

Disruption and Epiphany: Levinas at Work in Therapy

Eric R. Severson, Ph.D.; erseverson@gmail.com

Psychology for the Other

Keynote Presentation: October 22, 2011

Aligning the work of Emmanuel Levinas with the practice of psychotherapy will forever be a complicated endeavor. His language and focus at times resonate deeply with concerns at the heart of psychoanalysis. This resonance has led to many efforts in the direction of creating a convergence of Levinasian themes with psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.¹ In other moments, Levinas deals a harsh blow against the fundamental disposition of the discipline.² We should bear in mind that Levinas's wariness concerning psychoanalysis is complicated. Some of his reluctance to engage this field is the product of misunderstanding, or legitimate concern for the way psychology has sometimes dressed itself as a totalizing discourse aimed at "knowledge" or "understanding" of the other person. As such, psychoanalysis has tended classically to be reductive, confining, and to position the analyst in a position that transcends the analysand. Levinas was obviously unaware of developments in the last twenty years in psychology and psychoanalysis, which have transformed the landscape of this discipline. His concerns, nevertheless, continue to haunt the study and practice of psychoanalysis. This paper wagers that this haunting is a healthy one, and that closer examination of Levinas's later work promises to enliven both the discipline of psychoanalytic therapy and Levinasian philosophy.

There is a wide diversity in modern psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. I write as one aware that my gestures and forays over the line of philosophy and into other fields are hazardous moves, and I hope to make them with reverence. I have much admiration for the intense and precarious discipline of psychotherapy. My hope is to engender lively and helpful discourse by presenting some of Levinas's ideas about language and the encounter with the other person. I present these as a careful reader of Levinas, though not a perfect one. These are possible components of a conversation about how Levinas's ideas might assist the labors of a therapist.

Levinas levels a series of extraordinary challenges at the field of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is a broad and diversely understood discipline. One of the common mistakes in the interdisciplinary space between philosophy and psychology is to oversimplify and generalize one field or the other. Some of this is impossible to avoid; I lack the expertise to speak coherently about the breadth of psychoanalysis and its wide variety of therapies and interpretations. My paper will, however, strive to make these generalizations plain, and I hope to clarify why no form of psychotherapy evades the critique offered by Levinas.

¹ Already in 1975 Steen Halling offered a practical application of Levinas's work for therapy ("The Implications of Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* for Therapy," in *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology, Volume II*, A. Giorgi, C.T. Fischer, and E.L. Murray, eds., (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1975). George Kunz provides a more recent much more nuanced treatment in *The Paradox of Power and Weakness: Levinas and an Alternative Paradigm for Psychology* (Albany: SUNY, 1998). A host of essays and books have appeared in this vein, including notable contributions such as: John Heaton, "The Other and Psychotherapy," in *The Provocation of Emmanuel Levinas*, Robert Bernasconi, David C. Wood, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1988), and Norene O'Connor, "Who Suffers?" in *Re-Reading Levinas*, Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds. (Indianapolis: IUP, 1991).

² See, for instance: Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 63 and 76. Many authors who have utilized the work of Levinas to influence psychotherapy have done so with the open admission that there are difficulties in this alignment. C. Fred Alford seems to be particularly aware of this in *Levinas, the Frankfurt school and psychoanalysis* (Middleton, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

Levinas questions the very structure of the therapeutic encounter, along with the terminology, epistemology and hermeneutical methodology of this discipline. Just when one thinks that Levinas's critiques have been addressed or incorporated, his work escalates the conversation to even more radical extremes. Last year I focused on the physical and temporal structure of the encounter with the other person in psychotherapy. This presentation will focus on Levinas's unique understanding of language. Levinas writes much about language later in his career, though his work in this arena has received less attention and appreciation than some of his other ideas. I will be aligning his ideas about language with the vital discourse of psychotherapy, an alignment that promises to be disruptive. My hope is that this disruption will be productive.

- - -

Michael visits my office weekly, and emails much more often.³ He is in his mid-twenties and reeling from childhood sexual abuse that seems to repeatedly twist his life into knots of physiological and psychological trauma. He was once my student, and his visits to me are only supplementary to regular appearances at the offices of a psychiatrist and a psychotherapist. In our first meetings he stated a staunch refusal to visit anyone associated with the mental health professions. I have minimal training in professional therapy, so it quickly became unwise for him to continue seeing only me. The intensity of his flashbacks, and the claims he made about his mental states and behaviors, almost instantly exceeded my expertise. He simply stonewalled my repeated insistence that these would be safer and more constructive conversations if they were held with a psychotherapist. After a few sessions, I refused to schedule another appointment with him unless he would also be seeing a professional.

Eventually, Michael agreed and began therapist shopping, a long adventure of rejecting one office after another for a wide variety of reasons. What fascinates me about conversing with Michael is the way he looks at me when he speaks words about his life, his memories, his condition and his psychological state. He watches my face for reactions to catch phrases that he works into the conversation. Michael is a bright man, an excellent student and a college graduate with a major in psychology. At first I was sure he was just toying with me, seeking to meet understandable needs for human contact by stringing me along with signs and symptoms of various mental disorders and syndromes. I felt that his self-analysis was occluded by the jargon he thought I would find meaningful, or that would elicit a particular reaction. My meetings with Michael have become, as much as anything else, a quiet struggle for language.

Michael learned, either through encounters with me or with other people like me, that certain keywords inevitably elicit responses. He talked of self-mutilation, fantasized in great detail about suicide, and suggested that he might be a danger to other people around him, especially children. These are surely not surprising patterns to psychoanalysts and therapists, and I took great comfort from the fact that Michael was also seeing people accustomed these phenomena. A noticeable tendency has developed in our discussions. When Michael feels like his emotions and experiences are striking a resonance with me, he is less likely to appeal to the trigger-words that he knows will incite a visible response. Levinas's philosophy of language provides a subtle but powerful suggestion about the dynamics of dialogue. Michael and I fumble for tools to talk to one another, each reaching back into a complex history of our own experiences, resources and studies to try to find some spark of connection with the other. But for

³ Details altered for privacy.

Levinas, this way of thinking about language and discourse is derivative of a philosophy of the same, a metaphysics of presence.⁴

The goal of language in the classical sense is to forge a synchrony, however tentative, by invoking common meanings and sensations between speakers. We find early philosophy already concerned with the perils of language. Pre-Socratic philosophers had high hopes for a *logos*, a binding concept that could explain the vast diversity of phenomena in the world and render the mysteries of the cosmos understandable. The hope in the *logos*, before Plato, is partly a hope that we can adopt and communicate principles without loss or contamination. The Sophist philosophers, contemporaries with Socrates and Plato, were the first to suggest the folly of this hope in language as the perfect transmitter of anything.⁵ Plato records the relativism of Gorgias, a Sophist who claimed that even if there were such a thing as truth it would be impossible to communicate it.⁶ We wrestle with an open question, even today, when we ask about the dynamics of language and communication. But the question remains inflected by the Greeks. Plato can allow language to be imperfect; words are imperfect mirrors and gestures toward their referents. This flexibility allows for my announcement of the word “lunch” to invoke the wide variety of images that it means to all of us here today without losing the linguistic focus of “mid-day meal.”

The debate can rage on about how exact language can be, and this is a valuable issue in philosophy and psychology. However, we can justifiably wonder if questions about language in this vein do not all remain beholden to the ancient Greek question with all of its assumptions and presumptions about communication. The relation to the other, from the Pre-Socratics forward, has been a relationship with another *me*, another self who shares a common metaphysical plane of existence. We are wise enough today to know that language is intensely complex and impossibly discreet. But we have not learned to think of language outside of the metaphysics of presence that was presumed by Parmenides and Plato. We have come to see language as the shifting sea between the separated islands of individuals. The more time and energy we spend working on communication, the easier the passage of information and emotion between parties. But in the end, we know there are no perfect bridges or boats, and that we must make-do with approximation. This humility is helpful in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Many scholars and clinicians have paid attention to the work on language by Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein and others. This has led to important advances, I think, in this field, including significant caution in the application of labels and diagnoses. A hermeneutic approach to communication is surely an improvement on the clunky methods of classical psychology.

Hermeneutics offers a process of interpretation that begins with a movement outward, an *attestation*, in the terminology of Paul Ricoeur.⁷ The attestation can be a theory, an idea, a principle, a hope, an expectation or even just a word. This movement is met by an other, a partner in dialogue, who responds to my attestation. A response can be surprising or expected; it may confirm that which I have attested, or it may unsettle and judge my very utterance. Careful hermeneutical methodology holds loosely to the attestation, and all the history and science that

⁴ Levinas writes: “But then is not the trace the weight of being itself outside of its acts and its language, weighing not through its presence, which fits into the world, but by its very irreversibility, its absoluteness?” Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 62.

⁵ Alexander Mourelatos, “Gorgias on the Function of Language,” *Philosophical Topics* 15.2, 135-170.

⁶ John Gilbert, “The Sophists,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Ancient Philosophy*, Christopher Shields, ed., (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 35-36.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 299ff.

stand behind it. Good hermeneutics is humble, quick to adjust and transform the original attestation, perhaps even radically.⁸ Whatever the feedback from the other person, my role in the dialogue now requires adjustments and reconsiderations of the original movement. Some scholars have pointed out that this movement forms a kind of circle, where each saying leads to a hearing, each attestation leads to an adjustment.⁹ Martin Packer and Richard Addison have argued extensively for the application of this “hermeneutic circle” to psychology and psychotherapy.¹⁰

Such a method prioritizes the dialogue and its progression over any theoretical model. The philosophical approach to hermeneutics emphasizes adaptation, loose commitments to the channels of theory and doctrine, and a permanent commitment to humility. I applaud the direction in which this moves psychoanalysis and therapy, exponentially far away from the impulse to forcibly read some Freudian understanding of human sexuality into every patient.

For Levinas, however, this is not nearly enough. He critiques hermeneutics with nearly the same energy as any other philosophy of totality. The hermeneutic process begins and ends with the self, however carefully and humbly the epistemological structure is arranged. Hermeneutics sets theories in motion, testing hypotheses against the real world in which they are given to sink, swim or adapt. But following Levinas, we may wonder if hermeneutical methodology fails because it remains committed to the epistemological model developed by the Greeks and honed by Western disciplines over the ages.¹¹ Language and the encounter with the other person would remain, if Levinas is right, only extensions of a longstanding egoism. The encounter is on my terms; the role of language is to make her more present to me and to my understanding. Hermeneutics beats generalizations and the diagnostic boxes that domesticate the wildness of the other into the categories of the same. But hermeneutics is nevertheless, at least according to Levinas, cut from the same cloth. To use another analogy, hermeneutical philosophy may well be the gentlest weapons in the arsenal of Western epistemology. But the practice of hermeneutics is still, by Levinas’s reading, *violence*.

There are advocates of hermeneutics who gesture toward a deeper sense than the methodological structure suggested by Ricoeur. Gadamer, for instance, points out that “the circle of understanding is not a ‘methodological’ circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure understanding.”¹² This is a distinction with consequence; for along with the later Heidegger, Gadamer struggles to articulate a sense of hermeneutics that is about participation in the event of understanding. As such, these late developments in twentieth century hermeneutics take what James Risser calls a “decisive turn” away from the romantic hermeneutics of the nineteenth century.¹³ Hermeneutics after such a turn is no longer fixated on

⁸ Donna Orange suggests just such a hermeneutic humility in her recent book *The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Clinical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁹ James Risser has pointed out that the later works of both Gadamer and Heidegger move away from the terminology of the “hermeneutic circle,” which still carries too much of the tradition subject-object paradigm. See *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY, 1997).

¹⁰ Martin J. Packer, Richard B. Addison, eds. *Entering the Circle: Hermeneutic Investigation in Psychology* (Albany: SUNY, 1989).

¹¹ Levinas, “Hermeneutics and the Beyond,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, by Emmanuel Levinas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 56-65. Here Levinas advocates not a philosophical hermeneutics in the tradition espoused by Gadamer and Ricoeur, but a specifically *religious* hermeneutics, perhaps better termed *exegesis*. Religious hermeneutics, Levinas argues, must have “thoughts that go off the deep end.”

¹² TM, 293

¹³ Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 74.

the traditional dyad of the self and the other, but indicates a deeper common *belonging*. At this still cutting edge of hermeneutics, the relation with the other is less about what I choose to appropriate and more about what I come to discover about myself as already in relation. As such, hermeneutics may be less about interpretation or even understanding, and more about the condition of being-in-the-world. And yet still, in Gadamer as in Heidegger, the ego remains the protagonist in the drama of understanding and belonging. There is a legitimate reading of Levinas's first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, that still links his descriptions of intersubjectivity with this narrative of the self. Whether intentional or otherwise, and perhaps ironically inasmuch as he is doing everything in his power to distance himself from Heidegger, Levinas's self-meets-world narrative in 1961 resonates with the later movements of Heidegger.¹⁴ The ego remains the main character in the narrative of sensibility, awakening, awareness and finally responsibility.¹⁵ As such, the encounter with the other is registered as a passivity, as a debt, but not yet the passivity-beyond-passivity of Levinas's final works. So the face of the other speaks or summons anterior to my volition. This sounds much like Risser's articulation of the later developments in Gadamer, where the word of the other person is that which the self "cannot not hear."¹⁶

The trajectory of my investigation here pushes on toward Levinas's most developed position on this situation in which the self finds itself with regard to the other person. In these latest developments, hermeneutics of any stripe will not suffice to describe what Levinas the relation. At the same time, it is worth pausing to register a note here about the relationship between hermeneutics and therapy. It may well be the case that no hermeneutic disposition or ontological belongingness can avoid what Levinas considers a totalizing or egoistic approach to intersubjectivity. Even if Levinas is right in his broadside against the vast hermeneutic tradition, this does not disqualify hermeneutics from a vital role in therapy. I would point to the fine work of Donna Orange in this regard, who utilizes the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics as a deft tool for deepening the sensitivity, humility and openness of therapeutic epistemology. My aim is certainly not to undermine the value of hermeneutics across many disciplines, but to show that for Levinas this enterprise remains attuned to the machinations of being and not being's otherwise. In other words, hermeneutics is an epistemology of the self. We need this sort of thing, very much, and Levinas would not reject the tools and trades that generate and sustain the economy of being. Instead, Levinas offers a relentless reminder that we cannot look in this direction for responsibility. The summons of the other reaches me *despite* my epistemology, even when my epistemological orientation is relational, sensitive, hermeneutical and

¹⁴ It is widely conceded that Levinas read very little of Heidegger's postwar writings, despite being a careful reader and interpreter of *Being and Time*. Heidegger appears to have never responded directly to any of the significant critiques directed at his work by Levinas.

¹⁵ This is the insightful thesis of Diane Perpich and her reading of *Totality and Infinity* as well as the transition between that 1961 work and Levinas's second major work *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 118. She writes: "*Totality and Infinity* engaged in an extended narrative that purported to show how a separated and atheist ego could nonetheless come to be commanded by and responsible for the other."

¹⁶ It is interesting, in fact, that this phrase – "cannot not hear" – appears in Risser's interpretation of Gadamer and in several texts explaining the significance of the Levinasian face. For Risser's treatment see *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 76: "Gadamer says that the one who hears is not just the one who is addressed, but the one who cannot not hear..." This same phrase appears in Rudi Visker's interpretation of Levinas, as expressed in *Truth and Singularity: Taking Foucault into Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999), 265. Visker also uses this phrase in her essay: "Dis-possessed: how to remain 'silent' after Levinas," in *Man and World*, Volume 29, 1996, 133.

compassionate. The road forward is complicated. Levinas will not offer a way to think about language or responsibility that integrates with the structure and aims of the psychotherapeutic relation. This does not mean, however, that reading Levinas cannot transform what it means to be a therapist.

If the alternative suggested by Levinas was simple, or easily deployed, his later work would have already made great inroads into fields like psychoanalysis, which have made wonderful use of the philosophical creativity of people like Heidegger, Gadamer, Martin Buber, Paul Ricoeur and others. These thinkers have demonstrated the perils of structuralisms, dogmatic approaches, and the clunkiness of using theory to intersect with the utterly complex phenomena of the inter-subjective encounter.

Levinas's critique of Western epistemology runs tremendously deep. He does not offer an adjustment of prior models of knowing and encountering the other. Levinas sets out to say that philosophy, since Parmenides and Plato, is just plain *wrong* about the relationship between epistemology and the encounter with the face of the other. Philosophy has treated the other person as another complex object in the world of the learner. In this way, philosophy has without exception prioritized *knowing* over *ethics*.¹⁷ To claim the reverse, as Levinas began to suggest early in his career and worked on throughout his life, is to make ethics first philosophy. This becomes, in the latter stages of Levinas's work, very much an issue of reconsidering epistemology and particularly language:

Is language the transmission of and a listening to messages which would be conceived independently of this transmission and this listening, independently of communication (even though thoughts resort to historically constituted languages and confirm to the negative conditions of communication, to logic, to the principles of order and universality)? Or, on the contrary, would language involve a positive and antecedent event of communication which would be an *approach* to and a *contact* with the neighbor, and in which the secret of the birth of thought itself and of the verbal statement that bears it would lie?"¹⁸

Levinas presents a trenchant critique of the tradition of epistemology that moves from Plato through Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and Gadamer and down to today. The basic structures of knowing, throughout this tradition, certainly seem to follow the pattern Levinas suggests: they begin and end with the self. So the more pressing question is not whether Levinas has found a steady egocentrism in the heart of Western philosophy; this seems to be beyond argument. We must assess whether he in fact offers any real alternative to this epistemological tradition. And for our purposes here the question is obviously far from merely academic. There is an urgency, I think, to Levinas's claims about epistemology and the weaknesses of hermeneutics. So what does he propose as another method of encounter? How does he suggest we think about the approach of the other?

¹⁷ Levinas, "Language and Proximity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 125: "The contact in which I approach the neighbor is not a manifestation or a knowledge, but the ethical event of a communication which is presupposed by every transmission of messages, which establishes universality in which words and propositions will be stated. This contact transcends the I to the neighbor, and is not its thematization; it is the deliverance of a sign prior to every proposition, to the statement of anything whatever."

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," 124-125.

Another Path

Levinas suggests that I never really approach the other person. The other person approaches *me*. We all know that this is not the case in the spatial sense of approach. Like other objects available to empirical evaluation, approaching runs both ways. The reason I never really initiate an encounter for Levinas stems from the fact that the other person is always *before* me. She does not exist *with* me in a common present moment, nor does she struggle with the same ontological dilemmas that plague me. The other person upsets the present in which I dwell, a disruption of my very *being* in the world. Levinas calls this disruption of my present, my now, *anarchy*.¹⁹ Objects in the world around me can be nestled into my present. I can drink coffee, eat an apple, use an umbrella, and in all these acts I make objects present to me. But the encounter with the other person is radically different than these movements. We have not yet learned how to shake free of our tendency to separate the encounter with objects from the encounter with the other person. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many of our encounters in large-scale societies are instrumental in nature. We exchange goods, pay bus fares, buy coffee and scan our gym club membership card without paying much attention to faces. There are too many faces to do otherwise! For Levinas, the patterns and economies of being are necessary for everyday life, but they only reinforce a habitual human blindness to the alterity in the face of the other. For Levinas, it is specifically the *suffering* other that interrupts and disturbs this objectifying existence. The face of suffering arrests me, and makes vivid the non-objectivity of the face. Suffering can disrupt our tendency to reduce the face of the other to a plastic form, to a façade. And here we find important sparks of connection with psychoanalysis, which has always held the suffering of the other as its principle concern.

The fact that I never approach the other, and that she approaches me already from time-before-time, renders the encounter utterly passive for the self. Levinas calls it a passivity beyond passivity.²⁰ Like one who suddenly realizes that there is a person next to her in the middle of pea-soup-thick fog, it dawns on me that the other person is already there. This dawning realization can be expressed in hermeneutic terms, as an awakening to a deep circle of understanding that is underway prior to my volition and participation. But hermeneutics cannot accommodate Levinas's central claim: as I discover the face of the other beside me, I find that I am already responsible for her suffering. It is here that many wish to part ways with Levinas. He claims that responsibility for the suffering of the other is prior to any interpretive reception, any hermeneutic – methodological or ontological – which might give parameters or delineation to this responsibility. So perhaps for some it is enough to appreciate Levinas as a kind of clarion call to prioritize the other over the self, and then leave it at that. But Levinas pushes further.

The impulse to forge the encounter with the other into a synchrony is a strong one, for some kind of mutual understanding would allow responsibility to be reasonable. Yet for Levinas the pursuit of understanding is already secondary to the literal and unbounded responsibility for the suffering of the other. The disposition of debt is pre-original, it is already ancient before I become aware of it. Epistemology, including hermeneutics, is utterly necessary. But for Levinas these rest on an original and unquestionable debt for suffering of the other which is already

¹⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1974), 99-102.

²⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 142-143. "For the subjectivity to signify unreservedly, it would be necessary that the passivity of its exposure to the other not be immediately introverted into activity, but expose itself in its truth; a passivity of passivity is necessary, and, in the glory of the Infinite ashes from which an act could not be born anew. Saying is this passivity of passivity and this dedication to the other, this sincerity."

utterly mine. If my understanding of this relation aims to mitigate or qualify my responsibility for the suffering of the other, then a kind of idolatry has occurred: my ideas about the other have risen to the height of the summons that called me into being *ex nihilo*. Hermeneutics is more like gathering one's bearings in the midst of a powerful river of irrevocable responsibility. I can hope to swim, and not drown, in the for-the-other that is my being-in-the-world. But I dare not imagine that my dog-paddling in the torrent of responsibility grants me equal footing with the force that surges me into existence.

The temptation to imagine that I awaken to a responsibility that is ultimately reasonable presents a powerful temptation. Levinas claims that this tendency is really just self-deception, like Robinson Crusoe convincing himself that his parrot is really a conversational other.²¹ The pain of the other comes from a place beyond the scope of my present and the gathering of data that characterizes my knowing. Her suffering is *before* me, utterly anterior to my cognition. I have no resource to domesticate this pain into something understandable. Hermeneutic methodology calls for me to *first* incorporate the suffering of the other into my already native comprehension of human suffering and its consequences, and then to determine how responsible I am for this pain. For Levinas, no such mitigating process can take place without giving up the game and forfeiting ethics entirely. The suffering of the other person *reigns* over my very exercise of hermeneutics. I am held hostage by her pain, but not because she is violent or possessive or even directly requests anything from me. All of the tools that would give me leverage to liberate myself from this captivity are the tools of totalization, domestication, reduction and synchrony. I can deceive myself into thinking that this face does not lay unrelenting claim to me, but these self-deceptions are the impulses to shirk responsibility. They are Cain's question to the God of Genesis, "Am I my brother's keeper?"²²

The encounter with the other person is therefore never to be conflated with any other encounter. Furthermore, this is the encounter that matters, that strikes at the heart of what it means for me to be human. The realization that I owe, that I am responsible, is primary and prior to any structure for meeting my responsibilities. Theories and normativity are secondary. When Levinas says that ethics is first philosophy, he is claiming that the quest for normativity is always conditioned by the infinitude of the debt I owe the other. The encounter with the other is always diachronous; I no longer synchronize her world into my own. For Levinas, I am no longer an ego narrating my own learning, my own adaptation, my own integrity or my own journey. I find myself re-narrated, wrenched from the role of protagonist in my own story. I am a character in the drama of the other, a member of a plot that is entirely foreign and enigmatic. I am in the time of the other, and in this time I am first of all responsible. Philosophy must build forward from this infinite and original debt.

Levinas works out some of the philosophical logistics through his complicated appropriation and rejection of Heideggerian thought, a shared adventure with Buber, Ricouer, Derrida and others. Instead of unpacking these themes, which are heavy with the jargon of continental philosophy, I wish to press forward toward an intersection between such radical philosophy and the essential discipline of attending to the suffering of the other person in therapy. Last year at this conference I suggested several hazardous components of the classical therapeutic encounter. The client/patient/analysand must conform to the *time* of the therapist.

²¹ Levinas, "The Transcendence of Words: On Michel Leiris's Biffures," in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 144-50.

²² Genesis 4:9.

The analyst frames the structure of the encounter both spatially and temporally. My focus then was on the structure of this encounter, which runs the risk of framing the other an object arranged for synthesis and domestication. This year my interest aims specifically at language, and at the way it operates in therapy. I would like to explore how language functions in Levinas's rendering of this encounter, and perhaps demonstrate how disruption can make way for epiphany. How can the staged encounter of therapy, so steeped in the tradition of scientific and empirical epistemology, ever support the kind of relation with the other described by Levinas?

For what its worth, the *how* in this question already misunderstands the situation. Any *how* that somehow proposes to create a scenario in which the other person is encountered is only the reappearance of a structure that would return the encounter to a synchrony, a synthesis. For Levinas, ethical dialogue is not about saying and doing the right things, or even having the right frame of mind. Speaking is first about patience, passivity, and above all vigilance. One speaks not *to* or *with* the other; the discourse is transformed into a for-the-other. And this requires a reinvention of the very meaning of language. A manner of conversing for-the-other may even require a specific genre of linguistics. We justifiably grow accustomed to talking in certain ways about all the concerns of existing in the world, from food to the weather to football. But the one who addresses me in suffering speaks another dialect, and the language-games that make the world go round turn to playthings in our hands. The for-the-other dialect of Levinas can be introduced in at least two ways, a strictly philosophical manner and a quasi-religious one. Because it is more accessible, and arguably the source of the first, I will begin with the latter.

Speech and Prayer

We actually have a genre of speech that sets itself apart in just such a way from our default manner of conversing: prayer. To pray is to speak in an unusual and uncanny manner. The mode of prayer is, perhaps, available to us as a phenomenon even though the object of prayer is not. So prayer is a mode of speech that can be considered phenomenologically whatever we may individually think about its spiritual value. To pray, in monotheistic religious traditions, is to direct earnest words toward a God who precedes the utterance, a God that makes possible the very act of speech. In most of these theological traditions, the act of prayer is not really about communication, not about sharing information or working toward a common understanding. Christians, Jews and Muslims will often confirm that the God to whom they pray already knows the words they are speaking before they are spoken. The point of the speech is not like most of our other talking, and language behaves strangely when the one to whom one speaks so completely transcends the formation of words and sounds.

When Levinas suggests that speaking to the other is a form of prayer, he certainly is not advocating that we worship the other as a deity, nor that we actually use the verbiage familiar to the act of praying.²³ It is rather the case that the relation to the transcendent other renders our language similarly asymmetrical. We speak not to render the other understandable, or even to render ourselves understandable to the other person. Rather, we speak in a kind of foolish hope that something will happen in the discourse, an *event* that we cannot prescribe or predict. Prayer hopes for a response, but knows that no particular formation of words or sounds is a guarantor of any outcome. This mode of speaking is necessarily humble, reverent and expectant.

We should expand this discussion past the mere field of speech; I know that not all psychoanalysts share the traditional confidence in a "talking cure" and point toward the emotive

²³ Levinas, "The Transcendence of Words: On Michel Leiris's Biffures," 149.

connection that can come beneath and before discourse. This too is mirrored in liturgy. To worship is to lean emotionally and psychologically into the unknown. Such a movement and posture does not necessitate words, though we see in the phenomenon of language a most obvious inadequacy. No words are adequate for prayer, and yet religious people often feel compelled to pray. It would seem odd and inappropriate to think of prayer as a form of hermeneutics. Whatever “feedback” one might receive in prayer is not suitable for the hermeneutic circle. Prayer is a discourse with a different aim, a different purpose, a different hope. Liturgy is not epistemological; it belongs in another genre of being-in-the-world. The focus of liturgy is something behind or beyond or otherwise than the focus of the other ways we normally speak.

Prayer, however, is just one way to talk about this unusual way Levinas thinks about language; we need not invoke religious imagery or language to make a case for this radical genre of speaking to one another and being together. To broaden this dialect that I am attempting to describe I will call this way of speaking *deēsis*, a Greek term that allows for the broad mode of address that includes prayer and the rich symbolism of forming words to represent the unrepresentable. *Deēsis* is uttered from a position of asymmetry, out of a lack and inadequacy and need.²⁴ The concept is much broader than the posture of a prayer turned toward God; *deēsis* is the mode of speaking from humility and destitution, as one who owes more than I can hope to repay.

My youngest child Luke is just learning to speak, now approaching his second birthday. He and I have spent a great deal of time together; the academic schedule allowed me to spend almost every waking and sleeping moment with him over a wonderfully long summer. My wife worries, for good reason, that I coddle him. He is constantly climbing up my leg, riding around in a backpack on my back, or burrowing into my shoulder in the dark of the night. His first efforts at language are emphatic but almost indecipherable. For a few months he merely said the word “ball!” to refer to every object in the world. But my ears learned to hear very slight differences in inflection in the way he says this basic word. When he slows down the vowel sounds he means “bottle.” When he combined it with the sign language for “please” he wants to play with a ball outdoors. For a while he called his mother “ball,” much to her chagrin.

He understands exponentially more than he can speak. Conversations with Luke are sometimes delightful, but they are often a bit one-sided. There is a very obvious gap in understanding in the way he converses with his siblings and parents. To speak to him in the mode of *deēsis* is to seek more than just to bridge gaps in understanding, which match neatly the hermeneutical process that is a part of most speech and language. As *deēsis*, I speak to my son and find I am *responsible* for those gaps. The difference between ball and bottle is quite subtle, and there may be only two humans on the planet that could tell the difference. Yet when his face speaks it summons me from an authority and height far more significant than the hierarchy of our parent-child relationship. There is a gap between “ball” and “bottle” and it is *my gap*, not his. He calls out to me and renders me responsible for the inevitable slippage in language that characterizes our discourse. So my speaking becomes a kind of prayer, a supplication, even a repentance. And in my more vigilant moments, when I am most attentive to his face, I hear the word and instantly know which beloved object he desires. Even as we accomplish together some small task in the being of our lives – a game of catch or some refreshing milk – his words remain beyond the scope of my present. I taught him both words, ball and bottle, yet his cry *precedes* me anarchically. The plea for a bottle is sometimes one of *hunger*, and his frustration when I

²⁴ “Prayer,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979).

hand him a ball instead of the nourishment he desires is written on his little face. When I direct speech toward him it is *deēsis*, the words aim to render me at his disposal. The question “would you like a bottle” is most akin to a prayer. It is *deēsis*, though it also communicates a concrete request for an achievable end. For Levinas, as I read him, we will be constantly tempted to think of the request for the bottle as a request for an economic exchange. But in the trace that is not captivated by the exchange there is the epiphany of the other, the encounter with that which summons and captivates and commands.

In our adult exchanges we are frequently doing the business of *being*. We exchange money and goods and pleasantries, and the classical and Western sense of language functions adequately and necessarily for these exchanges. We fairly easily discern whether our neighbors want a ball or a bottle, and we hand them what they request accordingly. Our adeptness and sophistication, however, becomes a curse. The problem of language, and the difference between everyday speech and *deēsis* becomes much more subtle, if no less important. And this is perhaps why Levinas repeatedly turns to the phenomena of the *suffering* other as philosophy’s central concern. Even when lips are sealed, the face of the other “speaks” a language very different from the “would you like fries with that” vernacular of economy and everyday banter. The other speaks from outside what Levinas calls “the ineffable sadness of echoes” that characterizes the supply-and-demand dialect of being.²⁵ The widow, orphan and stranger suffer, and their suffering demands a *deētic* response, a response potentially very different from the one we may have developed through the process of hermeneutics.

Language as *deēsis* invokes a sense of infinite debt. Communication breakdowns are *my responsibility*, not the responsibility of the other. The words spoken by the other remain, in a sense, objects for the possession of my ears and then my mind. But they are hardened and ossified versions of what the other person said. Levinas calls these words the *Said*, they are given to the self by the other in speech, but there is nothing definitive about the *Said* that can necessarily provide epistemological data. Levinas directs our attention to the *Saying*, forever lost to the self but nevertheless appearing as a kind of *trace* in the word of the *Said*.²⁶ Attending to the trace of the other in the plastic form of what was *Said* is hard work indeed. The word for this is not hermeneutics, which inevitably speaks first into the interpretation of the other and her words. Levinas is advocating something more like *exegesis*, the exercise of reading carefully for the surprise of what moves out of the text to the reader. Exegesis, after all, is about letting the trace of the author move around the obstacles of time and space and culture. Good exegesis allows even the most careful and hermeneutical epistemology to be stopped in its tracks. Hearing, in the *deētic* manner I am advocating, is exegetical. Perhaps it helps to think of the other person as speaking to me in this same mode of *deēsis*. She speaks of her pain in the irrational hope that I will hear something much deeper than the objects we call words.

There is a gap between words and meaning in all language, in all speech. The art of rhetoric, debate and persuasion sometimes exploit these gaps for gain. In our most sincere moments, we seek understanding by reducing and minimizing that which is lost in translation. To read Levinas, particularly *Otherwise than Being*, is to discover that *I am responsible* for the gaps and fissures in language. Levinas refers to this chasm as the difference between the *Saying* and the *Said*, a complex and philosophically rich suggestion that is still being unpacked by scholars who explore the implications of his late work. That, in fact, is what I am up to in this

²⁵ Levinas, “The Transcendence of Words: On Michel Leiris’s Biffures,” 148.

²⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 168.

presentation – attempting to think about speech at work in therapy, and what it would mean to think of language in this way face to face with an analysand.

***Deēsis* and Therapy**

The situation is messy when we turn our attention to psychotherapy. Classical psychotherapy has insisted unwaveringly that it is a science and should obviously adopt the scientific method in its pursuits. I am aware of various creative movements in the discipline that demonstrate a broader and more nuanced approach to the intersubjective relationship of therapy. I am quite sure I would not want to drain the scientific rigor out of this discipline. The human psyche is wonderful, terrible and vulnerable. The study of psychology and its application cannot be dismissed; it remains an utterly essential aspect of personal and public health. The question is whether or not the intersubjective relationship that occurs in therapy is able to aspire to be more than another exchange in *being*. My position is hopeful and supportive; I am confident that psychotherapy can both meet the psychological needs of patients *and* be a site for the epiphany of the other *qua* other.

Most people seek psychotherapeutic help because of some sort of suffering. This means that the speech therapists address is a kind of hybrid between the expected business transactions they hope arises from the encounter and their primordial cries of suffering. This does not only happen in psychotherapy, by the way. When people suffer knee pain and they bring their suffering to a physician their language plays on these same two registers. In fact, the complaint “my knee is killing me, doc,” is the very Said in which the Saying hides. When a patient sits down in the office of a therapist, the words are a similar hybrid. They may speak the language of being, perhaps fluently. To become absorbed in this Said is to make the encounter a synchrony, a gathering of data and symptoms aimed toward a diagnosis, and nothing else. The colder and more scientific the exchange, the less likely anyone will detect the trace of the Saying in the Said. The irony of the encounters of psychotherapy is that the data is the very component of the human experience that Levinas claims should utterly disrupt our scientific methodology. The other suffers, in ways that are not mended by Band-Aids and aspirin, and we are called in therapy to make language and recommendations that address that suffering.

The challenge for the therapist is that she must be fluent in *both genres* of communication. One must speak the language of economy and being and the language of *deēsis*. For that matter, conversing with almost anyone requires us to be bilingual in this way. My baby’s request for a bottle speaks to me both as a request in being and a summons that renders me hostage to his hunger. It may be easier for other professions to realize the bilingual nature of their speaking. My Spanish teacher in junior high was lecturing me about my late homework one day, appropriately scolding me for my second missing assignment in the week. She was doing the business of teaching a thirteen-year-old kid to fulfill academic obligations. The moment I told her that my grandfather had died that week her countenance changed completely and she wrapped her warm arms around me and closed the Spanish book. Her labors were distinct from the suffering that my words expressed. Her words to me – in this case a silent embrace – were *deētic*. She dropped the labors of being and attended to a sea of pain that rendered other labors insignificant.

For psychoanalysts the language of elusive suffering *is* the scientific data put forward for analysis. The psychoanalyst is supposed to *open* not *shut* the book when words of suffering are presented. These are the moments when the subtleties of relational problems reveal very different diagnoses and therapeutic recommendations. Somebody needs to know all the signs

that a person's suicidal musings are getting serious. Somebody needs to know the patterns of human behavior that lead to eating disorders, obsessions, addictions, and perilous choices that result from the wide range of human psychological tendencies.

The concern is that the scientific approach to psychology and therapy would completely obfuscate the *deētic* nature of genuine dialogue. This may even be a bigger concern for psychotherapists than any other profession. Therapists, after all, are trained to be unsurprised by what they hear from the analysand. Levinas claims that the encounter with the other – the genuine encounter that does not play the synchronizing game of being – is a *disruption*. We think of therapists that become *disrupted* by their clients as unprepared or inadequate. Therapists are likely to frame responses in the safe and familiar vernacular of their field; diagnoses are necessary for insurance, right? And in this way the therapist's office becomes a place where the Saying reverberates unnoticed in the Said, a site where goods are exchanged but the *deēsis* of the other only echoes unanswered.

For Michael, the encounter in my office is a weekly struggle over language. He looks, quite specifically, to disrupt me. I lack the expertise to determine which of his complaints and threats are sincere – perhaps all of them. But the words he summons when we sit across from one another are undeniably framed to elicit a reaction. He knows the psychological keywords that make my face twist and my eyebrows rise. I hope that someone with educated expertise in psychotherapy is helping him determine the right course of therapy for his particular suffering and its consequences. What finally dawned on me, thanks to Levinas, is that I had taken the Said of his language into my mind like pieces of a puzzle, attempting to arrange them in a way that made sense of the odd and contradictory claims he makes. Yet it seems that Michael is seeking the disruption that confirms that his *deētic* speech has been heard.

I mention Michael and his struggles with therapy as an example rather than a case study. Michael's language appears to be a scramble for terminology that would trigger a second kind of communication. He uses the trade-words well, the language of psychoanalysis that leads to diagnoses, insurance claims and transactions. But I have not heard him yet if I have not allowed his words to be *deēsis*, and not seen that his plea is for something that precedes and transcends these categories. In his case, the language game ended up being deeply self-destructive, precisely because it helped him avoid any real connection with therapists who could have provided him with vital assistance. This spiral led him to an inpatient hospitalization where the steady pressure of earnest mental health professionals finally melted his resolve against therapists. There are no magic words that could have prevented Michael from this destructive movement. I have only begun to guess at what it means to attend to his language in this register. My proposal today is not that therapists adopt a new strategy for therapy. Rather, I think Levinas's work attunes us to the language struggle epitomized by Michael, and to similar struggles of various degrees in every client – in every speaker. Levinas reminds me that Michael's problem with psychological jargon is my responsibility. The failure of language is my burden.

I continue to see Michael, in part, because of a hope I have for the encounter. I do my share of reading in the works of psychology and psychoanalysis, from Freud to Mitchell to Winnicott, and sometimes I try to think about the insights of these geniuses when I am with Michael. It would please me, for sure, if I were somehow able to provide psychotherapeutic care for Michael. But there are others who can do this so much better than me. Michael and I continue to chat because I hope, and maybe he hopes too, in the irruption of something amid the business of speaking and listening. We hope in the flash of the Saying in the Said, for the trace

of the holy in the face of the other, for a glimpse at the *deēsis* amid the banality of our conversation. In this way, I suppose I hope in something that is properly deemed impossible. Our conversation shifts and rearranges an ugly assemblage of broken and misused words and labels. But despite this, if I remember to wait for it, sometimes I hear Michael *pray*.

This presentation leads much more toward a question – and hopefully a healthy dialogue – than it does a statement. Is it possible to genuinely encounter other person in therapy? I suspect that it does and is happening for many therapists, though perhaps in ways that need better articulation and clarification. I think this need not be attached to any particular brand of therapy, though it would seem an awkward partner with the more reductive and generalizing branches of the psychoanalytic family. *Deētic* therapy, if such a thing were possible, would never forget its own responsibility for the slippage in meaning that inevitably arises out of every encounter. *Deētic* therapy understands that the hermeneutics that leads toward diagnosis and treatment is secondary to the ethical obligation to the suffering stranger. Therapy at this register does not drop the rigor of the science but remembers that science is hard and cold. The Saying, so easily missed as it hides in the more easily analyzed Said, may deconstruct all the scientific mechanisms that we might otherwise deploy to address a problem. *Deētic* therapy is, at its core, neither epistemological nor hermeneutical; it is exegesis. This is not the abandonment of epistemology or hermeneutics, but a move that renders these enterprises *secondary* to the primary manner in which the other person is encountered.

Deēsis is a term also used for the creation of icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Icons, like words, become absurd upon closest examination. The words of the other person approach like icons. I can be absorbed in their ossified remnants, or attend to the evasive reality that they emblemize. Putting the labors of Levinas to work in therapy means taking seriously the trace that evades diagnosis, and understanding that this trace is not another data point to assimilate. Hermeneutics tries to approximate the trace, to guess its character and nature based on the data already collected. Levinas reminds us that epistemology has no access to this trace, it arrives in a way that is otherwise than the manners of being. We find in the trace of the other not data but obligation, a summons to attend to her suffering, responsibility. *Deētic* speech is the liturgy that aims at this end, the organization of thoughts, emotions and actions that is irrevocably *for the other*. “Liturgy” means, quite literally, the “work of the people.”²⁷ Not primarily with the other, or for the diagnosis, or for the prognosis, or for any other goal of therapy. *Deētic* language, I suggest, is the primary mode of human discourse, however urgent our everyday needs may be. Attunement to this way of discourse with the other is not a matter of adding a question to a checklist, confirming that one has met some newly discovered psychological need. This is a way of hoping past what scientific epistemology can ever deem possible. Language as *deēsis* teaches the therapist, it commands the therapist. To think language with Levinas is to watch every word for its supplication, its summons, and the trace of that which does not fit into the synchrony of my present.

Levinas work in therapy is a rigorous work, a tireless work of revoking the impulse to allow the economy of being to have the first or last word of the therapeutic encounter. Levinas’s labors ceaselessly unsettle, relentlessly turning us from the idolatry that so quickly forms around our words and concepts, and pries open the fissures of our closed totality so that the trace of the other may be heard.

²⁷ “Liturgy,” *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008). The etymology of the term combines a form of “lit” that means *public* and “urg” which means *work*.