

The Demanded Self: Levinasian ethics and identity in psychology

David M Goodman, 2012. Pittsburgh,: Duquesne University Press.

David Goodman sets lofty goals as he positions his book, *The Demanded Self*, as challenging. He quickly starts off by saying:

The assumptions behind the naturalised, rationalised and supposedly amoral versions of the modern self and proposes a viable alternative; creating a picture of an ethically constituted self emerging out of conversation with a Jewish philosophical tradition ... To this end a Jewish philosophical perspective, as represented by Emmanuel Levinas, will be advanced as a radical corrective to the morally anaemic definitions of the modern self. I argue for a version of the self that is inherently demanded.

(p3)

This long quote serves to illustrate three points. Firstly, Goodman writes in the first person, emphasising the importance of personal ownership and self-disclosure which is helpful to the sense of the book and his argument that we should demand authenticity from ourselves and others. This book is personal and demands something of me as a reader. Secondly, despite Goodman's background as a psychology practitioner, this book goes well beyond the scope of psychology and therapy. Finally, the book is rooted in Levinas' Jewishness right from the start, before any kind of argument has been built. This was surprising to me as I cannot recall this sort of rooting in other philosophical works – I have never read a book on Heidegger that positioned his origins in how the philosophy is described. Perhaps I am not widely read enough, but to me this provides a distinct perspective and adds to the overall experience of reading Goodman's work.

The work is structured like a modern academic textbook, with a detailed contents page and oodles of subtitles grounding it, to my mind, in the realm of psychology. The introductory chapter, titled 'An introduction: The self out of which we live' has subtitles such as 'Narrowly lived self', 'Scientific reformation of the self' and 'Ethics 'defined'' followed by a conclusion. To work through all the subtitles would be laborious and not instructive, at a macro level the book can be divided into two parts 'Levinas's project: Love of wisdom (not equal to) wisdom of love', consisting of four chapters, and 'The demanded self: Clinical applications' with three chapters, before an overarching concluding chapter. The writing style is academic but accessible, which is impressive given the range of texts cited. In fact, I managed to read the book in just two days after receiving it, as it captivated my attention and embodied the concepts it discussed in line with Levinas' ideas.

However, I must admit that I felt disappointed by the limited number of

clinical examples provided. I wanted more and felt a greater need for them. Goodman has a ready rationale for this as “Levinas did not want his thought to be used to form ontological or totalling principles, even a depiction of the self as ‘ethically constituted’” (p141). There was only one impactful example of a therapist being assaulted by a child patient and the later decision-making process in applying Levinasian principles for the benefit of the patient, the therapy and the therapist. It was powerful, with disclosures that made it more real in terms of the ease in which they were called by the face of the other due to their age. I wanted more and an extra twenty pages could have accommodated them. This sentiment stems from my own entitlement influenced by my generational expectations; it is just a suggestion for the next edition, as it would provide further assistance to others, like me, in navigating the complexities of really embodying ethics.

While I understand Goodman's decision around the clinical examples, it left me with questions. One thing that struck me was the discussion about *hineni* (which for the purpose of this review, represents a higher calling and an aspirational concept for the self as a living entity). Goodman presents five interrelated qualities relating to *hineni*. The second of these qualities is

The self lived as hineni is open and receptive to that which is not itself, does not fit within its experience, even threatens itself...The self lived as hineni is a self, first and foremost, forever responsive to the other.

(p125)

This evoked strong feelings in me and made me wonder about the challenges of responding to an out-of-hours communication from a suicidal client. If I understood Goodman – and through him, Levinas – correctly, living for the other means I should be responsive to the face of the other and immediately take responsibility. In fact, it suggests that I should embrace any feelings of discomfort and move towards it when facing a boundary violation. I am unsure how either Levinas or Goodman would deal with this in a practical sense; I would like to think I am not asking for definitive answers but just examples. There have been times when I had five or six actively suicidal clients as well as a home life; how can one fully devote oneself to all these people? Is there an experience where it is possible and having a supervisor is enough? Does one need a supervisor who has the same mindset and approach? Based on my own experience with some supervisors, I have sometimes found a lack of responsiveness to the call, and this informs my question. My critique is answered in Goodman's explanation, and I am asking for too much of a textbook.

I liked this book. There is room for improvement, as I said, but that should

not detract from its resonating message. I write this as the UKCP Board faces a removal election and the UK is in the midst of a general election campaign. I am struck that colleagues, me included, and politicians could do well to read this, if not Levinas' original texts. The idea of seeing in others a responsibility to refrain from causing harm is lacking in so much of our discourse. I thought of the advert from Ed Davey and his experience as a carer and a father as I read this book. It reminded me that the very humanity he displayed is so often absent from public life and especially the social media world. Similarly, it left me wondering about the others involved in the (UKCP's) MoU withdrawal. I have noticed that I, along with some colleagues who feel threatened by trans rights, have disregarded the call to refrain from causing harm, perhaps in our haste to 'save the children'. Lastly, I found myself drawn back to the ideas of Levinas, a Jewish philosopher, and the situation in Gaza. It raises the tricky question of when self-preservation should come into play and how can one ethically prioritise the faces of others. Goodman does not present Levinas as having all the answers, and it is clear that Levinas himself did not claim to have them either. However, I do wonder if adopting an outward-facing stance and taking broader responsibility for all others would not make the world a better place.

Goodman said he would:

Argue for a radically different understanding of an ethical self, invoking Levinas' definition of the ethical as holiness and goodness. This self is a demanded self. Ethics is a moral attunement to the other; the radical exposure of the self to the needs, calling and demand of the other.

(p17)

While it would have been beneficial for Goodman to explicitly explore how his radical difference could be applied in psychotherapy or psychology, I hope that the majority of those reading this journal would be able to see the relevance in their work and apply this understanding to their practice. On that basis, I would recommend this book as an accessible entry point or a reintroduction to Levinas and his philosophy for all, whether one is practicing as a therapist or simply looking to exist in a world that is better.

Ben Scanlan

Who is Afraid of Gender?

Judith Butler, 2024. London: Allen Lane.

Jane does not like J.K. Rowling. *Harry Potter* is a gripping story, but there is one major flaw, she says. Despite the protagonist's appeal as an