

## REVIEW

**Paul Marcus, *In Search of the Good Life: Emmanuel Levinas, Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living* (London: Karmac Books Ltd., 2010), ISBN: 978-1855757233**

When psychologists try to use a philosophy to expose a “new” psyche and develop a new technique for changing one’s behavior they tend to reduce the marvelously enigmatic human to fit their Procrustean bed. They chop off the mystery to fit their theory. This power play to support an ideology ultimately sabotages its efforts to illuminate the awesomely elusive and irreducible psyche. Paul Marcus does not try to reduce the rich insights of Emmanuel Levinas to conjure up a theory or design a practice. When he calls for a “Levinasian-inspired, ethically-infused psychoanalytic approach” to face everyday problems, he challenges the tradition’s chronic habits of ego-centrism by honoring de-centering humility as the paradoxical path to a good and happy life, the basis of holiness. Levinas was more interested in the goodness of holiness than in ethics as a code for moral conduct. Both Marcus and Levinas risk being dismissed by psychologists for attending to holiness. Yes, Levinas wants a kind of utopia. Not one without suffering and conflict, but one where we would respond responsibly when called by the neediness and worthiness of the Other toward a transcendent “nowhere place,” while simultaneously being pulled toward a “here-and-now place” of natural selfishness. From Levinas, Marcus finds the basis for a Copernican revolution for psychoanalysis by removing the self from its center to recognize the Other at the center. Paradoxically, the self is served when serving others, not with the intent to serve the self, but by authentically serving the one who has priority over the self. While this Levinasian-infused psychoanalysis could be what Foucault called a “technology of the self,” it is less a technology to change personal habits and more what he describes as a “transformation into a mode of being.”

Marcus must convince his readers to pay attention to this Levinas with his extravagant descriptions of the priority of the Other: “The psyche in the soul is the other in me.”<sup>1</sup> “It is maternity, gestation of the other in the same [i.e., self]...”<sup>2</sup>

This other-in-the-self is bearing par excellence, bearing even for the responsibility for the pain brought on by the Other. (75)

---

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. translated by Alphonso Lingis from *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, first published in 1974 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 69.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

It is not an abdication of the (self), now alienated and slave to the Other, but an abnegation of oneself fully responsible for the other. (68-69)

To be oneself, is the state of being a hostage, always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other... (84)

This is strong stuff. With this Marcus points toward the *good* life by using the following definition of goodness from Levinas, "...taking up a position such that the Other counts more than myself."<sup>3</sup> These passages make Levinas seem like a grump leaving out the fun and pleasure of the good life. *Au contraire*, he has beautiful sections on enjoyment:

We live from 'good soup.' ...living from... delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness... Enjoyable objects make up the grace of life... enjoyment is the ultimate consciousness of all the contents that fill my life—it embraces them... Life is the love of life.<sup>4</sup>

Loyal to Freudian vocabulary Marcus insists that this Levinas alternative could inspire clients suffering from Narcissism by helping "...the analysand awaken to a moral life that is coterminous with the discovery of the Other as the first to be respected, and served." (xiv) He challenges the established master narratives of psychoanalysis that define the self as the pleasure seeker (Freud), the object seeker (Klein and Fairbain), and meaning seeker (Schaefer and Spence). Marcus points out to contemporary narrators that the self is not at its best as a seeker, but as the one who responds responsibly to the Other by placing her above himself. Paradoxically, the self finds its identity not by obsessively self-searching, but being distracted from itself by attending to others. This Levinasian inspiration is nothing short of a radical paradigm shift to save the goodness of the massive teetering edifice of psychoanalysis. Fundamentalist Freudianism is its own worst enemy, as is fundamentalist Behaviorism, fundamentalist Cognitivism, fundamentalist Physiologism, and especially fundamentalist Utilitarianism with its evidence-based practices: methods that mangle mystery and manipulate for other motives.

What does *In Search of the Good Life* offer to a wide sweep of readers, with its repeated intention to offer "...a Levinasian-inspired, ethically-infused psychoanalytic approach..." to the good life? How reach beyond analytic colleagues?

First, he does convince us that this distinctive philosophy cannot be dismissed as too abstract and too hard to live by, a too frequent criticism. Without a radical ethical philosophy we "fall into" ego-centricism and reduce others to nothing more than sources for our gratification of needs for companionship, friendship, love, and intimacy, and thereby violate the dignity and independent worthiness of others. We tend, for our convenience, to dismiss others to less than who they are from being "always more than" the labels we use to reduce them to "nothing more than" the stereotypical caricatures we construct for target-practice. Psychotherapists facing the enigmatic Other ought to know better, but are often the most guilty of doing so.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 110-115.

In Chapter Five: "Guard your tongue," Marcus clearly discloses the self-sabotage of reductionism. He unpacks "the psychological meaning of gossip" with its two poles of constructive and destructive "information exchange." Without the ethical intent to serve, the gossiper damages his co-gossiper as well as his gossipee. For his own advantage he tries to seduce a co-conspirator into membership with "helpful information" by passing-on "secret and socially significant" knowledge. But the gossiper hurts more than the gossipee and co-gossiper; he also hurts himself by deceiving himself, and risks turning listeners away. Better than the Valiant Little Tailor: three victims with one blow.

Second, he gives a lucid explication of Levinas's philosophy. Straight-up Levinas is hard to read. His are not logical treatises, but more like poetic evocations inviting readers to dig into their experience deeper than they are accustomed to or even want to. While not uncommonly does a reader discover this philosophy to be "what I've been waiting for," a common sense such as Grandma taught at her knee, it is painfully challenging; it disturbs; it calls into question the reader's comfortable prejudices about how right are his/her ethical foundations. It is neither Levinas nor Marcus who traumatizes. They are the reminders who show how the Other can ethically puncture and deflate our egos by her presence, saying, "Here I am. Do not do violence. Do not reduce me. My value is not from your judgments. My rights come before yours."

Third, Marcus attends to those common issues of living that few would dismiss as unimportant: "being a good parent," "caring for a dying parent," "sustaining adult-to-adult love," "developing an adult religious outlook," "reading a sacred book," "getting help through psychotherapy," "risking self-sabotage in gossip," "eating well," and, in the first chapter, "caring for a pet," where he delightfully sets the tone for all the others.

Fourth, he offers lay-people insights into their struggles with common issues. Earlier, in *Being for the Other: Emmanuel Levinas, Ethical Living and Psychoanalysis* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), Marcus explicitly addressed psychotherapists. In *In Search of the Good Life* he writes about the art of living that "good life" which we all so dearly want. In both books he brings Freud and Levinas together by asking universal questions: *are we humans (especially am I) only self-centered, or am I authentically concerned about others?* He does not put Freud in charge of the first and Levinas of its alternative. Marcus does not label Freud the pessimistic realist and Levinas the utopian idealist. Both are far more complex. Freud, the philosopher of pleasure, wanted his clients to be responsible. Levinas, the philosopher of responsibility, offered rich descriptions of the psyche justifiably enjoying goods privately at home unconcerned about responsibility. We are all Freudians and all Levinasians: all enjoy filling our needs and are all interrupted by the command to do the right thing for others: we respond at a cost to ourselves.

The fifth appeal of Marcus is his scholarship. He has not only mined Freud and Levinas, but also other analysts and philosophers. He turns to poets and lyricists, novelists and historians, sociologists and economists; he has taken examples from business, medicine, academia, and from the gratuitous giving and greedy grabbing at the street level. Best of all, he offers us vignettes from his therapeutic practice.

Let us be a bit more specific about the nine chapters. In Chapter one, "I'm just wild about Harry," Marcus is most convincing describing his love for his dog as more than some-

thing to fill his need. Levinas does not offer a philosophy of nature for equal animal rights. Their ontological status is at best loved companions, at worst prey for sport, mostly part of the glorious web of nature sustaining and sometimes threatening us on the only earth we have. Looking into his eyes, Harry provides Marcus with more than pleasure, is more than a companion and guard-dog; he fulfills that friendship described by Aristotle as one of excellence, one between "...two virtuous people wishing the best for one another." (7) Marcus's ethical assignment is not only to feed, water, and walk. He finds himself unexpectedly blind-sided by a healthy *love* relationship that Freud noted as containing three interrelated features: 1) an other-directed and other-regarding, wanting to keep Harry happy for his sake, 2) a maturity that is not infantile, dependent, and needy, but recognizes that Harry's needs and wishes are worthy of gratification, 3) an affection not marred by aggression, not ambivalent between friendly and hostile. Levinas adds to Freud's love the call to responsibility, purpose, and meaning that describes the deeper foundation for his Harry-love. The face of Harry turned toward him assigns Marcus's distinct presence as responsible, without being able to reduce Harry to the one for whom he is responsible. Harry is an enigma that calls up in him a kind of non-conscious moral desire, a primordial stirring in his soul. Harry's vulnerability, weakness, and suffering makes Marcus a hostage morally obligated to enhance this "pup's" life with the fullness of his whole being.

Chapter Two, "Victory through vegetables," is the least convincing for me. Vegetarianism is laudable for improving one's health, rejecting inhumane treatment of animals, avoiding the exploitation of nature, saving and sharing grain with humans rather than feeding and slaughtering stock animals. I don't eat much meat, but am not persuaded that Levinas's ethics can philosophically and directly justify not eating meat and its products. For him the face of the Other human calls the self to place its majesty above the self. The animal's life is dignified and worthy in itself, but not equal to the Other. (I may be prejudiced having grown up on a Western ranch with beef, pork, poultry, mutton, milk, eggs, cheese. We treated our animals humanely and fed them organically.)

Possibly the most touching is Chapter Three: "Long night's journey into day: on tending to a dying mother." Making public the eulogy he gave for his mother is brave and generous. He noted her genius for living in brutal honesty with her shortcomings and heaped-on trials: "I take life straight," she often said. She lived literature to the end and explored ideas with freedom and imagination, while struggling with depression. Marcus startles the reader when describing her perilous confrontation with the menacing, inescapable horror of approaching death. Levinas described death as the ultimate encounter with alterity. From beyond, death threatened her like a hunted animal by a predator, who for no reason she could understand, was out to get her. Its predestined coming, but "not yet," sadistically humiliating her in excruciating pain with time to know its inevitability though without a terminal date, would ultimately find and kill her in an unexpected attack, ambushing her from a concealed position. Suffering and dreadful anticipation of what more was to come made her dying a loss of self with its loss of world. It is Marcus's description of witnessing his mother die that deeply pierces the reader. He quotes a personal communication from his friend, Richard Cohen, to make his point:

Levinas rejects Heidegger's analysis of being as being-toward-death, arguing that the death that matters most and cuts most deeply into my own psyche is not my own but the other's. Furthermore, it is not the other's death per se, but the other's mortality, meaning the other's aging and suffering, the other's vulnerability that calls me to myself as responsibility for the other, responsible 'not to let him die alone.' (37)

Chapter Seven, "On feeling altogether miserable: getting help through Psychotherapy" will likely shake the heads of some fellow therapists. He asks and answers without moral judgment:

Que.: "What's the problem?" Ans.: radical self-absorption, a psyche utterly trapped in his own psychological skin ethically disabled in responses of feeling, thought, and action to the call of the Other. Que.: "How did the problem develop?" Ans.: parental inadequacy, insufficient love, and other harmful-to-self experiences suffocating with inordinate narcissistic needs. Que.: "How to fix the problem?" Ans.: moving the analysand from being exclusively "for-itself" to one-responsible-for-the-Other. (135)

In this way he deconstruct self-deception, isolation, and defensiveness against appropriate guilt, shame, remorse, self-reproach for their misdeeds for Others. (134)

I could reach into his four other chapters to pull out more brilliant analysis for good living using the light of Levinas, but you get the point by now. Here is a book that as the back cover explains puts to work a "...philosophy and applies it to the everyday lives of 'real' people struggling to give greater meaning and purpose, especially ethical meaning, to their personal lives." What analytic insights have I left for the reader to find in *In Search of the Good Life*? A brilliant Chapter Four: "On reading a sacred book: the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and its significance for psychoanalysis;" a powerful motivator for our most consequential tasks in Chapter Six: "The life and soul of good parenting: on wanting, having, and raising children;" a hopeful Chapter Eight: "All you need is love: on the difficulties of sustaining an adult-to-adult love relationship;" and finally an inspirational Chapter Nine: "Looking for God in all the right places: on developing an 'adult' religious outlook."

I strongly recommend this book to all who want for themselves and others happiness in a good life. Marcus and his philosopher, Levinas, are not self-help gurus. Their brutal honesty can show the reader how she/he will be traumatized, make her/him feel guilty, inadequate to fulfil the call to responsibility, all for the purpose of making a good life better by de-centering and re-centering.

Here is a passage from Marcus reading Levinas reading Dostoevsky's Alexey Karamazov reading notes of the dying Father Zossima: "We are all guilty of all and responsible for all before all, and I more than all the others." (98)<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The quote is from Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen from *Ethique et Infini* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

George Kunz  
Psychology Department  
Seattle University  
Seattle, WA 98122  
USA