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‘All the Rest is Dance’: another look at Levinas

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by tracing the growing influence of Levinas’s thought in the humanities. Psychotherapy in particular has drawn on Levinas’s original contribution to ethics and is often inscribed within an existing dialogical frame of symmetry. The article discusses facets of Levinasian thought which have been neglected in psychotherapy, namely the notion of separation, in turn linked to the notions of asymmetry and of the traumatic subject, all at variance with dialogical therapy. A second, equally overlooked aspect of Levinas’s philosophy examined here concerns his politics. Some of the implications highlighted here are controversial: these relate to Levinas ‘naive Zionism’ and a prejudiced position in relation to Arab culture. Others are enlightening even if undeveloped: these relate to Levinas’s decolonial thinking of the 1970s. The paper reflects tangentially on the author’s clinical work, and calls for a more nuanced appreciation of Levinas’s philosophy which does not shy away from critique.

‘All the Rest is Dance’: Ein anderer Blick auf Levinas

"Lo demás es danza": otra mirada a Levinas

Este artículo comienza por rastrear la enorme influencia del pensamiento de Levinas en las humanidades. La psicoterapia en particular, se ha nutrido de la original contribución de Levinas a la ética y frecuentemente se inscribe dentro del existente marco dialógico de la simetría. Se discuten facetas del pensamiento de Levinas las cuales han sido descuidadas por la psicoterapia, principalmente la noción de separación a su vez asociada a las nociones de asimetría y el sujeto traumático, en discrepancia con la dialógica. Otro aspecto de la filosofía de Levinas que estudiamos se refiere a su posición política, siendo controvertidas algunas de las implicaciones que destacamos: éstas se refieren a su cándido Zionismo y a una posición prejuiciada con la cultura árabe. Otras son instructivas y aunque no desarrolladas, éstas se refieren a su pensamiento des-colonial de los años setenta. El artículo refleja tangencialmente el trabajo clínico del autor y propone una apreciación más matizada de la filosofía de Levinas la cual no rehúye la crítica.

'Tutto il resto è danza': un altro sguardo a Lévinas


Tout le reste n’est que danse’: un autre regard sur Lévinas

Cet article commence par tracer l’influence grandissante de la pensée de Lévinas dans le domaine des humanités. La psychothérapie en particulier s’est inspirée de la contribution originale de Lévinas sur l’éthique et s’inscrit souvent au sein d’un cadre dialogique existant de symétrie. Cet article discute des facettes de la pensée Lévinasienne qui ont été négligées par la psychothérapie, en particulier la notion de séparation, au contraire liée à des notions d’asymétrie et de sujet traumatique, lesquelles se démarquent de la thérapie dialogique. Un deuxième aspect de la philosophie de Lévinas également négligé que nous examinons ici concerne ses idées politiques. Certaines des implications que nous mettons en exergue ici sont controversées : elles relèvent du sionisme naïf de Levinas et sa position partielle envers la culture arabe. D’autres sont éclairantes même si elles restent peu développées : elles sont d’abord références à la pensée décolonialiste de Lévinas des années 70. Cet article fait également référence au travail clinique de l’auteur et appelle pour une appréciation plus nuancée de la philosophie de Lévinas qui ne peut éviter la critique.
This paper is divided into three sections.

The first one, Levinas’s Original Contribution, briefly examines some of the reasons why Levinasian thought is invaluable to psychotherapy practice and theory.

The second, Fearful Asymmetries, highlights one aspect of Levinas’s thought that has been neglected by contemporary therapeutic discourse: separation, and its links to the notions of asymmetry and the traumatic subject. The third section, Levinas and Politics, broadly discusses two features of Levinasian politics: ‘naive Zionism’ and decolonialism.

Levinas’s original contribution

A philosophy of dispossession

Increasingly influential across the humanities, Levinas’s writings (1981, 1989, 1990a, 1999a, 2000, 2003) have broadened the fields of psychotherapy, fostering a deeper understanding of encounter and inter-subjectivity (Bazzano,
They offer a radical perspective on ethics (Bazzano, 2012a; Critchley, 2007; Gantt & Williams, 2002; House, 2005; Putnam, 2002), add significant insights to the understanding of trauma (Critchley, 2007; Emery, 2013) and to the development of post-psychoanalytic theory and practice (Emery, 2013; Irigaray, 2004). In his seminal essay ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ (Derrida, 2005), one that helped situate Levinas’s thought at the very centre of European philosophy, Jacques Derrida wrote:

“At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession. (Derrida, 2005, p. 101)

This process of dismantling and dispossession is a thoroughgoing reformulation of subjectivity, a unique response to the perpetual conundrum of the self, which is either (in psychotherapy as in philosophy) unduly substantiated or summarily bypassed, but one that simply won’t go away – ‘one of those solids – Merleau-Ponty reminds us – that [we] will have to digest’, adding in the same breath:

“There are some ideas which make it impossible for us to return to a time prior to their existence, even and especially if we have moved beyond them, and subjectivity is one of them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 154)

Whereas Merleau-Ponty’s response to the challenges posed by the notion of subjectivity was (in the broad sense) ecological, with his formulation of the body-subject effectively dispatching the Cartesian cogito and the Husserlian transcendental ego in favour of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, 1989), Levinas presented a distinctly anthropocentric yet equally effective response. He showed that the ‘I’, although devoid of intrinsic existence in the nominative (as in ‘I think’, or ‘I want’) becomes fully alive in the accusative (‘me’ as in ‘you call me’ or ‘you need me’). For Levinas (1961), the self comes into being when summoned by the other. Responding to the other’s presence is an act of ethical responsibility, which places ethics before ontology, and makes of ethics a first philosophy.

Two brief clarifications are in order here. Firstly, ethics in the Levinasian sense do not designate the contingent norms of social conventions, least of all the ‘worried conservatism’ of the ‘bourgeois’ (Levinas, 2003, p. 50). They describe instead the obligation to respond adequately to the very real presence of the other. As such, Levinas’s writings provide us with the inspiration for the creation of a ‘radical ethics’ (Bazzano, 2012a, p. 3). This is, admittedly, an anarchist reading of Levinas (Bazzano, 2012a; Critchley, 2007; Jun, 2013), one that gives us the potential basis for an anarchist clinical philosophy that not only questions the arché of the psychotherapist (Bazzano, 2012b) but also reframes ethics, to quote one illustrious example, from the point of view of Antigone rather than that of her sister Ismene.1 This particular reading is one of several that draw on Levinasian thought and expand it to areas largely unexplored by Levinas himself. For instance, he exerted great influence on Derrida’s tough assessment of apartheid in South Africa, on his heedful antagonism towards oppressive regimes and...
censorship, on his exploration of ‘Jewishness’ and the offering of hospitality to those who are not like ‘us’ (Butler, 2004). Levinas also inspired de-colonial thinking and geopolitical ‘barbarism’ (Slabodsky, 2010). Secondly, that ethics should be more important than psychotherapeutic theory gives pause for thought. At its inception, psychotherapy provided a considerable challenge to ontology (Clemens, 2013). With its exhilarating mix of science and literature, psychoanalysis (in its early days at least) could claim to be an ‘anti-philosophy’ – the unconscious being ‘pre-ontological’ as well as ambiguously serving an ‘ontological function’ (Lacan, 1994, p. 29). Being or non-being was not the question then; the question was ‘the unrealized’ (Ibid., p. 30). For reasons probably linked to its survival psychotherapy is arguably becoming subservient to the borrowed metaphysics of biology, ‘the philosophy of Being’, neuroscience, cognitivism and so forth. The teaching of psychological therapies is increasingly compliant to the dictates of a nomenklatura of ignorant managerial oligarchies whose job is to insure that anything even vaguely hinting at ethical and psychological exploration and complexity is stamped out in the name of the neoliberal agenda now predominant in education.

Psychotherapy and metaphysics envy

For these reasons alone, Levinas’s writings are vital. They not only provide psychotherapists with the encouragement necessary for attempting a healthy bypass of ontology, metaphysics and philosophy in the name of more direct ethical engagement. They also give us the philosophical coordinates for apprehending more fully the subversive role of ethics.

I came to psychotherapy long after my philosophy studies, at the end of which I had grown weary of ontologies and metaphysics and wanted to explore the intricacies and contradictions of human experience (and my own) from a different angle, one that may be free of philosophical assumptions. From psychotherapy I expected, naively, a praxis that was closer to experience. What I found instead were modalities that relied heavily on existing systems of thought, as well as suffering from metaphysics as well as physics envy. I believe there are other choices open to psychotherapy, and that the route back to a non-metaphysical stance may need to travel, paradoxically, via philosophy.

Nietzsche (2008) famously entrusted his fictional character Zarathustra with the task of undoing the dualistic separation (between good and evil, being and appearance and so forth). This was because the historical/mythical Zarathustra had been the one who first created duality. Similarly, we may need to turn to philosophy if we wish to slacken our compulsion to ontology and metaphysics. It is from a philosopher (Levinas) that after all one of the most passionate anti-metaphysical pleas in favour of ethics has been articulated in recent years.
Existents, not existence

By holding the real person facing me in higher regard than the abstraction of ‘Being’, Levinas wrestled back ethics from both abstract religious morality and from the Kantian imperative dictated by that other idol, ‘Reason’. In so doing, he designated areas of experience overlooked by Husserl and Heidegger: our encounter with the world and the human other. His writings introduced a startling element in philosophy: they relocated the foundations of ethics in the face of the other and attempted to reframe ethics as a self-determining undertaking, one that does not have to depend on the vagaries of traditional philosophy. Levinas’s writings being influenced by Jewish religious thought, his ethics are not independent of religion; he succeeded, however, in constructing a phenomenology that is free of Heidegger’s closet theology. He dethroned the abstract notion of ‘existence’ in favour of ‘existents’, i.e. concrete human beings with whom we interact and towards whom we are indebted (Levinas, 2001). For this reason alone, he can be applauded as the one thinker who took on Nietzsche’s challenge and expanded on the latter’s unmasking of religious morality (Bazzano, 2014). Levinasian thought represents the most radical reframing of western ontology in the twentieth century. This in spite of the fact that it emerges from that very same tradition, (particularly in Heidegger’s and Husserl’s versions) rather than the genealogical (anti)tradition of Nietzsche – in other words, in spite of the fact that it is more preoccupied with how things appear rather than the conditions for those appearances (Jun, 2013).

Fearful asymmetries

There are at least two aspects of Levinas’s thought that have been neglected or glossed over in psychotherapy literature: separation and politics. Let’s have a look at separation first.

Non-reciprocal psychotherapy?

Prior to being the champion of otherness, Levinas is the philosopher of separation – the separation of desire and unbridgeable longing (Bazzano, 2014), as well as, in Derrida’s words, ‘the absolute solitude of the existent in its existence’ (Derrida, 2005, pp. 110–111). Ethical response to the other (the motif for which his thought is justly celebrated) subsists within an ontology of separation and can hardly be realized apart from it. There is in Levinas, Chalier writes:

an insurmountable distance between the self and the other, an irreducible duality, even in love, which we should guard as a precious good. (cited in Tratansky, 2008, p. 296)

It is the very distance between self and other that prompts the former to attempt an adequate response to the silent ethical demand. This is at variance with
Buber’s (1961, 2004) dialogical perspective of mutuality and relatedness. For Levinas, ethical relation is non-reciprocal or non-transactional: it is one-directional, oriented towards my obligation to the other. It deliberately and polemically goes against the very notion of reciprocity, which historically belongs to an economy of exchange – a juridical form of hospitality managed by norms, essentially inscribed within a metaphysics of violence (Westmoreland, 2008) and on a form of hospitality that is conditional (Bazzano, 2012a, 2015). True, this conditional form of hospitality is the only one we know. It has been handed down to us from the Greek polis and the Roman forum. But it has not worked: which is why, at least in the Derridean reading of Levinas the quest for a difficult, utopian and messianic unconditional hospitality is worth pursuing. It is also timely now that hatred of the foreign and the migrant inflames contemporary politics.

There is a profound gap between Levinas and Buber, and a wider gap still between Levinas and the inter-subjectival and dialogical literature which takes its inspiration from Buber. Whereas Levinas stresses obligation, Buber advocates relation. Levinas is about asymmetry and separation; Buber is about symmetry and mutuality. Mutuality, symmetry, I-Thou,, dialogical therapy – when scrutinized through the Levinasian gaze, these formulations appear to belong to the narcissistic frame, where the other is perceived as akin to the self (Bazzano, 2012a).

Richard Hycner, arguably the most authoritative and eloquent exponent of dialogical psychotherapy, mentions Buber as his chief inspiration in his classic Between Person and Person (Hycner, 1991). He does not mention Levinas once. The same, however, does not apply to more recent incarnations of dialogical therapy, where Levinas is cited alongside Buber and most of the dialogical pantheon’s minor deities.

Two examples from clinical work

Two examples from clinical work may at this point illustrate some of the issues discussed above, particularly in relation to separation.

‘Sabur’

Years ago I worked with Sabur, a man in his early 30s. He was going through a crisis: his father had died two months before and his death had been a real blow. Plus, the Imam of his local mosque had failed to provide the spiritual support my client and his large family had expected. He felt let down, angry and sad, and for the first time in his life had serious doubts about his beliefs. He also felt embarrassed and somehow at fault for coming to counselling and seeking help outside religion. For my part, I was perplexed and a little uncomfortable. In spite of my travels and my diverse cultural interests, I had never engaged in close conversation with a Muslim person before. I nevertheless listened and
engaged with him in the best way I could. His father’s death had brought a lot of pressure on him. He lived with his wife on the ground floor, while his widowed mother and other relatives occupied the flat above. He expressed frustration at the demands put on him by his relations; he felt guilty for not being ‘morally upright’ and ‘doing what was required’ of him at a time of crisis. He talked of a growing desire to be alone, to start another life by himself, of leaving his wife and relations, and of abandoning his religion. I slowly started to read his crisis according to my western frame and in terms of his need to gain autonomy from the family womb and towards ‘individuation’, and felt we were making progress. I interpreted his sense of estrangement from family and culture as the momentary terrain he needed to cross before a new sense of self emerged.

On the 10th session, I knew from the way he talked that a shift had happened – to my surprise, not in the direction I’d expected. The sessions had been helpful, he said. Through them he had come to realize for the first time how truly important family and religion were to him. The momentary lapse had made him appreciate them more; it had helped him see how loved and supported he was by both, that the power of human contact and intimacy and inspiration he experienced there was real. This had come up in a family meeting where they had managed to reconnect and talk and pray together.

I was naturally pleased for him. I also felt sorely humbled by my obvious inability to suspend my own worldview and be more open to him.

‘Talia’

Two years ago I worked with Talia, an Israeli client. Often during our sessions, she would grow nervous and look up through the window whenever the sound of a plane was heard outside. She told me that once in Tel Aviv, after a bomb had gone off, she and her colleagues instantly left work to go and donate blood for the victims. ‘We help one another. That’s what we do’. I was reduced to tears.

Other times she brought vivid tales of fear and trauma; she once spoke of a long distant night where her town was being attacked by Hamas’ rockets. I felt deeply uneasy in my armchair pro-Palestinian stance. We spoke openly about this in our sessions, and I believe it was useful to both in gaining a different perspective, though of course I have never been directly affected by the conflict. My political position hadn’t changed. I thought, as I still do, that a grave injustice had been done to the Palestinians who are reduced to live in a state of apartheid. But I know that during our year-long work together the name ‘Israel’ became for me a place inhabited by real people with dreams, fears and aspirations, rather than an item in the weekly diet of news.

Meeting Sabur and Talia has complicated my ethical and political stance. It has also enriched me in ways that I am to this day processing ad assimilating. What seems crucial at first glance is the radical difference of vocabulary between different cultures. It is difficult to speak of dialogue if we bypass injustice and
prevarication. Nor does it seem enough to me to simply extend one’s unconditional positive regard to all and sunder without an understanding of historical divisions.

**Descartes’ influence**

Levinas is inspired by Descartes (Levinas, 1961), a philosopher who stands at the opposite spectrum of the dialogical stance. Not only does Levinas value the formal structures of Cartesian philosophy (Batnitzky, 2004; Bazzano, 2014; Keenan, 1999), but it is from his reflections on the third Cartesian meditation on the link between the ‘thinking thing’ and the infinity of God, that thought beyond thought (thought as inextinguishable longing) arises (Descartes, 1996). In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas writes of Descartes’s ‘idea of the Infinite’ (p. 25), as something that ‘overflows thought in a wholly different sense that does opinion’ (Ibid.). It is fashionable nowadays to summarily reject Descartes and it may even be good to do so, for much of our current nefarious dualism sits on Cartesian premises. It would be nevertheless a mistake to dispatch his philosophy without considering his notion of infinity (‘God’), so central in Levinas’s own thinking.

It is important to remember that Descartes’s infinity is not mathematical infinity but the experience of *rapture*, an encounter with something that disrupts his thinking. As Hilary Putnam puts it:

> Descartes is not so much proving something as acknowledging something, a Reality that he could not have constructed, a Reality which proves its own existence by the very fact that its presence in my mind turn out to be a phenomenological impossibility.

> It isn’t that Levinas accepts Descartes’s argument … [He] transforms the argument by substituting the other for God. So transformed, the argument becomes: I know the other isn’t part of my ‘construction of the world’ because my encounter with the other is an encounter with a fissure, with a being who breaks my categories.  
> (Putnam, 2002, p. 42)

This is far removed from the dialogical perspective and current emphasis on the relational and the mutuality present in human encounter.

*‘Here I am’*

A therapeutic orientation that has wholeheartedly embraced Levinas in recent years is the Person-Centred Approach (PCA), with several writers (Bazzano, 2014; Mearns & Schmid, 2006; Schmid, 2002, 2006; Worsley, 2006 among others) uncovering links between Levinas’s appreciation of otherness – a domain wholly external to what Schmid (2006) fittingly calls ‘the trap of the same’ (p. 243) – and the PCA’s avowed ‘principled [support] of human growth, worth and dignity’ (Worsley, 2006, p. 209).
I share the enthusiasm for a formidable thinker who after all was the main inspiration for my book on ethics (Bazzano, 2012a). I am also aware of the need for a more critical and necessarily ambivalent appraisal of Levinas’s thought – one that is vigilant to its contradictions yet able to absorb the core of its ethical message; one that is alert to the moral challenge his writings present us with beyond the sentimental altruism the popularization of his thought has engendered.

For Levinas, our fundamental obligation is to become available to the neediness and suffering of the other. I am commanded to say to the other hineni, ‘here I am’ (Genesis, 22:1). I can never comfortably claim to ‘understand’ the other, least of all to be ascending to the ecstatic raptures that are the high points of our current cult of the relationship in psychotherapy (Bazzano, 2015) On the contrary: for Levinas, ‘the closer I come to another … the more I am required to be aware of my distance from grasping the other’s essential reality, and the more I am required to respect that distance’ (Putnam, 2002, p. 38).

At variance with the majority of humanistic/trans-personal stances on the matter, Levinas (1990) also reveals a profound distrust of the ‘charismatic’, of ‘peak experiences’, of relational raptures and those ‘forms of human elevation [which he] denounces as the essence of idolatry’ (Levinas, 1990, p. 11). True to a Jewish Lithuanian background steeped in rigorous debate and argumentation, he sees ‘the Sacred that envelopes and transports me [as] a form of violence’ (Levinas, 1990, p. 23).

**Self-love and the traumatic subject**

To be only ethical … is to live a one-sided life. (Putnam, 2002, p. 56)

The notion of separation in Levinas is closely linked to that of the traumatic subject (Levinas, 1981). In his vision, the ethical encounter is essentially self-sacrificing and traumatic, which in itself poses a mighty challenge to our entrenched Western doctrines of the sovereign, autonomous subject, largely reinforced by mainstream psychotherapy. More problematic still, the Levinasian subject is essentially a ‘traumatized neurotic’ (Critchley, 2007, p. 61). This perspective is inscribed in a notion of encounter as asymmetric and is at variance from dominant notions of inter-subjectivity:

Levinas critiqued the inter-subjectivity found in three philosophers, Hegel (master/servant dialectics), Husserl (dependence of ego from alter ego) and Heidegger (for whom Dasein equals Mitsein), and in each of them found a misleading notion of symmetry which bypasses the fundamental traumatism of the subject and the asymmetry of every encounter. (Bazzano, 2012a, p. 71)

Far from being cosily inscribed within dialogical and reciprocal frames of human encounter, Levinas’s position is an irksome balancing act between self-sacrificing masochism (to the point of pious/ascetic rejection of eroticism) and ethical refusal of homecoming (Bazzano, 2012a; Schmid, 2006) to the safe citadel of
the self. The Levinasian subject is unmistakably masochistic. It is both naive and dangerous to ignore this – even though admittedly propensity towards self-sacrifice offers an antidote to the universal narcissism of our times:

While I believe that in Levinas the masochistic element of human relationality may be exalted to the point of an extreme violence toward the self – that is, to deny our basic erotic need for recognition and identification with the other – it seems to me that our fundamental ‘capacity’ for self-sacrifice is a basic condition of responsibility and openness toward the other. (Lapteva, 2013, unpublished manuscript)

There are different types of masochism, each in its own way perilously poised between abnegation and responsibility: social, emotional, sexual, religious masochism, and the bioenergetics analytic view of the masochist as endurer (Reich, 1980), a character style that may describe some psychotherapists.

It could well be that Levinas is unwittingly proposing a form of ethical masochism. If so, one antidote is potentially provided by the transfer of the ethical responsibility to the symbolic domain, thus evading the punishing demands of a religious and ethical super-ego. A second move implies the fostering of self-love. For Aristotle ‘friendship is based on self-love’ (Brown, 2009, p. 168), and the good person is one who is able to love herself. Although ‘self’ for the Greeks probably meant something different from what we mean by it, this notion of self-love is still valid in circumventing abnegation. We find a similar echo in Jesus’ ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ which in turn echoes Leviticus 19:18. Our situation is different, however; our consulting rooms are so filled with the reverberations of self-hatred that Christ’s injunction ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’, as Lacan famously pointed out, sounds positively ironic (Phillips, 2015). Phenomenology teaches us that ‘there is no inner man’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, p xi), and existentialists tell us that ‘no consciousness can even conceive of a consciousness other than itself’ (Rée, 1997, p. 17). In this altered psychic landscape we have, broadly, two different, at times intertwining, royal roads to self-examination, atonement and inquiry:

To approach the inner life with an attitude of inquiry is different from the more conventional approach of repentance. The latter has been the dominant mode of established religions and has influenced philosophy, psychology, science and culture even when these use a secular language. The difference between inquiry and repentance is subtle yet significant. It is the difference between learning and denigration, between accepting and chastising. Granted, both attitudes can be transformative, but the former does not set an ideal against which one’s imperfections are measured, nor does it wait for things to ‘go wrong’ before embarking on a path of meditation and study. (Bazzano, 2012a, p. 140)

Levinas firmly belongs in the ‘repentance’ camp. The Aristotelian notion of self-love ‘seems utterly alien to Levinas, for whom, it seems, I can at best see myself as one loved by those whom I love’ (Putnam, 2002, p. 57).
Levinas and Judaism

The first part of the paper broadly attempted an introduction to Levinas for those who are unfamiliar with his thought, whilst the second section sought to sketch ideas which are at variance with how his philosophy has been on the whole received in the field of psychology. This third section seeks to explore the thorny subject of Levinasian thought in relation to religion and politics. By bringing up these subjects here, if only sketchily, my hope is that it will become clear how potentially shallow a ‘straightforward’ (non-religious as well as a-political) transposition of Levinas’s notion of otherness can be. I will contend with the issue of religion first.

Levinas is a difficult thinker, partly because he is on the cusp, carrying narratives from one culture to another. This is something I understand well, for my own life has been characterized by striving to translate and transmute meanings and messages from the originary to the host culture (and vice versa), from one ‘speciality’ to another and so forth.

It is in any case difficult to be a psychotherapist on the cusp – attempting to be open to the experience of people whose cultural background is radically different from one’s own.

Yes, it is difficult to be a thinker and a practitioner on the cusp.

Why I love my neighbour

Yet Levinas is just that, a thinker on the cusp, what the Moroccan writer Abdelfattah Kilito calls a raawi, a ‘transmitter’, (Warner, 2014, p. 19), a ‘story-bearer’, carrying words, experience and sensibilities from one culture to another. A Talmudic scholar writing for a gentile readership, he christianized Judaism by underlining the subject’s ethical obligation to the neighbour (Hart & Signer, 2010). He did so by problematizing the love of one’s neighbour: I love my neighbour because she is utterly other and not because she resembles me. This paradoxical move is a step towards the universalization of Judaism – paradoxical because much of Levinas’s philosophy relies on particularism, often placed against universalism:

I see myself obligated with respect to the other; consequently I am infinitely more demanding of myself than of others … this ‘position outside nations’ of which the Pentateuch speaks is realized in the concept of Israel and its particularism. It is a particularism that conditions universality, and it is a moral category rather than a historical fact to do with Israel. (Levinas, 1990, pp. 21–22)

This particularism of Israel that ‘conditions universality’ presents ‘the paradoxical claim implicit in [Levinas’s] writing, namely that ‘all human beings are Jews’ (Putnam, 2002, p. 34). The universalization of Jewishness is for Levinas directly linked to the Holocaust. But it is also an ontological affirmation of our displacement as humans, a de facto statement about our inherent condition of dwellers,
passengers, wanderers on the Earth's crust. It spells out our complicity with the wind, exemplified by the archetype of the Wandering Jew (represented in all times by the gypsies), and most feared by the bourgeois, and aggressively pursued, according to Levinas, by all pagan ideologies such as Hitlerism, with their earthbound worship of an existence chained to the blood and the soil, to ancestry and the delusional fantasy of supremacy (Levinas, 1990b).

Yet the recipient of this hatred shifts with the movement of history so that new objects of prejudice come into being. Because of their displacement and the condition of apartheid in which they continue to be kept nearly seventy years after the creation of the State of Israel, another group has taken on the role that the tragic events of the twentieth century assigned to the Jews: the Palestinians. If all human beings are Jews, then Palestinians are at present most Jewish of all.

**Levinas and politics**

The above section on Levinas and Judaism may have alerted the reader to the fact that Levinas is more than the lyrical and secularized theorist of otherness portrayed in much of psychology literature, an idealized and rather convenient stance that leaves aside the religious element that is central of his thought. Here he shares the fate of religious thinkers such as Buber and Kierkegaard, great sources of inspiration for therapy as long as (so it is implied) we ignore the religious stuff (Lippitt, 2015). This section of the paper problematizes things further, by discussing some of Levinas’s politics, asking whether these may be at variance with some of the widely held assumptions and current applications of his thought.

Levinas’s life was personally affected by the political events of the twentieth century, from the October revolution and the Second World War and the Shoah to the process of decolonization and the students’ movement of May ’68, all of which had considerable impact on his philosophy. Hence the ‘critical neglect of the political dimension of Levinas’s thought is surprising’ (Caygill, 2000, p. 6), particularly when one considers that this is a thinker ‘who engaged with the question of the political horror of the twentieth century with an intensity and a bleakness unrivalled in philosophical writing’ (Ibid., p. 1).

Some of Levinas’s assertions about public events (Nelson, 2005) are highly problematic and make an uncritical acceptance of his philosophy indefensible (Badiou, 2013; Caygill, 2002; Žižek, 2006). He failed to include Islam within the ethical paradigm showing a Eurocentric, pro-Zionist and expressively anti-Palestinian stance, something that Buber (1961, 2004), who fiercely objected to the very notion of political Zionism, did not do. The philosopher of otherness failed to recognize ‘the other’ in the Palestinians. A week after the Sabra and Shatila massacres of 2000 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians carried out by the Lebanese Phalangist militia and facilitated by the Israeli forces of Ariel Sharon who surrounded the Palestinian refugee camp, Levinas participated in a radio
broadcast with Schlomo Malka and Alain Finkelkraut. During the interview, Malka asked:

Levinas, you are the philosopher of the ‘other’. Isn’t history, isn’t politics the very site of the encounter with the ‘other’, and for the Israeli, isn’t the ‘other’ above all the Palestinian? (cited in Caygill, 2002, p. 192)

Levinas replied:

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you are for the other, you’re for the neighbor. But if your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character; in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (Levinas, 1989, p. 284)

In alterity we can find an enemy. And: there are people who are wrong. Is there inconsistency between Levinas’s ethics and his politics? Or are the two areas of his thought intertwined? To another interviewer who insisted on the question of the relation between the West and Islam, Levinas replied:

I often say, although it’s a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated, all the rest – all the exotic – is dance. (Mortley, 1991, p. 18, my emphasis)

In other words, real culture and civilization belong to Athens and Jerusalem. The rest is dance – primitive, uncivilized, irrational. There is no logos in cultures that do not inherit or endorse the legacy of Hellenic philosophy or the religious and ethical insights of the Bible. Imagine the shock I felt when coming across the above statement, having spent years studying Levinas’ phenomenological works. An even greater shock came when it dawned on me that, as a Zionist (whose position on Israel was, to be fair, tormented), Levinas failed to gaze into the face of the Palestinian and draw from their vulnerability and their hopeless, wretched condition the ethical response that so inspired me all these years.

The shock I experienced may have been merely a sign of the naiveté with which I had accepted, alongside many others, the universality of Levinas’s ethical position. Could it be that the notion of the face is not open to culture outside the Judaeo-Christian sphere? This is what McGettigan (2006) effectively proposes:

The ‘face’ is not a physical countenance; it is an interpretation, beyond philosophy and phenomenology, tied to a particular historicico-cultural formation: the culture issued from monotheism. This has the consequence that the special idea of the face of the Other (Autrui), as encounter with the idea of the Infinite, in drawing from one particular culture, is not open to all other cultures; it is not a universal possibility. … [T]he problematic of the face is at root mobilized in a valorization of the Judaeo-Christian legacy against those who come from outside ‘the West.’ (p. 15)

If the above idea is right, it ought to make one shudder, for it could open up the question as to why psychotherapists would champion a philosopher whose thought amplifies psychotherapy’s existing cultural biases rather than questioning them.
Other pronouncements made by Levinas corroborate this troubling thought. For example, when joining the discussion on Asia and the Russo-Chinese debate at the time of Khrushchev’s visits to the West, Caygill, 2002, p. 184 wrote:

The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from which there does not filter any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past. (p. 161)

Speaking of the Chinese as strangers whose strangeness is akin to Martians or inhabitants of the moon in relation to the ‘civilized’ West is hardly compatible to a call to ethical responsibility. The core of Levinas’s thought stresses that our responsibility extends to everyone – not only friends and comrades, but ‘strangers and foreigners, and even unforgivable criminals’ (Réé, 1997, p. 19), yet his political comments tell a different story. The above statements are both Eurocentric and Orientalist. They are Eurocentric because they maintain the alleged superiority of white European culture and civilization, forgetting that the very notion of European culture was forged by exiles (Adorno, 2005; Bazzano, 2006, 2012a; Said, 2001) and that from its very inception it relied on Egyptian, Eastern and Middle-eastern culture (Said, 1979, 2001). They are Orientalist because they subscribe to an exotic, ‘foreign’ and even ‘alien’ idea of the ‘Orient’ (the Far East for Americans, the world of the colonies for the French and the British).

Levinas’ phenomenological writings do portray the other as foreign and alien, but the connotations of foreignness in his political pronouncements switch to a different register. In the first case, ‘alien’ and ‘foreign’ denote a presence that challenges ipseity, our isolated sense of self; as such, their otherness is transformational and even educational in a profound, anti-Platonist sense: not *maieutics* but being impacted by exteriority. But the foreign as Arab, Palestinian, the foreign as *enemy* (of the State of Israel) is to be feared, opposed and destroyed. Because it has neglected the political element in Levinas’s thought, the first wave of Levinasian influence on psychotherapy has been largely sentimental. A more open and informed discussion is needed if we are to employ effectively his complex thought.

Levinas’s declared bias towards the State of Israel poses serious questions with regard to what would be a questionable choice as psychotherapists, in a time of the ‘war on terror’ to swallow whole a philosophy that encourages, rather than dispels prejudice against the Arab world and Arab culture. The Hebrew poet and critic Laor (2009) builds a convincing argument around the phenomenon of new philosemitism which ‘mobilizes a highly selective form of Holocaust remembrance, together with the noxious residues of European colonialism, in order to negate the reality of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians’ (Piterberg, 2013, p. 44). For Laor, the new moral neoliberal universe has used the Holocaust in order to ‘sacralize the new Europe’s liberal-humanist tolerance of ‘the other (who is like us)’ and to redefine ‘the other (who is different from us)’ in terms of Muslim fundamentalism (Laor, 2009, p. 31).
The tragic events of the Second World War – and the killings of millions of Jews in the Holocaust have been woven as a cover for a new Islamophobia. In this reconstructed narrative, ‘it is possible to level the charge of anti-Semitism against anyone who criticizes the US or Israel for the treatment of the Palestinian people’ (Piterberg, 2014, p. 49). The heart of the poet and the analytical shrewdness of the cultural critic merge in Laor’s writings into a powerful ethical plea. As expressed by Piterberg (2013):

For the agony of his people to be parlayed instead into a pretext for the suppression of another is, for Laor, ethically intolerable. (p. 52)

**Levinas’s ‘Naive Zionism’ and decolonialism**

Levinas’s pro-Zionism ‘may be politically naïve and probably blind to some post-1940s world problems’ (Slabodsky, 2010, p. 159), largely because of his ‘unwillingness to adopt a critical stance’ (Ibid.). Yet the 1970s and 1980s saw an interesting development in Levinas’s thinking, prompted by his meeting with the liberationist Argentinean thinker Enrique Dussel. The ensuing conversations made Levinas receptive to decolonial discourse and to evident links between the suffering of the Jews throughout history and that of other groups who have been equally subjected to violence, exploitation and brutality. The connection Slabodsky makes is fertile and interesting. He ends his essay with a famous passage from Fanon (1991):

> It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who one day reminded me of the fact that whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you. (pp. 182–183)

Solidarity can be certainly built on the intrinsic link between the Jews and the ‘wretched of the earth’. It is difficult, however, to link the colonized (as Levinas had hoped) and other oppressed people to the State of Israel, which is something Levinas attempted to do even during the times he opened up his thinking to geopolitics. The reason is twofold: the creation itself of Israel belonged from the beginning to the colonial project (Bazzano, 2012a; Laor, 2009; Rose, 2005), and the political choices of successive Israeli governments, both on the right and on the left, have largely seen the uninterrupted violation of human rights to its 50,000 Arab citizens. The elections on the 17 March 2015, won by Netanyahu’s Likud, made things worse, but it would have not been very different, had the Labor Party won. Mendel (2015) writes:

> The Labor Party has better public relations in the world, but they do the same things. They do not promote peace, they build settlements and walls and make wars, but they get legitimacy for this from the world. (p. 51)

**Conclusion**

A therapeutic orientation that unwittingly accepts prejudiced views perpetuates injustice and narrow-mindedness. It would confirm the suspicion that the
profession as such is steeped in white, Eurocentric, Anglo-American cultural and political values. This is particularly unacceptable at a time when many hypothesize a clash of civilizations and an acceleration of the conflict between ‘our’ way of life and ‘theirs’; between the West and the Islamic world – a theory breeding catastrophic results.

Unawareness of social, cultural and political contingencies makes therapy complicit to reactionary forces. It is for this reason that an uncritical, apolitical acceptance of Levinas is dangerous. Much could be written on the theme of psychotherapy’s dubious penchant for unsavoury alliances (the uncritical championing of Heidegger dominating what goes under the name of British existential psychotherapy comes to mind) and on the consequent need for more open and undaunted discussion.

Lack of sensitivity in relation to racial, cultural and religious issues become all the more inexcusable at a time of cultural polarization, particularly if one considers, for example, that in France, ‘the Muslim religion … is the religion of the poor’ (Badiou, 2006, p. 99) and Muslim women wearing the headscarf may not subscribe to the ostentatious symbols of Capital, the one religion sponsored by the West, and visible in our trousers and T-shirts.

Our unsubtle times do not seem to allow for an unsteady ethos. The thorny area of inter-subjectivity, diversity and trans-cultural relations makes that starkly clear.

How do we inscribe the role of psychotherapy within the current sociopolitical situation? Are we to join the chorus that sings the hymn of obedience to the white man’s law? Are we to follow the bourgeois liberal fantasy of ‘diversity’ or instead pledge loyalty to the irreducible otherness of the other?

The human face, Levinas teaches us, expresses vulnerability and singularity, eliciting adequate response to a silent ethical demand. Now more than ever, this crucial encounter cannot be confined to the Judaeo-Christian universe but needs to include those who are oppressed, segregated and denied of their human rights.

In conclusion, I want to look back at that very same passage by Derrida (2005) quoted at the beginning of my essay. It charts Levinas’s thought, the reader may recall, as a thought that ‘fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality’ (p. 101), one that radically rejects both Being and phenomenality in favour of ethics, a.k.a. ‘otherwise than Being’. This is a thought, Derrida goes on to say, that ‘seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One (other names for the light of Being and of the phenomenon) as if from oppression itself’ (p. 102). It signals a fundamental break with the tradition and with the Greek metaphors of being, light, and unity. In my view, this creates the basis for a radical ethics that is still to come – a messianic, utopian form of ethics that may depart not only from Athens but from Jerusalem too, and open its horizons wide in order to respond to the other’s silent ethical demand.
Note

1. In Sophocles’ tragedy, Antigone defies the decree of the king of Thebes, Creon, in the name of a higher sense of morality, whilst for Ismene morality is abiding by the law (Sophocles, 2003).

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