

**The Ethics of the Other in Ourselves:
Levinasian Perspectives on Modern Psychotherapy**

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Table of Contents:

A Change in Therapy	5
Totality and Infinity	10
Infinity in Therapy	16
Separation and Listening.....	17
Internalizing Infinity	22
Conclusion	28
References.....	31

The Ethics of the Other in Ourselves: Levinasian Perspectives on Modern Psychotherapy

Something important happened in psychotherapy in the 1950s when it became less focused on the position of the therapist as an expert and more client-oriented.¹ This shift was clearly influenced by Carl Rogers, an American psychologist of the mid-20th century, who established a radically new set of practices, less directed on fitting the client's behavior and emotions to a predefined theory, as Freud and Skinner had done, and instead allowing the client to present their own needs themselves.² It was a move from the therapist who had a clear and unambiguous understanding of the client's turmoil to the therapist who became a professional partner – someone who stopped taking an authoritative stance toward the client and instead chose their side, taking seriously their own perspective on their emotional suffering.

Such a new understanding dramatically altered the practice of psychotherapy, making it more effective and more humane towards the client.³ At the same time, the change in therapeutical practice calls for a philosophical reflection on the anthropological views that it seems to imply. In this thesis, we will present the views of Emanuel Levinas as a philosophical foundation for understanding the change in therapeutical perspective.⁴

Levinas was a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish origin and a student of Edmund Husserl, who was active in philosophy and contributed to both phenomenology and ethical philosophy in a period covering the same decades as those in which Rogers was active in psychology. In order to make a comparison between the two, we will dive into both Levinas' philosophy and the principles of client-centered treatment as presented by Rogers, to see if they share the same or a similar core, but especially in order to answer the question whether, in combination, they may contribute to the development of an ethical attitude relevant for

¹ Howard Kirschenbaum and April Jourdan, "The Current Status of Carl Rogers and the Person-Centered Approach.," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 42, no. 1 (2005): 37–38, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.42.1.37>.

² Robert L. Woolfolk, *The Value of Psychotherapy: The Talking Cure in an Age of Clinical Science* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015), 14–16, 25–30.

³ Kirschenbaum and Jourdan, "The Current Status," 47–48.

⁴ Del Loewenthal and George Kunz, "Levinas and the Other in Psychotherapy and Counselling," *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling* 7, no. 1–2 (March 2005): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642530500134765>; Bettina Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford University: 1997–), first published July 23, 2006, substantive revision August 7, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>.

clinical psychology. The current work attempts to conduct such an analysis and to provide a tentative answer to the given statement and question. It starts by digging into the core of the change in therapy that occurred in the 1950s and the essence that made this change so drastic. Next, it will dive into an analysis of Levinas' major work, *Totality and Infinity*, followed by a consideration of whether Levinas' ideas are applicable in the context of therapy. Following this, the focus will shift to two of the major ideas in Levinas' work: 'separation' and 'listening (to the other)', both of which contribute to the ethical stance that he proposes.⁵

Finally, another important question will be considered, which is necessary in context therapy: does part of the healing come from the client internalizing the non-judgemental ethical attitude that they experience from the therapist? Internalization is an important topic in psychotherapy generally.⁶ Given the fact that it is not featured in Levinas's work, it will be necessary to consider whether his ethical attitude, as he describes it, can be internalized and reflected upon the person themselves. We propose that Levinas's ethical attitude can indeed be successfully internalized and brought to have its effect on a psychologically effective form of self-reflection in the eyes of the client. The analysis of this possibility will constitute the topic of the last section of this work.

Before we start, it will be helpful to emphasize that our understanding of Levinas is necessarily limited. Levinas's writing, moreover, is unavoidably poetic and very dense. Despite these caveats, however, we hope to show how applying the gist of his analysis to the practice of Rogerian psychotherapy will offer a new way of understanding the inseparability of the ethical and the psychological. Nor do we think our limited understanding contradicts what Levinas thought about the applicability of his views himself. According to his philosophy, we cannot and even should not try to understand the other, whether it be Levinas himself or any other person.⁷ Instead, we need to let persons speak for themselves. Accordingly, since Levinas can no longer do so now that he has passed away, making use of a historical interpretation of his views is inherently dangerous, because – in Levinas' own terms – this can provide a stereotypical "grasp" of the author that may be essentially

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Livonia, Michigan: XanEdu Publishing, 1969), 53–60, 201–204, 251–253.

⁶ Stephen M. Quintana and Naomi M. Meara, "Internalization of Therapeutic Relationships in Short-Term Psychotherapy," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 37, no. 2 (1990): 129–130, <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-0167.37.2.123>.

⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197–201; Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 55.

misleading and even immoral.⁸ Since this is an important notion in Levinas' own philosophy, we will have reason to return to the issue of the legitimacy of applying his views several times in the course of this text.

A Change in Therapy

It seems reasonable to start our discussion of the matter with a significant event that happened in psychotherapy in the 1950s, when Rogers introduced his ideas of client-centered psychotherapy.⁹ To understand why this was so special and new, it is important to consider what the field of psychotherapy looked like before he came up with his innovations.

There is, of course, no easy way to properly summarize the horizon of psychotherapy at a given point in historical time, but we can try to do so with two major figures in mind: Sigmund Freud and Burrhus F. Skinner. Both are major historical figures who established radically new approaches in psychotherapy. Freud founded psychoanalysis, and Skinner was the first to treat subjects with scientific rigor.¹⁰ Second, although Freud and Skinner seem completely opposite to each other, they share surprising commonalities, as we will see if we place them in opposition to the client-centered kind of therapy introduced by Rogers.

Freud created the field of psychoanalysis, a form of analysis in which a client's distress or emotional pain is examined in relation to the theories that Freud proposed as an explanatory basis for these symptoms. One aspect of Freudian theory is that we have conscious and unconscious aspects of our cognition.¹¹ We can attend only to the conscious aspects, but the unconscious parts largely contribute to our drives and impulses, which we may not recognize as their sources. Therefore, a client may experience emotional pain or distress without understanding how it arises.

The second aspect of his theory is the psychosexual stages of human development. Freud proposed that in our development we go through several stages, starting with the oral stage

⁸ Ibid, 227–229.

⁹ Kirschenbaum and Jourdan, "The Current Status," 47–48.

¹⁰ Stephen P. Thornton, "Sigmund Freud," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed June 1, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/freud/>; George Graham, "Behaviorism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford University: 1997–), first published May 26, 2000, substantive revision Jan 13, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/behaviorism/>.

¹¹ Thornton, "Sigmund Freud."

and moving to the anal, phallic, and so on.¹² The oral stage is associated with a breastfed child. At this stage, the child becomes attached to their mouth, as this becomes the most important organ in their sensory world because they receive life-sustaining food (milk) by using it, orally. The anal stage is connected to a child learning to use a toilet. According to Freud, controlling one's anus, bowel, and bladder movements and mastering it defines a new stage within a child's development.

For Freud, mental disorders could indicate that a person did not progress properly through all stages of development and became stuck, or, in his terms, fixated, at the level of development of one of these stages.¹³ If a person becomes fixated at the oral stage, they could exhibit infantile behaviors, develop obesity, or become heavy smokers because they constantly need to have something in their mouth as a form of oral gratification. Fixation at the anal stage may cause meticulous perfectionism, stubbornness or compulsive orderliness, representing a desire for control.

How did therapy work in practice with Freud? Freud would converse with clients, predominantly women diagnosed with hysteria, while they lay on a nearby couchette or sofa.¹⁴ He posed probing questions, particularly centered on the content of their dreams. Freud insisted that clients disclose all of their hidden thoughts, including sexual desires and their most guilt-ridden fantasies. After clients shared enough of these data, he took the time to analyze them and fit them into place according to his theory, providing a clear expert outlook on the reasons for the person's distress.

Unfortunately, Freudian theory possesses fundamental flaws, and neither the unconscious mind nor his idea of stages of a person's development withstand the critique that Popper, a renowned philosopher of science, would offer, asserting that Freud's theory cannot be effectively falsified.¹⁵ Unconsciousness cannot be directly observed or measured; therefore, we cannot have observations that do not fit the theory. Furthermore, explanations of disorder

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid; Morris N. Eagle, *From Classical to Contemporary Psychoanalysis: A Critique and Integration* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 69–72.

¹⁴ Thornton, "Sigmund Freud."

¹⁵ Stephen Thornton, "Karl Popper," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford University: 1997–), first published Nov 13, 1997, substantive revision Sep 12, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper/>.

through stages of development are made post-hoc; therefore, they may lack predictive power and are often subjective, which means that the interpreting therapist may be significantly biased in favor of their theory.

Partly as a reaction to this, a stricter scientific methodology was introduced into psychotherapy by Burrhus F. Skinner according to the rule that he refused to consider anything that we cannot directly observe.¹⁶ He determined that the proper approach to psychological studies is to consider only observable behavior, rather than analyzing cognition and thoughts, which are beyond our reach.

Skinner used the term “operant conditioning,” whereby a person's behavior can be modified through the use of rewards and punishments, both of which can be positive and negative.¹⁷ A positive reward involves providing something desirable to a person, while positive punishment entails actively penalizing them by administering an undesirable stimulus. Negative reward involves removing an undesirable stimulus, whereas negative punishment entails taking away a desirable stimulus from them.

The therapy in Skinner's method consisted of observing the behavior of a person and administering rewards and punishments with the aim of altering their behavior if such a change is expected to be advantageous.¹⁸ An example of this is temper tantrums in children, in the case of which, according to Skinner, providing or withholding rewarding attention to a child depending on their temper-tantrum related behavior can help reduce its occurrence.¹⁹

Although the Freudian and the Skinnerian forms of therapy seem completely detached from one another, there is an aspect that unites them. Both start from the expert position of the therapist making self-evident choices for treating a person. In the case of Freud, it is a therapist possessing the valuable knowledge of Freudian theory and who is able to analyze a client's impulses in terms of the theory. In the case of Skinner, it is the therapist who applies observational and scientific analysis to a client's behavior and provides a set of rewards and

¹⁶ Graham, "Behaviorism."

¹⁷ Jennifer Murtoff, "operant conditioning," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 May, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/science/operant-conditioning>.

¹⁸ Graham, "Behaviorism."

¹⁹ Ibid; Edward K. Morris, Nathaniel G. Smith, and Deborah E. Altus, “B. F. Skinner’s Contributions to Applied Behavior Analysis,” *The Behavior Analyst* 28, no. 2 (October 2005): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03392108>.

punishments and their timely schema to change this behavior.²⁰

Both for Freud and Skinner, the client has only a passive role to play. In a sense, they are not really taken into account. They are just data, a source of emotions or behavior and do not really have any actual agency for themselves in the therapeutic process. In the case of Freud, the client is driven by unconscious impulses that they have no idea about, so they are out of luck without the helping hand of an expert. In the case of Skinner, it is simply unnecessary to take the client into account because all that is meaningfully needed is to manipulate their behavior through rewards and punishments.

With this background in mind, Carl Rogers did something radical (and surprisingly similar to what Levinas offered, as we will see later). Rogers put the client first. What he said is that, instead of trying to understand what the client's problem is, it is more important to first ask what the client thinks and feels, and to let the client express what they themselves need in the therapy.²¹

There are both ethical and practical aspects to such an approach. First, and perhaps most importantly, it constitutes a radically different ethical attitude. Instead of instilling in the client some expert knowledge of the therapist, disregarding the individual client and how they perceive themselves, this approach, by contrast, gives the client a voice. It puts them in the center, allowing them, in a sense, to guide their own therapy. Secondly, and more practically, it allows the therapist to look at the client with a more open-minded and broader approach, without necessarily condensing their vision to a limited theoretical perspective. Instead, it embraces the diversity they experience when interacting with a specific client; experiencing their own interaction with the client as well.²²

To substantiate the effectiveness of this approach, Rogers introduced a set of practical skills and guidelines meant to actualize this attitude into a working reality; maxims that he also presented as “conditions for therapeutic change.”²³ First, the therapist has to be congruent or genuine. This practice or condition means that the therapist cannot simply act but needs to be

²⁰ Morris, “B. F. Skinner’s Contributions,” 102, 106.

²¹ Carl R. Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory* (London: Constable, 1951), 19–24.

²² Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy*, 19–24.

²³ Kirschenbaum and Jourdan, “The Current Status,” 41–42.

deeply and genuinely involved in the therapeutic relationship first. It also means that the therapist can sometimes express pieces of their own experiences if it helps to build the relationship. Second, the therapist has to share an unconditional positive regard, or, in other words, show acceptance. This means that the therapist fully accepts the client without conditions, judgments, or sense of approval or disapproval. This is supposed to help the client to raise their self-esteem and become aware of their self-denial or distorted ideas about themselves. Finally, the therapist needs to have an accurate empathic understanding of the client and needs to take the client's frame of reference and internal representation seriously. This understanding and accurate empathy are supposed to help the client establish a belief that the therapist has an unconditional respect for them.

It would be fair to say that Rogers' insights have revolutionized psychotherapy. Following Rogers, it became simply impossible to ignore this new approach to clients in psychotherapy.²⁴ It has influenced all other forms of therapy. The expert and authoritative stance of previous forms of therapy was met with a lot of criticism, including from the philosophical anti-psychiatry movement, in line with which Foucault, for example, attacked psychiatry as a disguised form of power exercised by specialists over clients, rejecting their individuality.²⁵

Ronald Laing provided an interesting analysis according to which a psychiatric expert was considered unable to understand the language of a schizophrenic patient because they did not even try.²⁶ He proposed that schizophrenia may become more comprehensible and the client's experience more meaningful if a genuine attempt is made to understand how the clients with schizophrenia experience their reality. In other words, his idea was that we can understand the client, or at least approach understanding the client, if we try to listen and speak with them in their language and not only in the language of experts.

²⁴ Ibid, "The Current Status," 47–48.

²⁵ Gary Gutting and Johanna Oksala, "Michel Foucault," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford University: 1997–), first published Apr 2, 2003, substantive revision Aug 5, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/>.

²⁶ R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin, 1965), 27–38.

Nowadays, it would be mostly correct to say that client-centeredness is prevalent.²⁷ It is evidently pervasive in therapies influenced by Rogers, but also in more conservative cognitive behavioral therapies that were initially reluctant to embrace client-centeredness as a viable approach due to their purportedly scientific and objective frame of reference.²⁸ Such influences are even more evident in later forms of third-wave psychotherapies like Dialectical Behavior Therapy²⁹ or Mindfulness-Based Therapy,³⁰ where it becomes more important to start with a client's experiences and help the client to accept their own internal experiences, their feelings and anxieties, states of their mind and bodily sensations.

Client-centeredness is nowadays considered more effective compared to an expert-focus approach because it leads clients to be more motivated to follow the treatment and helps them understand the causes of problems in their behavior or repeating emotional patterns, like recurring rumination.³¹ This approach also tends to lead to better retention of healthier patterns when they are recovered, resulting in fewer relapses.

Totality and Infinity

As mentioned, there is a need for a philosophical reflection on the anthropological aspects of the humanistic shift in client-centered therapy and why it is helpful. This reflection may also help us understand where the healing originates in this approach. Emmanuel Levinas may indeed be very helpful in gaining a better understanding of why there is an advantage to client-centered approaches in psychotherapy. In order to get a sense of the Levinasian perspective, let us try to focus on what Levinas was trying to convey.

In his major work *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas does exactly what the title implies. He contrasts totality with infinity. What does totality mean for Levinas? Totality represents the

²⁷ Clara E. Hill and Emilie Y. Nakayama, "Client-Centered Therapy: Where Has It Been and Where Is It Going? A Comment on Hathaway (1948)," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 56, no. 7 (2000): 870–872, [https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679\(200007\)56:7<aid-jclp5>3.0.co;2-j](https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679(200007)56:7<aid-jclp5>3.0.co;2-j); Kirschenbaum and Jourdan, "The Current Status," 41–43.

²⁸ Nina Josefowitz and David Myran, "Towards a Person-Centred Cognitive Behaviour Therapy," *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (December 2005): 331–334, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070500473600>.

²⁹ Thomas R. Lynch et al., "Mechanisms of Change in Dialectical Behavior Therapy: Theoretical and Empirical Observations," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 62, no. 4 (February 9, 2006): 462–464, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20243>.

³⁰ Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10, no. 2 (May 1, 2003): 147–149, <https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy/bpg016>.

³¹ Kirschenbaum and Jourdan, "The Current Status," 41–45, 47–48.

inclination to possess a universal comprehension, understanding of the universe, of reality itself.³² Levinas' work constitutes a profound critique of Western philosophy, which often seeks absolute universal resolutions to metaphysical problems, striving to attain ultimate, unequivocal understandings of how reality works.³³

Totality also implies that the subject becomes embedded, becomes linked with the reality they attempt to describe and understand.³⁴ Levinas contrasts himself with Heidegger, who described *aletheia* as a unique state of insightful, “internal”, original truth about reality prior to conscious involvement.³⁵ Heidegger aims to attain this as a spiritual place of communion and connectedness. For Levinas, however, such connectedness constitutes a problem. It is based on the preliminary idea that we all share something in common, that there is some shared ground forming the backdrop of the sum of us as individuals.³⁶ From the perspective of totality, this shared ground becomes the core; it becomes the essential element that is taken to be the intended focus of our attention, thus driving us together and representing a monolithic interpretation of our way of living together and thereby destroying our individualities.

This shared ground stems from the urge to understand, from the urge to grasp, to take, to possess a universal truth, a universal metaphysical understanding of reality, to be in possession of this understanding and truth. The ultimate danger of such a possession of, or power over, reality, for Levinas, is war. He starts his work by arguing war as the ultimate outcome of the search for totality, because in a war, there is no more individual, no more separated person.³⁷ There is only a duty that each person is supposed to follow in a war-like situation.

In war, the person becomes a weapon. They become identified with the expectations of the state, of the society in the state of war. The person becomes defined by the need of war. Accordingly, the ultimate danger of totality for Levinas is that it destroys the person. There is

³² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35–40; Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 56–57.

³³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21–26.

³⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45–47; Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 56–57.

³⁵ Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University: 1997–), first published Oct 12, 2011, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>.

³⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35–40.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 21–23.

no more individual. There is only a total, universal understanding of the person in accordance with some metaphysical understanding of reality, and in a given context, a war.

In this context, the idea of separation becomes an important and, in fact, foundational aspect of Levinas' work. To be able to appreciate another person, not merely a (totalizing) image of them, but the real person itself, it is necessary to separate from them.³⁸ Instead of trying to find a shared common ground, something that will 'totalize' us with the other in some shared, unified space, the first step that one needs to take is to separate, to individualize, to personalize, and to become a separated self oneself. Only in separation, when we are apart from another, can we truly appreciate each other. Separation is the first step to being able to see the Other, to perceive them without attempting to totalize or encapsulate them within our frame of understanding. Instead, separation allows us to recognize the Other as not constituting a part of ourselves, not being a part of our totality.

Separation also entails finding one's own ground, finding one's home in which one can dwell and enjoy one's dwelling.³⁹ Separation is strongly linked with the notion of possession in Levinas. To separate means to become grounded in one's possessions.⁴⁰ In a manner reminiscent of Locke, Levinas could say that one can make a tree one's own by cutting it and using it for building a house.⁴¹ In this way, one will separate the tree from externality to make it internal, to make it part of owned reality. Separation is also necessary to seek shelter from reality, to find a home as a safe space within it.⁴² A home is something that a hand can reach. It is made by hand and defined by it.

To further elucidate this separation and its conceptual relation to *infinity*, another of the two major concepts of his work, Levinas uses the example of the force of nature that we cannot encapsulate or embed.⁴³ Instead, we always have it as a background for our experience. Moreover, a force of nature is usually not even considered when describing an event or a thing. What we describe exists within the force of nature. We do not think of air when we

³⁸ Ibid, 77–79.

³⁹ Ibid, 152–154.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 158–162.

⁴¹ William Uzgalis, "John Locke," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. (Stanford University: 1997–), first published Sun Sep 2, 2001; substantive revision Thu Jul 7, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>.

⁴² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 156–158.

⁴³ Ibid, 130–142.

describe a (separated) chair, although the chair is surrounded by it. Therefore, when thinking about a chair, we are only considering the material it is made of and probably its form, but not the surrounding force of nature. We are, of course, able to think about the surrounding force of nature, but we then still need to have something larger to place it within. In a sense, if we think about the air around the chair, we will probably need to consider the air in the confines of the room because we can then embed the air of the room in our minds, but we cannot really think of the air around the chair without embedding it into something bigger. And this something bigger, something that always stays bigger than what we aim to conceptualize, is Infinity for Levinas – something that we cannot grasp, something that does not have a horizon (by itself).

We cannot possess Infinity because we cannot understand it. We may pretend that we understand Infinity, but then it will dissolve into Totality. Totality is the illusion of an understanding of Infinity, totalizing it, making it graspable.⁴⁴ But by making it graspable, we, in fact, reject Infinity and deny its very nature. By totalizing it, we step away from it; we are no longer in touch with Infinity, no longer experiencing it as it is.

To summarize, for Levinas, the only way to allow Infinity to exist in our minds is to refuse from understanding it, to resist attempting to grasp it. Infinity thus becomes not an object of understanding or a concept, but rather an ethical attitude. And to develop this attitude, we need to stay separate, to maintain our separateness.

The same holds true for Levinas regarding another person. How else could it be? For Levinas, we are essentially separate from any other person, the Other. Although we can, of course, attempt to totalize ourselves with the Other by naming some third attribute, such that we both are human, something essential will be missing in such a perspective of Totality. The third attribute may help us understand an abstract, and probably irrelevant, notion about the Other, but it will not help us see, appreciate, and experience them while being present in live communication and interaction with them.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid, 130–134.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 42–48, 64–70.

For Levinas, an ethical attitude precedes ontology.⁴⁶ Although this way of ordering things may seem paradoxical, his idea is that if we try to understand the Other by constructing a totality around them, we lose the chance to be properly and ethically present and open to interaction. Instead of openly looking at the Other as they are, trying sincerely and unreservedly to respect them and to be present while interacting with them, we become constrained by a misleading understanding of the Other that fails to represent true reality, that fails to be a proper ontology of the Other. While such a totality may highlight a certain ontology, it does not capture the true reality of other persons as they are in themselves. Thus, such a totalizing interaction would not be metaphysical; it would not express the Other in its essentiality.

Therefore, if our goal is to stay in touch or maybe get in touch with reality as it is, we cannot avoid but respect its mystery. And surprisingly, by mystery we do not mean something positively mystical here, because mysticism can also be a form of Totality. Heideggerian *aletheia*, for instance, can be seen as a paragon of totalizing mystery. Even though Heidegger does not fully reveal the meaning of *aletheia*, he is still motivated by his attempt to grasp, to get an impression of what it is. Levinas, by contrast, says that the whole point is not to try this. The whole idea is to avoid trying to grasp what is ungraspable.⁴⁷ It is not our business; it is not who we are; it is not part of us. The ungraspable is the Other, who (or what) is totally separate from us.

Levinas accordingly devotes a large part of his work to developing the idea of separation. This is also where his main criticism of Western philosophy comes to the fore: Western philosophy has often tried to deny this separateness and instead seeks to find our true communion with the other by uniting them with our own nature. For Levinas, trying to find this mystical communion is the wrong way to go about, because it will lead to a false sense of understanding and grasping this communion. In feeling connected, we will disregard the other because the other will cease to exist as separate from us and will no longer be seen as needing respect and attention.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 42–48.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 64–70; Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 57–58.

So, instead of this futile and even dangerous longing for communion, we must stay separate and focus on listening to the Other – the Other who remains unknown and unknowable to us, the Other whom we cannot understand. Simply because we cannot understand the Other, we need to listen to them.⁴⁸ And by listening, Levinas does not mean making an attempt to understand, having a goal of gaining a better understanding or a better grasp of the Other. Instead, the attitude Levinas suggests is about being present, because the Other needs our attention and needs to express themselves to us.

Levinas actively advocates for our immediate presence in dialogue with the Other because what we need to do, our ethical stance, should be to let the Other speak for themselves. The point here is that the Other has their own voice and their own means to express this voice, most importantly through language.⁴⁹ By being ethical toward the Other and remaining attentive, resisting the urge to assume that we truly comprehend them, we can remain open to letting the Other speak for themselves in the present moment. We stay receptive to what the Other says, as this is the primary concern in this ethical stance. According to Levinas, in such an ethical approach, we are much smaller than the Other; the Other becomes much bigger than us. We choose to be taught by the Other, remaining open to learning from them.

Especially enlightening in view of the stance towards the Other that Levinas tries to promote, is the analogy he introduces on the question of learning. Learning always implies an acceptance of the unknown. It seems reasonable that we can only acquire new knowledge when we are open to it; when we are ready to receive something new, to take it in. In contrast, when we are not prepared to learn and instead hold onto our prejudices, our preconceived ideas, upon which we base our interpretation of a book, a teacher, another person, a pedestrian, etc., then we are not truly learning from the Other. And in that case, according to Levinas, we are neither being ethical toward the Other.

Levinas even goes to extremes here, suggesting that by not choosing this ethical stance, we are essentially murdering the Other.⁵⁰ We do not allow them to live. The other needs us to be able to express themselves, but by not listening, by not being ready to learn from them, we are not allowing them to live. We are not allowing them to say their word.

⁴⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201–204.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 216–219.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 82–84.

Infinity in Therapy

We think this is where the analogy between the spark introduced to psychotherapy by Rogers and the ethical passion that Levinas wanted to share becomes clearer. We cannot help but notice this resemblance.

Rogers says that the therapist needs to listen to the client, to take their words into account, to focus on their needs, and to let them express these needs for themselves, not rushing to interpret it through some theory, but instead staying in the immediacy of presence with them.⁵¹ But is it only Rogers? Perhaps we are overlooking something in Freud and Skinner. Maybe they, too, are listening to the client in some other sense.

It is fair to say that Freud listens to what the client says about their worries and urges, fantasies and dreams, but does he truly listen? Does he genuinely try to learn from the client? What is crucial here, is that Freud's goal is not to try to learn something new from the client, but instead to fit the client's patterns of behavior and emotions into the predefined theory that Freud has. We are not suggesting that the therapist should not have any theory or theoretical background to use in their practice. What we are trying to convey is that if the therapist is driven solely by a strictly defined theory, instead of being open to listening, and thus to learning from the client, taking the client seriously and their experiences as genuine and uniquely *other*, the kind of separate is missing that allows the therapist to accept the other's experience as something ungraspable to them. Thus, it is in this way that the Freudian therapist cannot have an ethical approach to the client in the Levinasian sense of the word.

Does Skinner listen to the client? Probably even less than Freud. Because for Skinner, the only thing that matters is the behavior. To put it ironically, he will not even try to listen. We think Skinner could quite effectively put earplugs in while sitting with the client because what the client says is basically irrelevant for him. In this sense, Skinner is even less likely than Freud to take the ethical stance in the manner of Levinas.

At the same time, if we continue criticizing psychological theorists in this way, maybe even Rogers does not fulfil these stringent ethical requirements. There are known criticisms of Rogers, saying that his client-centered attitude is not completely sincere because, in his

⁵¹ Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy*, 19–24.

therapy, Rogers still tries to focus attention on positive aspects: on things that help the client in recovery. Rogers, in other words, is essentially guiding the client in their recovery process, still taking an expert stance and viewing the client as someone needing help. In this way, the therapist is setting himself in the position of overshadowing the client, who is smaller and needs to be helped.⁵² We think that this criticism is valid, and it also means that Rogers is not always trying to learn from the client and genuinely experience them as unique and separate. However, the insight Rogers brought and the change of focus in the therapy is unique and fruitful.

Linking up with ideas of Irvin D. Yalom, who shares a seat with Rogers in his humanist perspective, it is important to see that any client going through a difficult time of their life (and often feeling lonely because of this), is desperately in need of being heard and understood, or perhaps, more accurately, of being allowed to share their experiences.⁵³ In this sense, there is not only a beauty, but also an enormous therapeutical benefit in a therapist daring to be deeply present with the client and opening their heart to the client's vulnerability, co-experiencing it, letting the client share and express their uncertainties about themselves, and learning from the client how it feels, being ready to learn something new from them. The therapist does not have to have gone through all of that in their own life. The therapist does not have to accept any turmoil of a similar magnitude in their own experiences. They do not need to map, to match what the client experiences to their own experiences. Instead, what they need is to be able to learn, to keep an open heart and ears, to dare to take in what the client says, and to listen without attempting immediately to understand (and categorize) the deep and worrying experiences of the client.

Separation and Listening

Whether Levinas' philosophy may ultimately be of help to understand the effect of a therapeutical stance like Rogers', crucially depends on what type of connection is sought between the therapist and the client. Levinas talks about the importance of separation. For

⁵² Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne, *Person-Centred Therapy Today: New Frontiers in Theory and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2002), 79–83.

⁵³ Irvin D. Yalom, *The Gift of Therapy: An Open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and Their Patients* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017), 6–12.

him, separation means the possibility of detachment from Totality.⁵⁴ A sense of connectedness creates a totality, a universality that disregards the Other, that does not allow us to hear, listen, or learn from the Other. Instead, it produces general categories, general understandings that destroy the Other in their presence.

It may seem paradoxical that to connect, we need to separate, but this is not exactly what Levinas means. We do not have to reconnect with the Other. We do not have to get in touch with something that unites us. Instead, we need to be properly separate and firmly established in our separateness, in our own sensation of being at home with ourselves, to be able to hear and listen to the Other from this insiderness, from this separateness. Hearing and listening to the Other does not mean understanding them; instead, it means maintaining a respectful and open-hearted moral stance when the Other is bigger than us, because they cannot be understood, they cannot be embedded and become part of us, but instead they are learned from.

Levinas also introduces religious terminology in his text, which does not necessarily contribute to an easy understanding of what he is trying to convey, but we think it is fair, nevertheless, to include it. For Levinas, separation is termed atheism, and he discusses the necessity of having this “atheist” grounding in oneself, an atheist separateness that, at the same time, treats the Other like a God. This is what makes the proper attitude toward the Other a religious attitude.⁵⁵ For Levinas, having an ethical attitude toward the Other means to be on the same level as one is in one’s attitude towards God. The Other can never be truly understood; the Other can never be embraced and taken in; the Other can never become part of us. We cannot overpower them; we cannot assimilate them into our system. Instead, the Other must always remain Infinite and otherworldly, always beyond the boundary of what can be reached and integrated into our possession.

It appears to us that the Levinasian system fosters a new understanding of loneliness and the need for connection – a longing, a desire for it.⁵⁶ On the one hand, according to Levinas, we are distinct; fundamentally, metaphysically separate. Trying to avoid this separateness by fabricating an illusion of Totality, crafting a fictitious understanding of the Other, fails to do

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 53–60.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 77–79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 60–64; Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 32.

justice to it, and constitutes an immoral act. Therefore, we should not run away from our separateness but instead embrace it in our groundedness, relish our sense of being at home with ourselves. At the same time, from this separateness, we can and should adopt a welcoming attitude toward the Other, putting ourselves asymmetrically lower than them, and remaining open to what they convey to us, allowing the Other to express themselves with their own words without attempting to fit them into our system.

If this is the kind of separateness Levinas argues is needed for an ethical stance towards the Other, how might it be helpful in modern therapy?

Separation holds both a threat and the potential for recovery. On one hand, it poses the threat of loneliness. When one is separated, disconnected, no longer part of the whole, of Totality, one may feel detached, unsupported, and unhappy about one's presence in this world. In Levinasian religious terms, one becomes without God, atheist, alone. On the other hand, this very separation can facilitate being heard. When both parties in communication are sufficiently apart, they can potentially hear each other's diversity. They can potentially hear each other's authenticity and uniqueness.

Totality, on the other hand, creates an illusion in which both parties may feel heard and understood, but due to a lack of proper separation remain unheard either way, since they will try to align, often unconsciously, with each other's expectations and, as a consequence, miss out on what the other is saying. Differences will not be expressed in such a case, and instead, both interlocutors morph to create a unity, a totality between them, with both of them disappearing into this totality.

A similar kind of totality was probably expressed by other means by Sartre, who insists on our essential tendency to label each other, where the glance that we give to each other is damaging and destructive, reducing each other to a label, yet still defining the way we interact.⁵⁷ Levinas is opposed to such a position. We should not define the Other, we should not label the Other under some concept – unless we do it for a very utilitarian and practical reason – but we should not do it in order to presume we have an essential grasp of the other,

⁵⁷ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel Estella Barnes (London: Routledge, 2002), 429–430.

because in this way we are committing an immoral act, taking over the Other and stealing their agency, their uniqueness and otherness, in other words: the Infinity that they express.⁵⁸

It may be that modern therapy is helping in this regard precisely because it tries not to do this. In comparison to Freud and Skinner, who totalized the other through their concepts, overpowering and disregarding their otherness and externality, Rogers was giving the Other proper space where we should not rush to define them; we should not rush to understand them. It can be in this moral glance to the Other, to the client by the therapist, that the Other finally gets a chance to exist, to express themselves as they are. It can even be that the Other desperately needs this permission to live, and when the therapist gives this permission, allows the Other to express themselves, they can finally start living.

Levinas often expresses that the Other is in need, that it is our duty to morally relate to them because they are asking us to do so. Maybe they are not asking it directly, but the whole of their existence asks us to give this presence to them, to give this non-judging attitude, by which we choose not to teach but to learn from them.⁵⁹

Levinas also talks about the centrality of language in this regard. To take a proper moral stance, we need to focus on what the Other tells us. And the best way to do that is to use language. It is not about how we perceive the Other with our eyes or how we understand their nonverbal signs. It is not about how we interpret the Other, but instead, about what the Other says exactly.⁶⁰ It is about words of the Other, said by the Other. It is giving the Other the chance to express themselves without rushing to interpret what they say and placing it in the overall system of oneself.

We may now see how, when read in the context of a psycho-therapeutical situation, Levinas' philosophy is not about keeping the Other a mystery to us, or about avoiding to understand them. On the contrary, as we said before, Levinas is quite against the mystical attitude, because the mystical attitude includes something positive in the sense that we are trying to build some sensation, some energy, some vibe connected to this mysticism. Mysticism is always an act of creation. What Levinas pleads instead, is that taking a proper step back in

⁵⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35–40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 215–216.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 201–204.

understanding does not imply creating a mystical appreciation of the Other, but instead just reserving any judgment.

To put it very bluntly (and thereby obviously to reduce the scope of Levinas's ideas only to the domain of psychotherapy), what Levinas tries to teach us, is to listen. If we want properly to listen to the Other, we need to take a stance of being all ears, especially by reducing (the importance of) ourselves and to become a listening subject who is eager and ready, driven and desiring to hear what the Other says.

What further links Levinas' philosophy to psychotherapeutical practice, is that it is almost unavoidable to link this appreciation of the Other to the idea of unconditional love. What the one who expresses a Levinasian attitude is actually doing, is to offer the Other an absolutely safe space. In this space, the Other can be open to be themselves, knowing that anything that they say will be met with a non-judgmental, non-reducing stance. They will be able openly to say, express and state everything that is part of them. It generally allows the Other to exist, to be, to express themselves unreservedly.

Applied to the sole context of therapeutical situations, we may conclude that having such an experience of being heard and actively listened to can give the client something they desperately need, even by only showing them the possibility of being treated in this way. If it were not for the danger of sounding ironical here, we might even say, "treated like God." The more important thing with respect to the function of therapy and the role of the therapist, is that a Levinasian-inspired form of communication is important in the therapeutic context because it enables the therapist to offer the treatment that the client properly deserves because they probably missed this appreciation in the past, and by being seen and heard, and given the space to make a statement about themselves, they may reaffirm themselves. Not only can it be a life-enriching experience to be present in a space where one can make a statement about oneself, where words count, where one is not disregarded, but where instead there is a space to experience existence, to experience the power and resources to speak and teach – it can also show the client where the possibilities lie to develop new horizons for themselves and regain their own control over their footing in this world, finding pleasure in separation and dwelling.

To create a healthy climate in which one experiences the possibility of being treated faithfully and respectfully and is given a chance to see a model of interaction in which this becomes a possibility, respecting the separateness of the Other becomes a positive factor when it is not avoided but embraced, and a resource for fruitful interaction, including newly found abilities for the client to hear, to listen, and to speak.

It is almost as if this approach in therapy might allow, or at least gives a chance for the client to heal by their own means – not by molding and shaping them to fit societal expectations, not by totalizing them into some stereotypical notion of well-being, but instead by embracing their uniqueness and differentness, allowing their incommensurability and Infinity to be taken into account, and thereby to be the source of their recovery.

Contrasting this form of therapy with traditional expert approaches seems like allowing a tree to grow in the direction it wants instead of cutting its branches to make it safer for others. There is an impression that this Levinasian way gives the Other the opportunity to live, to exist as they are, unchanged and un-morphed, in other words, to find new ways of communicating from their own perspective, to let them make a statement, to say a word without ensuring that this word is nice and fitting.

This deeply respectful attitude, in other words, representing the core of the Levinasian ethical stance, creates a healing moment in the context of therapy. When a moral attitude becomes the core of how to approach the Other in the psychological context, the foundation of the therapy comes to be detached from the expert knowledge of the therapist, giving way to initiate and energize a healing moment on the part of the client, for whose mental recovery it provides the necessary basis.

Internalizing Infinity

It is generally assumed that the client steps onto the path of healing when they begin to internalize what is offered to them by the therapist.⁶¹ If we start from the notion that what the therapist, having a Levinasian attitude, may primarily offer to the client is the ethical stance that is foundational in a Levinasian approach to the Other, then what is offered in the therapy is this ethics itself, which the client may begin to make part of their own identity. The ethics

⁶¹ Quintana, "Internalization of Therapeutic Relationships," 123, 125.

of Levinas embraces both the ideas of separateness and of respecting the other from a separated, being-at-home perspective. The potential of Levinas' maxim to respect the otherness of the other in other words works both ways. What may help the client is not only to be offered the room for mental development, but also to thereby become more rooted in their own internal center, more aligned with who they are.

A common symptom that clients with both anxiety and depression experience is excessive self-criticism.⁶² They tend to label themselves with negative names, such as calling themselves ugly, poor, or unsuccessful, etc. Surprisingly, it also means that the client then tends to instill a totality on themselves; instilling some stereotypical notions and understanding that will totalize them into a general notion instead of giving them space to be properly separate from these notions.

To Levinasian standards, being separate means being rooted in oneself, finding a place of pleasure, finding a place where one is at home, aligned with oneself, feeling in touch with one's own reality. Self-criticism kicks a person out of this sense of pleasure; it ungrounds them and defines them in comparison to some standard notion that they must attain. The first therapy sessions often start with these repetitive elaborations by the client of why they are not how they are supposed to be, why they are not smart, successful, or active enough in dealing with their problems. By taking a non-critical attitude and embracing their feelings and expressions, the therapist provides a chance for the client to get through, spill out an expression of self-criticism to make space for something that lies behind it. This helps them attain a place at which they may come into contact with what is felt when self-criticism ends, when labels end. Having an attitude from the therapist to the client that is not grounded in Totality may help the client experience themselves as not grounded in Totality either, feeling liberated from it.

It is interesting to observe whether the client may also internalize the therapist's ethical stance literally and embrace it themselves. In other words, it is intriguing to see if the client may begin to adopt the same attitude toward themselves as they experience from the side of the therapist. There is a hidden logic to this, because part of where the healing originates is

⁶² Paul Gilbert and Sue Procter, "Compassionate Mind Training for People with High Shame and Self-criticism: Overview and Pilot Study of a Group Therapy Approach," *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 13, no. 6 (November 2006): 353–357, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.507>.

when the client starts integrating the healthy attitudes and behaviors that the therapist imparts on them into their own lives.

In the process of their recovery, the client may, obviously, start relating to important others in their lives morally as they experienced the ethical relation from the therapist to them. But it may also go deeper. The client may also start relating in the same vein to themselves, recalling the attitude from the therapist toward them.

Although it may not seem evident how one can relate to oneself in a similar fashion as the one in which one relates to another, it may become more evident if we touch on the topic of internal speech. Internal speech seems to serve as a means of communicating with oneself, constructing an internal dialogue. Using the example of excessive self-criticism, such a dialogue can be tantalizingly harsh, often scarcely comparable to the dialogue one may experience when interacting with others. However, it mirrors a dialogue one may undergo in a difficult family environment marked by addiction and an unhealthy familial climate. Thus, a self-critical, harsh dialogue can find space both externally and internally. Engaging in such internal dialogue can be just as harmful as external dialogue if the person remains unaware of their tendency towards excessive self-criticism.

But with Levinasian ethics in mind, the surprising aspect of the harm that such a dialogue brings arises not only, and perhaps not primarily, from its violence, but specifically from its totalizing nature when it confines, constrains, and condenses a person's notion of self into a defined, unstretched state. Experiencing a welcoming, open attitude from the therapist may help the client internalize that same attitude within themselves, thereby enabling them to step back from this excessive self-criticism.

Could it also lead to a situation in which the client internalizes a similar attitude to what they experience from the therapist and begins to perceive themselves ethically as the Other? We tend to think that this is possible. We believe that the healthy interaction they experience from the therapist may provide them with the space to adopt a caring self-attitude, where they start to respect their own boundlessness, their own richness, and refrain from self-judgment, abstaining from attempting to totalize themselves into rigid notions.

Put simply, when they feel more seen and heard by the therapist, they obtain a chance to better hear and listen to themselves. Rather than being confined by stereotypical notions and self-judgment, they may find a space to exist more fully, where they can express themselves and make a statement. We also tend to think that this dynamic and this form of relation can be recreated internally.

It might, at first glance, seem contradictory to Levinas's stance. He speaks of an inherent asymmetry between ourselves and the Other, cautioning against attempts to make it symmetrical, as doing so would pave the way to Totality.⁶³ However, we do not believe that we are inclined to establish such symmetry here.

Levinas insists that we are inherently social. He contrasts this with a schema of Totality, where there is an objective and finished understanding of reality. Instead, he says that all notions, concepts and terms that we have are brought to us through sociality. Everything we possess, all meanings, all definitions, come to us through learning them from others.⁶⁴ They are not objective in the sense that they define reality as it is. Instead, they are given to us and gifted to us through our interaction with others.

In this sense, this asymmetry between us and the Other persists. The Other is the one who brings language to us, who brings concepts and words. But most importantly, in this sense, we are completely immersed in this sociality. We continue to live within it, constantly interacting with the Other, even when we are by ourselves. For example, if we entertain a self-critical thought, such as "I am ugly", this is neither merely internal. It is a thought that has been bestowed upon us by some significant Other who may have labeled us as such, or perhaps by another who has instilled a particular standard of beauty, and so forth.

We cannot evade social interaction, even if we opt for deep solitude, as we are continually bombarded by societal interactions through our thoughts, which are created, introduced within us through learning, imparted by the Other. So, in this sense, the ethical choice of having an unbounded or bounded relation to the Other persists even if we choose deep solitude and lack of actual societal dialogues, because this dialogue remains internalized.

⁶³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215–216.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 204–212.

In this context, the ethical attitude of a therapist, when providing the opportunity for the client to express themselves in their authenticity and vitality, allows them to extend this societal interaction and adopt an ethical stance towards their own inner world, replicating and reinforcing the attitude of embracing externality and otherness that the therapist ethically advocates. We maintain it still allows one to sustain this crucial asymmetry that Levinas proposes, while extending it into the internal dialogue.

In parallel to this, it may also enrich the notion of unconditional love. One can impart unconditional love to the Other by allowing them to be and express themselves freely. But one can also have unconditional self-love, having practically the same or similar ethical gaze but turned inward. A gaze that allows one to live – not being cut and defined by clear, totalizing notions, but instead, letting one cheerfully and openly say and state something, embracing one's liveliness.

Levinas might well, and rightfully, be critical of the reflexivity of his ethical stance that we here propose. He would likely argue that it is in danger of effectively totalizing the asymmetry that he insists on. Even if reflexivity maintains this asymmetry, it disregards and devalues its meaning by making it possible to turn it inward.

Is it still fair to say that there is an actual other inside us? This may seem like a mental game, instilling something that does not appropriately exist. Maybe it is unfair to say that there is something other inside us that we need to ethically relate to. Maybe it devalues and undermines the importance of moral relation to the Other, to the real person. At the same time, it may also allow us to take an even smaller position in this universe, becoming even less arrogant and certain.

What defines us? What is “me”, actually? This is probably too big a question, but one way to look at it is to see ourselves as a point of consciousness, the point from which we observe. What we observe can take place externally to us or internally, but if we consider consciousness as a point of departure, something inside of us that is able to observe, then everything that it observes potentially becomes the Other. The Other can be another person; it can also encompass natural or artificial objects with which we come into contact. Furthermore, the Other can manifest as certain aspects of ourselves that we may observe and

that we tend to observe. If we take a conscious observation point as our center, as what defines “us”, “me,” then everything that is not it can be seen as the Other. Our bodily sensations, our emotions, and even thoughts can be expressions of this Other.

We can adopt different attitudes toward these expressions of bodily sensations, emotions, or thoughts. We can take a totalizing and judgmental stance, insisting on emotions and thoughts that we would prefer to have, ones that fit our understanding of them, while rejecting and avoiding ones that seem unpleasant to us, those that take us by surprise. Or instead, we can take a Levinasian ethical attitude according to which all of these sensations, emotions, and thoughts may arise in us fruitfully and unboundedly. This encapsulates the essence of third-way therapy, including Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Therapy, the latest advancement of psychotherapy that places special emphasis on clients experiencing their own emotions and thoughts as non-judgmental observers and accepting them.⁶⁵

If we acquire this acceptance and non-judgmental stance, if we allow our own emotions and thoughts to be embraced, there seems to be no objection to modeling this attitude that Levinas so passionately advocates in relation to the Other inside ourselves and in relation to which we become this conscious power, this conscious agency that has the means to adopt this ethical stance, which will allow us to heal ourselves.

In this sense, we may maintain the idea of asymmetry that is crucial to Levinas; the asymmetry between us and the Other as a one-sided relation – a relation from us to the Other where the Other becomes present to us through our own experiences. Being taken from the perspective of a conscious observer, this center becomes “us” in this interaction, with the sensations we experience within us becoming the Other in it.

Most importantly, it allows us to free ourselves from the burden of a Totality that denies us the opportunity to learn from our own internal experiences. We believe that it is equally important to learn from our own sensations, emotions, and thoughts, to be able to hear them, as well as to be able to hear others, real others. Indeed, both of these skills may in practice complement each other. By learning to listen to ourselves deeply, we learn to listen to others

⁶⁵ Lynch et al., “Mechanisms of Change in Dialectical Behavior Therapy,” 462–464; Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness-Based Interventions,” 147–149.

deeply as well. To summarize, the proposed perspective does not diminish the asymmetry that Levinas insists upon but rather focuses on its reflexive aspects stemming from our social nature and the social aspects of our language.

Levinas does not mention internal speech in his “Totality and Infinity,” but he does discuss the social origin of our thoughts.⁶⁶ Thus, the internal dialogue we experience can readily be viewed as a reflection of an external one. The Levinasian asymmetry implies a one-way ethical attitude that comes from oneself towards the Other, yet the same attitude can asymmetrically reflect upon oneself when we, as active observers, adopt a similar ethical stance by relating it to our own experiences as human beings. This approach offers us the opportunity to adopt an open and healing stance towards ourselves, enabling us to openly listen to and learn from our own experiences.

Importantly, this is something that allows healing to become self-healing. This is an approach that therapists in modern forms of psychotherapy seem often to insist upon, adopting a client-centered approach and endeavoring to discover a healthy core within the client, embracing their expression. Thus, the client becomes empowered by their own self-healing resources.

We believe that Levinas has brought into this world a beautiful and essential notion of taking a respectful and careful attitude towards the Other, and possibly towards ourselves, as we see from this text. This notion allows one to become and remain open to what the Other is eager and needy to say. We are convinced that Levinas, if listened to and heard, can help us learn to avoid rushing to totalizing conclusions, and instead remain open to an uncompromised and, in some sense, unbearable Infinity that the presence of the Other invites us to engage with.

Conclusion

It appears to us that Levinas has introduced something into Western philosophy that radically departed from previous considerations about ontological understandings. If metaphysical philosophy was previously mainly driven by an attempt to get some essential understanding of reality, a metaphysical grasp of it, what Levinas has proposed is that such an attempt is not only misleading but, what is more important, unethical.

⁶⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 204–209.

What plays a crucial role here is the interaction with another person. When we choose to take a stance toward another, attempting to understand them in some sense or another, this intention to grasp them, in fact, diminishes the other person. We do not allow the other to properly exist. For Levinas, instilling some meaning or understanding onto another constitutes a totality, a generalized grasp that is as misleading as it is unethical. The right moral attitude for Levinas is to regard another person as infinity, as something beyond our reach. We should not even try to understand but instead need to be openly listening to what the other says to us.

This effectively resembles the change that occurred in psychotherapy when the shift was made from an expert stance, universalizing understanding of the client from an external perspective, to a client-centered approach in which the client takes center stage. Here, the therapist starts actively listening to the client, learning from them, and taking them seriously. In this shift, the authenticity and empathy of the therapist become essential aspects of treatment. Henceforth, it appears that the Levinas's analysis can profoundly contribute to client-centered therapy by elucidating its effectiveness, fostering a human and open, non-reductive relationship between therapist and client, and aiding the client in discovering their own footing.

Finally, it appears to us that the ethical attitude of Levinas can and should be effectively internalized, so that the client learns to adopt the same respectful and open listening attitude towards themselves. Levinas does not mention such internalization in his work, but it seems that such a possibility is evidenced by our tendency to engage in internal speech. One can have both a totalizing (and a reducing) attitude towards oneself, as well as an expanding one, if one treats oneself as an infinite and unbounded being who can be eagerly listened to and learned from. Given the importance of internalization in client-centered therapy, it appears to us that the Levinasian ethical attitude can provide a fruitful way to theoretize such internalization.

Overall, it seems that there is a possibility of a fruitful dialogue between, on the one hand, Levinasian philosophy with its notion of active listening and positive attempt not to reduce another to some defined formula, and client-centered therapy by Rogers, on the other hand, in

which the therapist takes a step back from their expertise and opens their heart to the needs of the client.

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