other. My dollar bill is not mine even before I give it to another in need. It’s an object assigned to me to fill the need of the Other.

2. Body. When I am in my own world, I am my subjective body. I live my body. It is not lived as an objective thing. My ambiguous subjective-objective body is my incarnate connection to the world to fill my needs and to enjoy things. I am a body-subject as Merleau-Ponty says (1962). Certainly I can reduce my body to a quasi object: I can view it in the mirror, discuss it with a doctor, or experience it as a burden in suffering from which I cannot escape. I remain, however, the body-subject who subjectively knows and expresses my meanings.

However, when I responsibly look over the shoulder of the Other, my body is no longer just my subjectively lived body. It is taken from my exclusive subjectivity and becomes a quasi objective body for the subjectivity of the Other. My body is called out of itself to respond to the
needs of the Other. It becomes like a tool, a utensil for the good of the Other. Empathy is suffering my body concerned about the Other. I don’t subjectively choose to be called. I am chosen to serve. As bodily present, I say to the Other, “Here I am.” My eyes and ears say, “I am the one here seeing you and hearing your plea.” I witness the Other saying to me, “Here I am, needy and worthy.” I respond with my “Here I am” with a gesture, a word, an extended hand with a gift, perhaps a caress, a healing touch. Incarnation means embodied service.

3. **Others.** In my own world, other Others, family, friends, neighbors, can be called mine. They are here within the focus of my intentional consciousness. They are not perceived as objects. They are fellow subjects alongside my subjectivity. They are there trusted to not hurt me, to provide for me, to enjoy in conversation or play, to manage the institutions upon which I depend for service, to help, maybe to fear.

   However, when I look over the shoulder of the Other at her world, those other others, those along side of me who I’ve called mine now belong to her. While each of these other others is unique and for whom I have infinite responsibility, the facing Other commands me to command those others to help. They become a quasi objective tool as my own body is a quasi objective tool to use to serve the Other. While I am infinitely responsible, I cannot do it alone. Neighbors and institutional structures are there to be used to serve each other.

4. **Time.** When separated from others, time flows out from my present now into my future then and back to my past then. My protentions and retentions are from here and are subjectively meaningful. Time does not flow smoothly and objectively in one direction forward from my before to my after. My subjective meanings present my time as folding back and leaping ahead to make a disjointed present.

   When I look over the shoulder of the Other, my time is further disjointed. It is wrestled away from my subjective time. The temporal “I” is radically dephased, as Levinas says. Time is taken out of my own time. It is diachronic, out of synchrony with my time, destabilizing my projects and accomplishments. The Other interrupts me and appropriates both the objective time of the world and my subjective time. It is her time. My temporal continuity is altered by the Other’s interruption. I put myself on hold to begin anew later. I am knocked off my center by the transcendence of my time, a time elevated above my time. Past time is irretrievable, it is “irrecuperable,” out of reach to repair the hurt I’ve brought others. I can only hope to repair the past by being forgiven by the Other. The future is unforeseeable where I might hurt another or not have time or skill to help (Levinas, 1981).

   Clarence Frogman Henry sang, “We always hurt the ones we love.” Levinas says, “To love is to fear for the Other.” To love is to fear for the other hurt by me.

   Let me offer another quote that shows how far Levinas goes when describing the identity of the self as de-centered away from its things, body, other others, and time: “The animation, the very pneuma of the psyche, alterity in identity, is the identity of a body exposed to the other, becoming ‘for the other,’ the possibility of giving.” (1981, p. 69). Haunted by being identified as the other for the Other, by my responsibility to this other, and by my inadequacy for this responsibility, yet inability to escape, I suffer being human. But this suffering awakens me from my egoism and raises me to my authentic self. This is the psyche.

II. **Question:** What is pathological about pathology? **Answer:** Isolation from ethical responsibility.

   In the last chapter of *A Different Existence*, J. H. van den Berg defines the study of psychopathology as “the science of loneliness” (1972, p. 103). The pathological individual is
alone and isolated from the external world. He is disconnected from things, from his own body, from others, and from his past and future. Van den Berg first describes the individual isolated from things, and challenges the use of the analytic term, “projection” of distortions. Secondly, rather than claiming that the pathological person “converts” psychological problems to physiological symptoms the individual is isolated from his body. Thirdly, rather than claiming that he “transfers” styles from previous people to those in the present, van den Berg describes how he is isolated from others. Finely, he is alone in his time. He does not “mythicize” (distort) earlier events. He lives a different past and a different future.

These psychoanalytic terms tell us very little of the person’s experience. Van den Berg says that the term, “Projection denies the patient’s observations. Conversion denies the existence of the patient’s bodily sensations. Transference denies what the patient can find in others. Memory distortion denies what the patient remembers” (p. 104). Then he goes on,

If we want to continue using these four terms, then we are correct in saying that every single human being, including the very healthy one, projects, converts, transfers and distorts his memories; for no human being lives in the midst of nameless objects, with a body that is anonymous, surrounded by puppets and equipped with a past that is recorded as an engram and has no history. On the contrary, everyone lives an existence that is structured, incarnate, interpersonal and historical (p. 104).

Inspired by Levinas, we can add to the van den Berg’s description by saying that the psychologically unhealthy person tends to appropriate things from others to his isolated existence. Rather than the world of things as the material infrastructure across which he can relate to others, he lives without recognizing things as spatial locations, and tools, comforts, and gifts with and for others. He is not so much greedy, but the stuff of the world crumbles as support for his access to others, and it congeals as foreign and threatening.

Rather than living his body as his means to communicate and serve others, he lives as if unseen and isolated from others. Not that he is always narcissistically self-indulgent, but he does not live his body as touching others. The schizophrenic talking back to his hallucinations in public is not fully aware that others are watching him. He is isolated from the place, from his own body, from others, and from a common time as he speaks out loud.

Rather than other people being paradoxically infinitely other yet infinitely close, he reduces others to his own mineness. They are either psyches invading his space and threatening his psyche, or they simply do not exist.

Rather than allowing a transcending diachronic time, one interrupted by others and begun anew to oblige the needs of others, he locks himself into a temporal sequence beginning and ending with his here and now present, a motionless present. Isolation is the inability to recognize and responsibly respond to others. The pathological person is alone with his mineness. Trapped inside his own psyche, he is unable to be open to the goodness and neediness of others. He suffers from an absence of hearing the call to responsibility in a horrifying isolation.

Cognitive isolation. He is trapped in an unshakable obsessive structure of self-centered consciousness. He denies himself openness to new meanings. His thinking narrows his attention away to guard against surprise, away from being comfortable with his own communicating body, listening and speaking with others, and celebrating the rich breaking up of predictable temporal sequences to bring genuine excitement. He is caught in the flat and boring isolation of his own ataractic existence, a tranquilized undisturbance.
Behavioral isolation: restricted by compulsive habits, the person limits his creative, efficient, and joyful encounters with Others across the furnishings and tools of life. Ritual behaviors narrow his opportunities to work with and for others.

Affective isolation: victimized by his own suffering, the person limits his feelings for others. His addictions to alleviate his suffering disallow empathy for the suffering of others. Unable to suffer the neediness of others, he restricts any emotional concerns of love and joy. While enjoyment establishes the identity of the self, enjoyment can only be fully enjoyed with others. The addict’s enjoyment conspires to sabotage his freedom and condemns him to pain and paranoia.

These are not moralistic judgments about individuals suffering pathology. Each has reasons from hard lives for adopting ego centered and irresponsible styles. The patient has become trapped in his own style. He has made isolating and ego-centric choices, but he is the victim of his pathology.

III. Question: What is therapeutic about therapy? Answer: Ethical responsibility!

Last year I focused on what is therapeutic from the therapist point of view: the gifts of simplicity, humility, and patience given within the therapeutic encounter. Open to their patient’s world by looking over her shoulder, a good psychotherapist holds back prejudices, theories, and especially their temptation to be super perceptive, skilled, and sympathetic. The face of the patient says “do not do violence to me; do not reduce me to your labels. Bracket your obsessive categories, your compulsive techniques, and your need to feel good about being a psychotherapist.” Without speaking, the client asks the psychotherapist to be ethically responsible, to use the freedom invested in her by the client to attend to him. Speaking in psychotherapy is primarily speaking to someone and, secondarily, speaking about something.

Here is an example from last year’s seminar. The client’s face says, “Here I am.” Before speaking about troubles, his face says, “I am the one before you. I am here and others are not here. This suffering I suffer, these problems I tell you about, are mine; they are unique.” The client’s face does not say, “I’m here to represent that group called depressives.” The face says, “It’s me. You see me here. You do not see a client in pain. You see me in pain. I am the only one here, and my pain is appealing to your goodness.”

The face of the good psychotherapist responds, “Here I am. I’m not only here with you. I am here for you. I’m not a representative of the group called therapists. It is me here, and I’m here for you.”

This year I would like to focus on what the therapist might want in clients from good therapy. A good client receives the gift of simplicity. Simplicity is knowing by not knowing, being able to know new knowledge by radical openness to what is beyond what is known. We want clients to be open, rather than closed off by fear from the wonders of the world, especially other people. We don’t want them to negate themselves and their knowledge about the world. We want them to be confident that their knowledge offers the chance to know more. We want them to be curious about what more there is. We want them to release themselves from their inward looking and frightening obsessions in order to direct themselves to enjoyable surprises. We want them to look again to what they already know as if for the first time, because it is a new experience now, not a rerun of a past then.

The marvelous thing about memory is that it is faulty. It allows us to experience freshly what is not remembered. We want clients to find ways to wrench themselves free from obsessions. We want them to expect puzzles and confusions and laugh at their clumsiness as they
test themselves in ways to play and work. We want clients to be in awe of others they meet. Every person they meet will be unique, infinitely other, an unfathomable mystery. Certainly some people have hurt them and we would not want clients to put themselves in danger. However, if they can forgive they can release themselves from corrosive anger and hatred. We want them to be able to approach others not as threatening but as people with whom they can communicate and laugh and especially for whom they can serve.

Bruce Springsteen sings about his brother, “Nothing feels better than blood on blood.” Nothing feels better than bonding to another and giving up self-interest to truly give to another. We want clients to be able to love, to see others as someone with whom they can talk about things in common. Heidegger gave a bad name to chatter, small talk, empty statements. But they can be healthy. It’s not what is said; it is the saying. We want clients to be excited about the future because it will bring astonishing surprises, and to hold the past, although spotted with pain, as what was lived through to arrive at this glorious place.

**Humility:** clients can learn to act by not acting, to be free from compulsive acting in order to initiate something new, to be released from the ritualistic that dominate their lives. Just as the therapist recognizes the vulnerability of the client asking her to not manipulate his behavior, so the client can recognize the vulnerability of others asking to not be manipulated. We want them to serve others. Not slavish servitude, not obeisance, but obedience to the others real needs. We want them to try new movements, to learn to play with things, to hold and caress things as lovely pieces of nature and objects fashioned by others for their use. We want them to test their own bodies as means to serve others, to stretch beyond their stilted postures to caress others. We want them to learn to *grop*; not the sexual violation, but the risky search in the dark for something they don’t know and have. Groping is stretching out with imagination, with eyes, ears, hands, and feet searching for the faces of others who are also risking awkwardness. We want clients to have the courage to extend beyond their comfort zone.

We don’t want clients to want *capricious* freedom, self-centered freedom, freedom to continue to hurt others and sabotage self. His face says to therapist, “Help me regain responsible freedom.” The psychotherapist is responsible for the client’s responsibility, not his actions but his sense of obligation. We want clients to be responsible for the responsibility of others. The client can serve his own responsible freedom by serving the responsible freedom of others.

**Patience:** suffering the other because the other suffers, but not trying to suffer the other’s suffering. The other’s suffering is his own. It cannot be shared. The client does not ask the psychotherapist to suffer his suffering. The psychotherapist suffers real empathy; she suffers because the client suffers and because she cannot suffer the patient’s suffering. We want clients to be able to suffer others without suffering the others’ suffering.

Healing or redemption happens if another suffers. The psychotherapist suffers the client because she values the infinite goodness of her suffering client. He is good. His suffering is not good. The psychotherapist suffers because the client suffers. Her interest in him is a *disinterested interest*. The client can learn to suffer others with this disinterested interest because they suffer useless suffering. When clients suffer others with patience, therapy happens.

**IV. Conclusion.**

What do we want of patients? *Being free from the tyranny of self, invested with freedom received from Others to be used with and for Others in the world of things, own body, other others, and time.* As Richard Cohen, a Levinas scholar, writes,
the healthy psyche… is not an armed self-enclosed fortress but an openness to the other, and hence also the possibility of malady, dishabiliitating vulnerability, illness, mental breakdown, psychosis. One can be mentally ill because one can be morally responsible! The road from mental illness to mental health is not to create from a shattered ego a fortress ego, but to regain one’s obligations, one’s responsibilities to and for the other (In Gantt and Williams, 2002, p. 48).

What do we want from our patients?

**Simplicity:** free from obsessions and open to the rich meanings of others. Simplicity is not being simplistic. Simplicity is the first step to wisdom. Freed from the abuse of others and from their own obsessions, clients can only fully recover their freedom by acknowledging the goodness of Others, recognizing their own responsibility to others, and serving.

**Humility:** free from self-serving, compulsive habits in order to serve the good of others. Humility is not groveling, not cowardice, not sycophancy, not false modesty, not a weak inability to stand up to others abusing them and other others. It is service without expecting reciprocity.

**Patience:** free from debilitating suffering, distanced enough from their own conflicts in order to suffer others, able to have empathy to suffer others.

Let me finish with an extravagant notion inspired by Levinas: psychotherapy is a religious event. Levinas says, “We propose to call ‘religion’ the bond between the same (self) and the Other” (1969, p. 40). *Religion* etymologically comes from the Latin *religare*, to bond to others, ancestors, descendents, contemporaries. The primitive meaning of the word religion is *to bind oneself in obligation*, to transcend the self to serve others. Psychotherapy is “attending to another to heal.” The therapeutic relationship is religious. The goal of therapy is to seek this primitive religion, commitment to others.

**References**


