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The face of the Other –
the desire to love and the desire to kill
To the significance of Emmanuel Levinas for gestalttherapy

I was surprised yesterday to listen to Donna Orange, and her love to Levinas jumped out of her sentences. I am pleased about your interest in Levinas` - in depth radically simple thoughts - which needed a lot of difficult sentences to become simple by heart.

Leonard Cohen sings „*Ring the bells, that still can ring, forget your perfect offering, there is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in...*“ The present urgency to ring the bells is impressively brought forward by him.

„*Inertia is certainly the great law of being; but the human looms up in it and can disturb it*“ (engl.entre nous, 114, Zwischen uns, 145 f) With this quotation from the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, I like to begin with.

The mysterious title of my presentation : *The face of the Other – the desire to love and the desire to kill..* and its provoking issue are related to Levinas, for me someone who rings the bells.

Let me introduce Emmanuel Levinas to you. After his death in 1996, I read an obituary at the homepage of the German „Bundestag“ with the title „*Only responsibility makes us free*“. This is one of the paradoxes we have to deal with, when following Levinas. They wrote „... here we find a philosopher , a human

being, who found joy of life, sensuality, eros, love just in the presence of weakness, mortality, powerlessness, violence, also in his personal coping with the holocaust.“
(Schönherr-Mann, my translation)

Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1906 and grew up with the Talmud and the Russian literature from Dostojewski to Tolstoi. He developed his theory on the background of his experiences of the Russian revolution, of his being a soldier of France in the Second World War, and of the Holocaust, which he and his wife survived while all the other members of his family were murdered by the Nazis.

Levinas lived and worked in France. The phenomenology of Husserl, who had been his important teacher, and the ontology of Heidegger became the background of his philosophical life-long work.

Today he is internationally known as one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. His radical humanism of the Other and his Ethics as First Philosophy have influenced many following philosophers. In Cohen's words, Levinas himself and his philosophy is a crack - not only in the history of philosophy.

I shall talk now about some aspects of his work, which solicited a strong response in me, and which I found nourishing for my life and work as a gestalttherapist and trainer .

I. The othernesss of the Other – Totality and Infinity

A crack breaks all totalities: With totality as a closed system, Levinas describes the permanent returning from the I to me, where the other is taken in and over. The other, he argues, then is no longer the other, but an extension of the I.

„Totality – the I, that always returns back home, is contrasted by the idea of Infinity in us, To have the idea of Infinity it is necessary to exist as separated. ... It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other.“, he says. The Other breaks through forms, is a „pure hole in the world....without any form, he is the nude, the stranger, the orphan, the widow., (engl.TO 44). These are the metaphorical and not only metaphorical sentences of Levinas. Today we are again confronted with their quite close reality.

Infinity is the inexpressible, he describes it as trace that shines through poetry, through music, through art – a trace that expresses itself especially in the face of the Other, more exactly as the face of the Other.

With this central notion of Levinas I shall continue.

II. The face of the Other – nudeness and vulnerability

„The face resists possession, resists my powers ... the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge.“ The idea of Infinity, revealed in the face, does not only require a separate being: the light of the face is necessary for separation. (engl TO 197 ff)

The face is an opening to the infinity of the Other. It is at the same time the visible and the invisible face, neither true face nor mask. (vgl.Finkielkraut,33ff) In its absolute vulnerability, it expresses itself especially through its defenseless eyes.

With this rather hard to chew sentences I come to my main issue:

The face awakens the desire to love and the desire to kill as double-faced sphinx.

I start with Eros: „*Before Eros there was the face; Eros itself is possible only between faces*“ (engl.entre nous) Levinas says in wonderful words : *The whole body – a hand or a curve of the shoulder – can express as the face.* (TO dt, 383, engl. 262)

Here we are in the middle of his famous phenomenology of the eros.

III. Communication in Eros - need and desire.

Levinas talks about a communication in eros. He discriminates between need and desire : the joyous fulfilment of our needs , he calls it *happy dependency*, is a prerequisite for an opening to the otherness of the Other.

This is an interesting idea, starting from needs as our sensual basis. But the satisfaction of our egoistic needs still leaves us hungry and isolated. The awakening of a desire for the nonavailable Other is not the result of a deficiency, but of a fullness . It is a desire for the „*wonder of stepping out of oneself.*“ (*Difficile liberte*, p.63, my translation) The ambiguity of love as „...*simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence...constitutes the originality of the erotic*, (TO 254/55)

„*It is only by showing how eros differs from possession and power that I can acknowledge a communication in eros... It is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge....it is a relationship with alterity, with mystery ... Alsosexuality is in us neither knowledge nor power, but the very plurality of our existing.... I have access to the alterity of the Other from the society I maintain with him, and not by quitting this relation in order to reflect on its terms. Sexuality supplies the example of this relation, accomplished , before being reflected on* (TO, 170, engl. 121)

And here the other side: The naked face also invites an act of violence. I shall talk now about the

IV. The attempt to extinguish the face – the desire to kill

Levinas contrasts the nudeness in the KZ's with erotic nudeness. According to his analysis of the aggression of the Nazi machinery of extinction, hate and murder are going back to this face. Here the forced nudeness of the naked bodies crowded together in order to extinguish the face, effective in the

indifference towards the mass of flesh, to which the subject is degraded. There the nudeness of the body in the erotic contact, where the whole body, the whole skin become face. (vgl. Finkielkraut, The wisdom of love)

The face, on the other hand, „... calls a halt to my violence and paralyzes it through its call (TO 420), Infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: “you shall not commit murder“ (TO,199) he says..... „there is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely other: the resistance of what has no resistance – the ethical resistance.“ (TO, 199)

„Murder, it is true , is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity.“ (86/87 Ethics and Infinity)

What has the double-faced Sphinx , the face of the Other to do with me, with us ? Does the vulnerable face of the Other call us ? Do we listen ?

V. The violence in our intimate and professional relationships

For most of us, also for me, it is not easy not to take advantage of my Other, not to manipulate by threat and withdrawal, by withholding my love.

My experience is that just the vulnerability of the Other provokes either my cruelty or my mercy. Who does not know cruel impulses towards the ones we love , while they would need our affectionate attention?

Not taking advantage of our positional power as therapists is not easy, too. Realizing and admitting our encroachments as well as our shame help our clients to admit theirs and thus enable proximity. The face of the Other confronts us with our self-satisfaction, and puts us in direct contact with our shame..

VI. The priority of the Other - a central concern of Levinas` ringing the bells:

If we talk about intersubjectivity, we are familiar with the I-Thou of Martin Buber. I want to add an Thou-I, as the call of the face could be seen. Levinas „Thou-I“ instead of Buber’s „I-Thou“ for him is not symmetrical, as it is for Buber. : *When I say „thou“ to an I, to a me, according to Buber I would always have that me before me as the one who says „Thou“ to me. Consequently, there would be a reciprocal relationship. According to my analysis, on the other hand, in the relation to the face, it is asymmetry, that is affirmed: at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business.; for me, he is, above all, the one I am responsible for.* (*entre nous*, p.105, *Zwischen uns*, S. 134)

We therapists seem to give priority to the Other - but how are we fixing ourselves to righteousness? What keeps us from being humble, merciful in front of the helplessness, weakness and mortality of the Other ?

Maybe our communication fails in that we think we know things better and influence the other violently. Violent is also our tendency to explain out of our seemingly better knowing, We take a place of being superior also with our well understanding of the other.

All that means not being-for- the-other face to face.

At last I want to insist :

VII. There is space and time for a crack, the breaking in of the face as the absolute otherness of the Other.

The primordial responsibility for the Other, in the words of Levinas, obliges us to be for him . That would be admitting our weakness, our passivity - a

„no, we cannot“. What we can do , is to live with a sentence from Levinas:
„*Touching is tenderness and responsibility*“ (*la trace frz,p 225,dt.Die Spur, S.275*)

This sentence , in many variations, is the core of Levinas' philosophy as ethics:
The commitment to the Other replaces the return of the I to itself.

Laura Perls, had she known Levinas - they lived at the same time - would have been delighted. In a sensual way he is the philosopher of the aesthetics of the Other, in a radical way the philosopher of the aesthetics of commitment.
