

ETHICS BEFORE ONTOLOGY: A FEW WORDS

TOM ANDERSEN, M.D.
Institute of Community Medicine
University of Tromsø

IN THE EYES OF THE OTHER AND MYSELF

According to the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas,¹ the Norwegian philosopher Asbjørn Aarnes preferred to place the philosophy of ethics before the philosophy of ontology (Aarnes, 1995). Ontology is the study of what an object or a phenomenon is. Philosophy attempts to explain or understand wisdom, knowledge, values, and ethics. When thinking of ethics, one tries to immerse one's self in these explanations and understandings, trying to understand or explain what it is, for instance, to be an Other person.

I understand ethics as activities that connect one's self with Others. In these activities, one needs to be aware of how both the Others' and one's own dignity and integrity are protected. As Levinas (1991) says, we have a significant responsibility for the Other. Because I can only see myself or the effect of what I do in the eyes of the Other, I depend on the Other. In the eyes of the Other, I can see whether what I said or did was within the limits of what my community (Other and I) can or cannot accept. The Other and I are *mutually* dependent on each other in this communal acceptance.

When I express myself to an Other I become naked somehow. As the Danish priest and philosopher Knud Loegstrup² says: "I 'move' out of myself and lay myself in the hand of the Other" (Loegstrup, 1991). This always creates a considerable risk because I can never know if the Other is willing to receive what I lay in his or her hands. Loegstrup (1991) says that pain is created by not being received and, therefore, we have a substantial responsibility for the Other as the Other has for us.

¹Even though Levinas's writings are mostly in French, there are English translations.

²Loegstrup's numerous books have been translated into English.

Address correspondence to Tom Andersen, Institute of Community Medicine, University of Tromsø, Breivika N-9037, Tromsø, Norway.

The activities of connecting with Others are significantly *related* to conversation and language. Through language and conversation, we make descriptions of our surrounding reality and ourselves (Gergen, 1999). These descriptions aid in relating to the reality of the Other. To a great extent, we depend on the conversations with the Other in order to be able to describe, create, and sustain conversations.

By expressing oneself, a person not only informs others and himself or herself, but is actually also forming one's self in this moment, and maybe a slightly different self in the next moment (Shotter, 1993, Andersen, 1998). As a listener, I will witness the Other's formation of himself or herself. At this time, I often feel as if I am in a sacred place.

It is important to note that positive descriptions of oneself and the Other tend to strengthen the relationship as negative descriptions create distance in the relationship. This is sometimes the painful distance that we call loneliness.

SOME THOUGHTS OF ETHICS OF BEING IN CONVERSATION

Sometimes, as therapists and researchers, we get so eager to understand, explain, or to solve problems "out there" that we forget *how* we connect with "what is out there." If we call therapy and research collaborative connections with Others, I propose that we discuss with the Others *how we can collaborate* before we start the collaboration. Three guidelines may be usable in this respect: "I want to talk with all those who want to talk, but it is much, much more important *not* to talk with those who do not want to talk," "I want to talk with those who want to talk about what they would like to discuss, but it is much, much more important *not* to talk about what they would *not* like to discuss," and "I prefer to let the Other talk, and therefore be formed, in her or his own preferred language."

If something is said in a conversation by someone that creates tension and even discomfort in the Others who are present, a therapist or researcher might ask herself or himself: "Who might talk with whom about this issue, in which way, in which context, at which point in time?" The question could even be raised in the open so that everyone could help to find an answer that protects the dignity and integrity of everybody present.

Harry Goolishian,³ an American-Armenian and a friend to many of us, used to say: "You shall not be so occupied with what you do (because so much works), but very occupied with the few things you shall *not* do!" What I think is most important *not* to do, is to humiliate others. We have to look in the eyes of the Other to be sure that we do *not* humiliate her or him.

³Harry Goolishian died in November 1991.

EDITOR'S QUESTIONS: APPLYING THESE IDEAS

Q: It appears that some of your thoughts on ethics and therapy address the therapist connecting and collaborating with the Other (client) in a way that they communally define ethics together. Your guidelines show how a therapist might consider how to do so. Taking these ideas into deliberation, what are your thoughts on abuse, suicide, and domestic violence?

A: Most likely somebody would say, "If people only talk about what they would like to discuss, what about abuse, suicide, domestic violence, and so on?" I think there will always be somebody in such a situation that will be ready to talk about those issues in some way or another. So we (client and therapist) start there, talking about the abuse, suicide, or violence of some sort. If we, as therapists, try to talk with the person who acted violently too eagerly or too early, we may contribute to the situation in a negative manner.

Q: What ideas do you have as to how we as therapists can talk in these contexts?

A: In becoming informed, we have to accept the way that person is ready to talk. If we disconnect with the person, we may make her or him more dangerous. One day, she or he will hopefully find and develop that part of herself or himself that balances the part that acts in a violent manner.

REFERENCES

- Aarnes, A. (1995). Aa lese Levinas. In H. Kolstad, H. Bjoernstad, and A. Aarnes (Eds.), *I sporet av det uendelige* (pp. 12–18). Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Andersen, T. (1998). One sentence on five lines about creating meaning: In perspective of relationship, prejudice and bewitchment. *Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management*, 9 (2), 73–80.
- Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social constructionism*. London: Sage Publications.
- Loegstrup, K. E. (1991). *Den etiske fordring*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities*. London: Sage Publications.