

Levinas in Practice: Mental Health Treatment in a Community-Based Clinic

Abstract

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In a paper presented at the 8th Annual Psychology for the Other Seminar I speculated on the applicability of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical concept of *interiority and exteriority* in psychological practice. This theoretical examination considered various implications of movement between these existentially lived states as a paradigm for treating the suffering patient. Now that I have begun a psychological practice I revisit this work, reflecting on how Levinasian philosophy concretely applies to patients I am treating at a community-based clinic serving the underprivileged and disenfranchised.

This paper presents an evaluation of twelve patients, revealing multiple psychological conditions, which are then clustered to form three main existential themes. Within the general perspective of interiority and exteriority, I then reflect on what Levinasian philosophy has to say about these themes and discuss their implications in psychological treatment.

The theme of *trauma and abuse* consists of physical and psychic trauma, childhood abuse and the experience of alienation, to which the application of the Levinasian concepts of proximity, substitution and forgiveness are examined. The theme of *power, economy and society* groups together societal conditions that cause the psychic wounding of patients, which are then linked to the Levinasian notions of the Third, social justice and *il y a*. Finally, the theme of the *ineffable body*, is presented, which refers to the body that contains, as a vessel, the transcendent exaltation's of life but also experiences the states of human suffering that is anxiety, depression, hopelessness and existential angst. The ineffable body is reflected on in two ways, that of the apparition of the Other, the face that beckons to and disarms the Same into acting with ethicality; and second, the body as the container of the ethical relation, preverbal and implicit, that provides the compass to our ethical nature of goodness and transcendence.