Shared Embodiment and Shared Conversation: Compassion in Clinical Forensics

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we present a case of a therapist working with a challenging patient in an even more challenging context, that of a maximum-security prison. We use this case to explore philosophies of compassion and how we might apply them. Particularly, we explore the phenomenology of embodied compassion as presented by James Mensch, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Immanuel Levinas to describe how compassion can be understood as a visceral human response to the suffering of others. Given the narrative metaphors offered and utilized thoroughly by Mensch, we explore compassion through the phenomenology of dialogue as well, as presented by Mikhail Bakhtin. In this section we describe how language informs the meaning of suffering deeply, and in a way that furthers our understanding of embodied suffering and compassion. We conclude with recommendations for therapists and philosophers who wish to study compassion or practice these philosophies more thoroughly.

Vignette: The Story of "George"

The psychologist sat in his office in the medical wing of a maximum-security prison and rubbed the bridge of his nose as though trying to wring out the fatigue-inducing day. As he wrote the last of his clinical notes before taking a longed-for lunch break, the nurse knocked on his door before entering.

"There's a patient presenting in crisis, doc," she stated quietly, looking at the psychologist carefully to note his reaction.

"Oh? Who is it?" inquired the psychologist in a concerned tone.

"It's George from K House." she replied, looking away.

"Oh," he replied with a heavy sigh. "Well, I'm just finishing my clinical notes for the day, so when you see him in the waiting room, please bring him to me."

The psychologist tried to return his concentration to his work, but found he could not. An uncharacteristic dread suddenly flood through his body. George had never presented in crisis before, and while it concerned the psychologist that he was doing so now, he couldn't help but feel disgust in the presence of this particular patient. George presented with mild negative symptoms of schizophrenia such as alogia (George sometimes had difficulty speaking), apraxia (George had a hard time completing simple behaviors at times, like remembering to shower or tying his shoes), and blunting of affect (George expressed his emotion in a nearly flat monotone manner). Because of these symptoms, George's hygiene proved wanting, his shirts perpetually stained a yellowish-brown and reeking of mildew and sweat. Yet, as disturbing as George's lack of hygiene often appeared, the psychologist had become used to working with schizophrenics with similar symptoms. Those patients did not bother him as George did. So what was it about George that unearthed these unwanted emotions? As a twice-convicted pedophile George would occasionally try to re-live his sexual conquest of children in the therapy room stories very difficult for the psychologist to hear. Early in their sessions together, George would tuck his penis between his thighs and rub his thighs together as he talked about his crimes, a

behavior the psychologist repeatedly confronted. George would justify his exploitation of these children in terms of his psychological symptoms, despite the fact that his symptoms proved unrelated to the nature of his crimes both in the courts and in the eyes of the psychologist. Surely, this was what frustrated the psychologist so. Taking a deep breath, he stood up from the desk built for someone of much less than his height and stepped out of his cramped office into the medical waiting area. George sat alone, shifting self-consciously. The therapist motioned for George and waited as he slowly stood up. Turning, the therapist went back into his office and sat down in his chair.

A few moments later George shuffled in, his eyes on the ground, the front of his t-shirt greasy with sweat, his prison browns rumpled and stained. He slumped into the chair, shifting his eyes to the left, avoiding eye contact with the psychologist.

"The nurse said you're in crisis. What's going on?" the psychologist asked, trying to show compassion he did not feel.

George just sat silently, his eyes shifting from the right, to the left, to the floor, and back again, haltingly wringing his hands. After a few minutes of watching George shift in silence, the therapist asked "You seem uncomfortable, can you tell me what's going on?"

George just sat there, fidgeting in the uncomfortable silence. The clock ticked on. The therapist was growing increasingly impatient. He felt his muscles tense as a headache began pounding behind his eyes. He thought to himself that he was wasting his time with this pedophile, who (he assumed) must have feigned a crisis to get out of his cell for a couple of hours. Angry and feeling taken advantage of, he looked at George and stated bluntly "I cannot help you if you do not tell me what is going on. Go back to your cell and decide whether or not you are going to talk to me."

He stood up and opened the door for George, who carefully stood and shuffled out the door. The therapist turned back and headed for the desk. His gaze glanced past the chair George had been sitting in. Shocked, he took a closer look. A broad splotch of blood was smeared across it, a faint trail of blood droplets continued along the floor leading from

the chair to the door. Stunned, the psychologist suddenly realized George's silence made

sense, and he understood the real nature of his crisis. George had just suffered brutal

sexual assault, and had turned to the therapist for help. He had most likely kept silent lest

he suffer further retribution from those who assaulted him, as was the custom in prison.

Appalled at his callous treatment of George, the psychologist sprinted out the door and

caught him at the doorway from the building. He placed his hand tenderly on George's

shoulder, and choking up with emotion he said quietly "I'm so sorry, let's have the nurse

take a look at you and then we can talk." Motioning to the nurse to hurry, he led George

into an examination room and began the arduous process of trauma recovery.

Introduction

It is this sudden shift in the therapist's experience that is of interest. The abrupt

jump from disgust and revulsion to compassion and concern has led to further study on the

process of compassion. The therapist's experience provides us, the authors, an opportunity

to explore the nature of compassion and the experience of truly empathizing with another in

a difficult clinical setting and working with patients that may be challenging. A greater

understanding of this experience may also serve to help us empathize with others we work

with and those we come across in our everyday lives.

Some philosophers have written on the nature of emotion in relation to others, or

compassion, particularly James Mensch (2001; 2003; 2009), Maurice Merleau-Ponty

(1945/2012), Immanuel Levinas (1969; 1998), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; 1984; 1986a;

1986b; 1986c; 1992; 1993). These authors demonstrate related, yet nuanced,

understandings of the nature of empathy and compassion and the moral demands placed

upon us by the others in our lives. Although the authors' perspectives are similar, the

differences are also worthy of exploration to help us understand the nature of compassion

and how it informs our relationships, particularly in this difficult prison context.

Mensch and Embodied Compassion

James Mensch (2001; 2003; 2009), a phenomenologist of embodiment, conceptualizes empathic experiences, like this psychologist's, as the experience of bodies (both the experiences of the experiencer as well as the experienced). In one text he presents our literary imagination, our capacity to imaginatively inhabit the experience of the characters or subjects of the books we read (Mensch, 2003). This capacity arises due to the embodiment we share with the characters we read about. Mensch (2001) gives the example of the character Shingo, from Kawabata's 1970 novel, *The Sound of a Mountain*. A person reading this novel would understand what it might be like to be a Japanese person living in Tokyo through his own empathy toward Shingo, including Shingo's experiences, emotions, and physical sensations of the environment around him. Therefore, when we read that "the warm sea breeze blew gently through his hair as he looked across the undulating waves to the sunset on the fading horizon," we all know what it feels like to have a warm breeze blow against our skin, and we can imagine that happening to the subject of the story, just like we remember, or can imagine, what "undulating waves" look like. Even if we were bald and had never felt the wind through our hair or had never seen the sea, we can imagine or remember what a breeze feels like, and what an undulating surface looks like (like the undulation of grass in a field or trees in the wind as an imaginative simulacrum for the sea waves we had never seen). Mensch argues that our shared embodiment makes this literary imagination possible. "In its basic etymological sense, empathy is a feeling (a suffering or undergoing) of the world in and through another person. Flesh is our capacity to suffer and undergo. Tasking myself as another in empathy, I take up the other person's standpoint, letting myself be determined by his situation" (Mensch, 2003, p. 172). Both the reader and the author experience the world through their embodied experience, and although their bodies are different, both share the experiences of the body in common. Both know what pleasure feels like, or pain, grief, joy, contentment, or fear. These experiences are universal to embodied beings. As Mensch, (2003) argues,

Such universality springs from our condition of plurality. We are always already with others. To work with them, we have to anticipate their action; but this requires that we regard the world, not just from our own, but also from their standpoints. It involves our letting ourselves be imaginatively shaped by the latter. Given our lack of immediate access to their memories and anticipations, the attempt to do this is never entirely successful. Our plural condition, however, demands that we make the attempt (p. 172).

We share this plural condition as authors, as readers, and that allows the author to imaginatively shape the reader's experience. So the author, as he writes "the father watched his children at play and sighed contentedly at their happiness," asks the reader to imagine this experience, which can make sense if the reader has seen and experienced playing happy children, sighing, and contentment. Mensch does not mean to detract from the power of imagination, however, but to add to it. A young girl may read the author's words about the father, and she can imagine playing happy children, sighing, and contentment, even though she does not share the experience of fatherhood. Despite her different embodied experience than the subject of the story, her imagination and her embodied experience of similar phenomena allow her to relate to him and his experience. Likewise, as you read the story above, you could imagine the office, the psychologist, the nurse, George, the exasperation of the therapist and his sudden concern upon learning of George's injuries. This imaginative process is not new relative to the field of psychotherapy. Our capacity for such is presupposed in techniques often utilized by counselors, social workers, and psychologists to help their clients: for example, imagery techniques for relaxation and the empty chair technique (Elliot, Watson, Goldman & Greenberg, 2004).

Tension and emotional difficulty can arise both when therapists relate to an experience too deeply or too often, as in the case of secondary trauma (Elwood, Mott, Lohr, & Galovski, 2011; Figley, 1995, 2002; Hesse, 2002; Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995), but also when the embodied subjectivity of the client's story proves too

harshly dissonant to the experience of the therapist. In this case, the psychologist listening to George's story could imagine what that experience felt like for George. As George recounted his experience grooming and molesting children, the psychologist experienced strong emotional dissonance. The psychologist has experienced children, and has experienced the erotic, but to him, children are not erotic beings and the thought of them as such filled him with revulsion instead of arousal. Although this did not necessarily cause a disconnect between him and George, he began to experience George as a revolting being, unable or unwilling to share the experience of the eroticization of children. In essence, despite the capacity we have to relate to others, we do not necessarily do so in a complete way; nor are we caused to take up the experience of another just by hearing their story. When we witness someone embarrassing themselves in public, we may not be able to relate to them completely, but we still have that shared experienced that enables us to feel embarrassment on their behalf and to say, "I'm embarrassed for you," or as it is often expressed, "I feel for you." The capacity to do so starts in infancy and we can see it in childhood. In fact, the tendency amongst small children is to assume that others see the world through the eyes of the child, sharing their perspective (hence children will "show" an adult a picture book, but will not think to turn the book around so the adult can see it as well) (Mensch, 2009; Kahle, Eisert, & Piner, 1986; d'Entremont, Seamans, & Boudreau, 2012). The child faces some disappointment in learning that the other cannot see what he does, but eventually the child will learn that he can see something that the other cannot (the flesh of the other) and the other can see something the child cannot (the flesh of the child). Experientially, as the child experiences the other as an object in his vision, so too will the child learn that he is an object in the vision of the other.

Mensch's perspective on embodiment builds on the earlier work of Merleau-Ponty, who argues that our vision of the body of another opens the experience of our own body as an object (Mensch, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Or, as Merleau-Ponty offered, "[T]he very first cultural object, and the one by which they all exist, is the other's body as a bearer

of a behavior" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 364). What is implicated in Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of the body as a bearer of behavior? The objectified recognition of this embodied presence or embodied action evokes a variety of ethical implications, predicated upon the various ways in which this presencing is socially constructed. The body of the other, then, is not simply a bearer of behavior, but a bearer of a specific set of socially constructed meanings that comes to give this embodied act its specific cultural significance. But where does this conceptualization of the body leave the other: as social object or as something more?

For both Mensch and Merleau-Ponty, the body or embodied subjectivity becomes the ontological point of reference for human existence. Indeed Merleau-Ponty argues, there can be no discussion of the human without reference in some way to the body and the social world(s) from which it is inseparable (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). However, this ontological grounding of human existence within the confines of the body also attempts to answer the ethical and philosophical status of other bodies that we encounter in our shared world. From this vantage point the body of the other, rather than configured as an object among other objects or as an unknowable or inaccessible consciousness, is viewed as a body like my own, capable of pursuing its own projects and potentiality. As such, the recognition of my own embodied subjectivity allows me to witness in the body of the other the same ethical considerations I configure in my own existence, thereby evoking a type of coexistence.

Mensch and Merleau-Ponty elucidate the nature of the inter-relationships that occur when two bodies experience one another. Merleau-Ponty describes in detail the origin of our shared coexistence. He observes:

> I establish a pact with the other person, and I commit to living in an inter-
> world where I make as much room for the other as I do for myself. But this
> inter-world is still my project, and it would be hypocritical to believe that I

desire the other person's well- being as my own, since this attachment to
another's well-being still comes from me (1945/2012, p. 373).

However, this pact with another person still remains one sided and fails to recognize
the position of the other. Without this reciprocity, there can be no coexistence, because the
existence of the one takes over and envelops the world of the other leaving he or she
alienated in this process. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) continues by stating:

> Coexistence must be in each case lived by each person. If neither of us is a
> constituting consciousness, then at the moment that we are about to
> communicate and to find a common world it will not be clear who
> communicates and for whom the world exists (p. 373).

This rings true in the case of objects; if we were to attempt to speak to a chair, there
is no lived-coexistence, and the effort makes no sense. When we make others into an
object by using pre-given or constructed definitions to interact with them, we deny their
lived existence and hence, no coexistence emerges. As in the case of George, the
psychologist objectified George as "repulsive" and "schizophrenic" and "pedophile" and
refused to share a common world with him at first. In fact, a common world will not exist in
such cases, and cannot exist for the other who is denied the reciprocity which coexistence
requires. With the absence of reciprocity, the body as a bearer of behavior is stripped of its
own potentiality, its own claim to this inter-world and is enveloped by the meaning imposed
upon it by another, in this case the psychologist himself. As Merleau-Ponty argues:

> Once the other has been posited, or once the other's gaze upon me has
> stripped me of a part of my being by inserting me into his field, then it is
> clear that I can only recuperate my being by forming relations with the other
> or by making myself freely recognized by him, and that my freedom requires
> that others have the same freedom (1945/2012, p. 374).

Mensch cites Levinas (with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) to help him describe the
fundamentally empathic nature of most human relationships. When speaking of *en-pathein*

(the Greek term to "suffer or undergo" as a root for "empathy"), Mensch describes how when we see a friend strike his thumb accidentally with a hammer, we reach for our own thumb wincing, and the other person becomes incarnate in us for as long as that empathy lasts (Mensch, 2009). Such empathy resonates in some of the work of Levinas as well, who in *Otherwise than Being* describes how I resonate with the hunger of another, and I feel as though the bread I eat was "snatched from my mouth" as I share my bread to ease the pain of his hunger (1998, p. 100). Mensch builds on Levinas' philosophy to highlight the fundamentally moral nature of the compassion we feel for others in their suffering. However, the ontology of Levinas as described in *Totality and Infinity*, (1969) requires some clarification relative to our compassionate experience of the other because it seems to differ, if not contradict, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Mensch, however, utilizes both, and offers some subtle distinctions between the two.

Levinas situates the moral nature of human relationships in his description of the other, which he ontologizes as radically **O**ther, very different from myself. "The Other lies absolutely beyond my comprehension and should be preserved in all its irreducible strangeness; it may be revealed by other people insofar as they are not merely mirror images of myself" (Davis, 1996, p. 3). While we may see an other, the small "o" other is phenomenologically un-reduced, merely manifest. A capital "O" Other is one given to consciousness, and therefore we can phenomenologically gain in the reduction, but such an Other remains "strange", so different that the reduction proves infinite. This is quite unlike Merleau-Ponty, who argues that I am a body like other bodies I encounter, which requires a recognition of other in a way that both constructs an ontology of the flesh without necessarily condemning that flesh to the status of a pure extension of the totality of an individual perspective. Embodied subjectivity for philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and Mensch requires the recognition of a reciprocity or co-existence between embodied subjects that reflects a type of potentiality for both. From their perspective, to view the other as somehow ontologically different from me is to resort to a type of totality that fails to

recognize my co-existence with the other. For Merleau-Ponty, the potential or the likelihood

for unethical or deficient concern emerges when my recognition is incongruent and allows

me to view this alien other as somehow a not-I.

The conceptualization of coexistence allows for the recognition of the other as *Other*

without requiring the formulation of a totally separate ontological category for human being.

Coexistence rejects the privileging of one perspective over another and situates this co-

shared potentiality as an ontological characteristic of existence. It is perhaps possible to

argue that coexistence includes the potential of totality and infinity as a shared parameter

of human existence. The other becomes a totality when we fail to recognize that the other

always overflows our image of her (Levinas, 1969). The possibility for infinity is when we

meet the other in this shared reciprocity without restricting who this other may be.

However, sometimes psychologists, even well-intentioned ones like the one described

above, cast their totalizing gaze upon their patients. When the psychologist looked at

George, he could only engage with the image (totality) he placed upon George, rather than

attempting a coexistent relationship with him (which could entail infinite possibility). The

moment of compassion ruptured this totalizing gaze, the process of which we will describe

below.

Human existence need not be totally "mine" or totally "other" for an authentic

recognition of the other to take place. The body of another person evokes a degree of

familiarity, a sense that she is similar to me but not the same as me. Unlike Levinas, who

emphasizes the otherness-of-the other, Merleau-Ponty argues that I do not need to view the

other as ontologically other to have a sense of empathy for that person; often times all that

is required is my recognition of their humanity. If to be human evokes a general shared

meaning concerning our relatedness to one another then that recognition should be enough

to hear the call. "The call" in the case of George, is the call of his humanity, his feeling, his

suffering. Such recognition does not naively ignore the all too human possibilities for

brutality and violence; rather, it more firmly evokes the various ways we are implicated in the choices that help to define the human.

The presence of the other person evokes an immanence and transcendence that is inseparable; an emergence of potentiality that remains different from my own and may indeed exceed my own immediate ability to grasp that possibility. But without that recognition coexistence is lost.

Mensch (2003) develops Levinas to describe the ontological nature of relatedness. In fact, Levinas (1969, p. 48) states that relationship comes before ontology and argues that it is in-relation that compassion and morals arise. Merleau-Ponty, however, makes the other a non-radical other and relatable rather than radically different (1945/2012). Any difference between self and others is a matter of degree, not a matter of kind. Levinas' assumption is one primarily of difference-of-other, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, the key assumption is of similarity. Building on the foundations provided by Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, Mensch argues that it is because of our relationship with the Other, whom we can understand via our shared experience of embodiment, that we can come to know the Other and have compassion for him, changing Levinas' conception slightly from an unrelatable Other to a relatable one. The Other, in Mensch's view, ceases to be radically different from me (one form of totality) or the same (another form of totality) but instead remains similar (embodiment) and different (potential). However, as mentioned earlier in this analysis, this shared embodiment and understanding is never complete. Therefore, the compromise that Mensch draws between Levinas and Merleau-Ponty seems adequate and appropriate.

The process of embodied similarity and potential begins early in our development. We come to learn of ourselves through the eyes of the other, as an object in their vision. So too, do we experience the physical being of another through their flesh; as Mensch points out, "empathy understood in its etymological sense, a feeling in another person, is characterized in this understanding" (2005, p. 13). By feeling "in and through another" empathy doubles our perspective, and allows us to see ourselves not only as defined by our

environment, but also within the environment that defines the other, or as Mensch describes the process: "the other is 'in' me as 'other' than me'" (p. 13). The perspective and experience of the other can help abstract us out of our situation, which gives us the distance to appraise ourselves and the other.

In the case of George and the psychologist we can see this process clearly. The psychologist experienced George as an unrelatable object at first. George's unkempt, stained, smelly, and un-hygienic appearance coupled with George's attempts to re-live his sexual conquests of children in therapy prompted the psychologist to keep George distant, as an un-relatable object, whose flesh he did not want to inhabit with empathy. The visceral response, rather than a sharing, involved revulsion on the part of the psychologist when experiencing George. Mensch describes this as a "shaking" that destabilizes our interpretations within our relationships. In the case of the psychologist, he usually interpreted the experience of his clients as worthy of empathy and worthy of sharing. Not so with George. The common response to this shaking is to deny their Otherness by stereotyping them, which allows us to relate to our prejudices of them rather than relating to them as another Being (Mensch, 2009). However, in the case of George, the injury, and their shared experience of shame and pain made George a relatable being once more, and the therapist felt compassion for George where just minutes before he had felt impatience fueled by disgust (and probably no small amount of guilt for feeling so cold towards George in the beginning of their meeting).

Mensch uses the examples from our literary imagination to highlight the phenomenon of our shared experience of subjective embodiment, and how that shared experience can prompt empathy and compassion. The basis of this empathic shared experience, however, rests not in imagination alone, but in the encounter with an original other (the other as the origin, in part, of my experience of him) who is embodied, like me. An inherent part of embodiment is the experience of *need* which often entails relationships with others for satisfaction, a process that starts in the womb. "Insofar as it is 'born of

woman' it is always already there with its Others" (Mensch, 2001, p. 237).   We cannot

function organically as embodied beings without being-in-relation with others, and in these

relations we understand the need of others due to our experience of need as well.

Macmurray, a relational phenomenologist (1961/1990) also talks about this need of

others when he describes the beginning of an individual's life: "The most obvious fact about

the human infant is his total helplessness" (p. 47). Macmurray therefore concludes that

"[the infant] cannot, even theoretically, live in isolated existence; that he is not an

independent individual" (p. 50) and, "[h]e can live only through other people and in

dynamic relation with them" (p. 51). Similar to Mensch analogizing the womb to this

conclusion, Macmurray is analogizing the relationship a helpless newborn has with his

mother. Human beings socially experience, from the time of their first existence, this need

for others and learn very early on that we are always already in dynamic relation with

others. This experience of need exists not just within the individual, but can be experienced

as a shared need in-relation to our Others, which requires some negotiation. This does not

negate the self, however.

As Mensch describes "Thus, insofar as I feel Other's needs as my own, the object of

this negotiation is my self-presence as a need" (Mensch, 2001, p. 237). We experience our

needs and the Other's needs in-relation made manifest by the encounter with the Other. As

Mensch (2001) describes that within this face-to-face encounter:

> [t]he response to original presence is an openness to it, a readiness to take it
>
> on. This involves the gratuity of letting one's self-presence be shaped by the
>
> Other who is encountered face-to-face. This taking on, in empathy, of the
>
> other's self-presence responds to the Other's embodied presence. It is a
>
> responding by taking up the Other's standpoint in the world (p. 236).

In this "taking up" of another's standpoint self-presence is not diminished, rather,

> [W]hen, in empathy, I attune myself to another person's situation, I do not
>
> abandon my own situation. My own self-presence as determined by my bodily

being in the world remains. Empathy simply overlays this situatedness with
that of the Other. As indicated, I experience a kind of dual shaping of my
objective selfhood. My being in the world becomes, in a certain sense,
doubled (p. 236).

   The psychologist working with George experienced a visceral, embodied reaction to
him. Earlier in the story, when he remembered George attempting to re-live his erotic
encounters with children, the psychologist did not experience that as needful (and in fact,
experienced it as disturbingly harmful). This "doubling" of the psychologists' being-in-the-
world expanded his experience in unwelcomed ways, challenging his capacity to remain
open to George, prompting the psychologist to assert his need for self-presence. However,
upon learning of George's victimhood and his traumatic injury, the psychologist experienced
the trauma as very needful, and responded with empathy and immediate action, his being
having become doubled through the traumatic injury of George, and through that, the
desire to meet that (now shared) need. This need, shared through empathy, Levinas
explores and Mensch builds upon. To use Levinas' example, when we experience the
hunger of another, the experience of their hunger snatches the bread metaphorically from
our mouth (Levinas, 1969). We cannot satiate our hunger in the face of an Other who
starves, when we experience them as an Other phenomenologically. At times, we respond
to this all-too-common suffering of another by distancing ourselves, stereotyping the other,
and behaving according to our stereotype. At other times, the suffering of another, as in
the case of George and his assault, demands our attention, pulling us from our distanced
position, back in-relation with the other. When the psychologist became aware of George's
injury, it brought him back to compassion for George, pulling the psychologist out of his
stereotype and back to the relationship. This does not necessarily happen, however; some
will hold to their stereotypes even in the face of the desperate suffering of another.

   The authentic experiencing of the suffering of another due to the embodied similarity
between I and the other contradicts Levinas' ontology of otherness. From his

conceptualization, otherness is radical, placing the other person outside of relatable reach, making him alien.   How do I recognize this ontologically alien other without in some way finding a sense of kinship in that recognition? Levinas would undoubtedly view such a formulation of empathy as caught within the totality of individual perspective, thereby rejecting the possibility of the infinity of the other. To critique Levinas, it seems to us that his conceptualization of the ontology of the other removes him from the very connection compassion requires, and hence removes him from a moral and ethical consideration as well. My recognition of the suffering of the other, even if that recognition may require that I remove bread from my well-fed mouth, is possible through my shared recognition of this embodied subject or being-in-the-world within a type of reciprocity that calls me to an ethical response to his suffering.

For Mensch, the experience of the psychologist whose feeling changed quickly from one of disgusted indifference to one of compassionate concern entails the experience of the Other made possible via shared embodiment. From this shared embodiment arises experience-in-common or the capacity to share approximate experiences: the parent of a child can understand the grieving of another parent who has lost a child to a tragic death through their shared embodied experience of raising children, and even someone without children can relate to the experience of grief. When the experience of George entailed horrific abuse, their shared embodiment related the psychologist to the trauma, and from that relationship came compassion and a willingness to help.

However, despite our critique of Levinas, his concern that we can totalize the other remains worthy of consideration in these cases. Just because someone suffers does not mean that their experience exactly matches our embodied sharing of their experience, and to assume that it does would be to totalize them in a problematic way. Levinas suggests that we can relate to the Other through language, through discourse, a process in which both participants come to an approximate understanding together, but in a way that does not fold the Other into the same (Levinas, 1969). When we speak to the Other, and when

the Other responds, the words we share do not have a fixed meaning, but rather each

blossoms as a revelation, a production of new meanings, heretofore unpredicted. In

addition, the dialogue between us not only reveals new meaning, it opens new possibilities

for all participants. In fact, some authors have argued that, to Levinas, the face of the

Other is more of a "source of language than something that can be seen" (Davis, 1996, p.

46).

Mensch does not explore the language, the symbolic meaning of the other, relative

to worthiness of empathy, or of trauma. Mensch thoroughly addresses how compassion

comes about, but not when experience switches from disinterest to empathy or vice-versa,

which seems to be a deeply-languaged event. Even though George said nothing to the

psychologist as he sat in pain, his body language, and the symbolic meaning of the blood

"languaged" meaning. As mentioned before, the complete experience of the other is not

possible in Mensch's embodiment alone; therefore, it is here where the notion of dialogue

advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin becomes valuable. Mensch himself alluded to this effect with

the expression: "Incapable of reducing the others to its own perspective, each, then, can be

called into question by the other expressions of what it means to be human . . . It requires

that each be given the power to call the other into account for their actions" (Mensch, 2003,

p. 16). Bakhtin presents an understanding of the process of how emotions can change,

based on our participation in the meaning of our relationships in the world, and our

accountability in-relation (Brandist, 1992; Morson & Emerson, 1990).

Compassion in Dialogue: Mikhail Bakhtin

The nature of accountability, like the psychologist's feeling of accountability in the

face of George's trauma, his feeling called to account and accountable to George's suffering,

from Bakhtin's perspective, is possible because of the inherently *unfinalizeable* nature of

beings-in-dialogue. This dialogue permeates all speech and relationships pertaining to

human life; it is everything that has meaning and significance and is unfinalizable (Morson &

Emerson, 1990, p. 49) (resisting the *totality* which Levinas refers to). Bakhtin's notion of dialogue entails not just spoken words or written text, but a simultaneous unity of differences in the interpenetration of utterances (Baxter, 2004). It is precisely this embodied and dialogical ability which can afford the therapist the opportunity to understand George, to take him up as a person. Not only did the psychologist have this opportunity, Bakthin points out that we are accountable in these dialogues. Echoing Levinas' concept of infinity, this accountability (called "responsibility" by Bakhtin) arises due to our always-in-process, never-finished Being. A finalized being is one that loses Being, lacking the transcendence characteristic of those who can engage agentically in the meaning of relationships, whereas unfinalized Beings participate in relationships and meaning ("dialogue") in creative and sometimes unpredictable ways. Because unfinalizeable Beings participate in meaning, they embody a unique time and place in any encounter, bringing to bear a set of memories, capacities to imagine, and interpretations of the encounter at hand, they have a "non-alibi in Being" indicating that "that which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else" (1993, p. 42). All participants share this non-alibi, and Bakhtin moralizes the importance of taking up others as unfinalizeable.

> [T]he very fact that they are secondhand renders them, in a deeper sense, both false and morally wrong. "The truth about a man in the mouths of others, not directed at him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand truth*, becomes a lie degrading and deadening him, if it touches upon his 'holy of holies' that is, 'the man in man'" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 265 - 266).

The psychologist, at first, finalized George, totalizing him, foreclosing possibility in their relationship, limiting George to a disgusting pedophile and schizophrenic. As a finalized object in the psychologist's sight, George warranted no compassion or understanding beyond what the therapist chose to see, and the psychologist was accountable for that act. In Bakhtin's view, "a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process" (1963, p. 58). In this

case, the psychologist's process, his moral judgment and clinical diagnosis removed the

"voice" of George, his capacity to participate in the dialogue meaningfully, and failed to

attend to what he said, even non-verbally, as he sat and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

The psychologist failed to acknowledge that due to our imaginative capacity, George was

and could become more than what the psychologist saw, and the psychologist, had he

bothered, could have imagined other possibilities for George. Bakhtin calls this the "dialogic

imagination" (Bakhtin, 1963; 1990; 1986c).

The dialogic imagination entails a similar process to the embodied imagination

Mensch discusses. For Bakhtin, we understand the meanings of words, symbols, and signs,

and we imagine those when we read or hear a story. When we read Kawabata's novel, *The

Sound of the Mountain,* we can picture the characters, their experiences, and their

surroundings because we understand the meaning of the words, the signs, and the symbols,

and therefore can imagine what they mean. What gives these meaning, however, is our

experience of the relation of these words to our world (a world that entails our embodied

presence). In the case of George, the psychologist communicated with George and

interpreted their earlier interactions as problematic, and George as a pedophile, disgusting,

misusing therapy, etc. However, as a new sign presented itself (evidence of George's

assault) the psychologist interpreted those as signs of trauma, and felt compassion and a

desire to help. Those symbols held emotional weight for him, because of the meaning of

blood, and pain, and humiliation, which he understood based on his experience of the world,

and his imagination of what George might be experiencing.

All human relationships, Bakhtin claimed, are fundamentally dialogical (Morson &

Emerson, 1990, p. 49). In a manner of speaking, this dialogic encounter transcends the

merely verbal or purely intellectual to a level or type of meaning deeply emotional and

relational. This deeply meaningful encounter, from Bakhtin's perspective, arises from the

dialogical nature of the Being-of-human. As language-using Beings, our fundamental nature

exists in-relation with others who participate with us in the memory of and creation of

meaningful understanding. This languaged-in-relation nature Bakhtin called "polyphonic" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 10). Polyphony, put simply, means "multi-voiced," so as polyphonic Beings we are multi-voiced Beings, each voice a way of experiencing our relationships and our world, each a different perspective by which we can interpret our experience.   We do not invent these voices on our own; rather we participate in the creation of voice, a voice we remember, which informs our understanding (Bakhtin, 1986a; 1986b; 1986c). (There is no voice-less place by which we can engage with new voice, we are voiced from the outset, and our experience of a new voice we participate with from our current multi-voiced perspective.)

For example, imagine a mother holding her newborn babe whom she smiles upon and cuddles. The babe does not yet know language the way we understand it, but Bakhtin would still conceptualize the babe as an active participant in meaning, his voice very simple compared to his mother's but no less meaningful or deeply compelling. His need for comfort and for nourishment are stated loudly by him in the forms of cries and responded to by his mother who seeks to meet those needs. As she continues to do so, he experiences her comfort and her nourishment, and should this continue he will understand himself and his world (in part) through this relationship. Because others participate in our understanding and our experience they irrevocably link themselves to us, and we participate in them and they participate in us. Our Being, in this sense, is not a solitary one but a fundamentally relational one, a co-being of Being (Draper, Green & Faulkner, 2009).

However, at times we forget the nature of our relationships, and we close ourselves to the other, and to the possibility that the other embodies (Polizzi & Draper, 2013). The psychologist working with George initially only embodied his voice of disgust and resentment, prompting him to treat George according to his stereotype of him, partly disengaged from the man sitting in front of him, denying their co-being. George, feeling the judgment and impatience, dared not speak because co-being felt dangerous with the therapist almost as much as with those who raped him. However, the psychologist learning

of George's trauma embodied a compassionate voice, blossoming fully into the foreground. The psychologist's voice of disgust and resentment did not vanish; it merely receded to the background, as is common for multi-voiced beings. As this new voice of compassion came to the foreground, the entire meaning of their relationship changed. No longer was their relationship one of drudgery, misunderstanding, and resentment, but of meaningful help, healing, and recovery. The psychologist "voiced," so to speak, a newfound meaning to help George, and George, for his part, voiced genuine distress and the need for healing, the co-being of the psychologist and George became a polyphonic chorus of compassion and treatment.

Vital to understanding Bakhtin's notion of dialogue is the nature of the perspective granted on the other due to our outside-ness. In other words, the image of the other person is fundamentally vital to the entire process of this kind of dialogue. Seemingly paradoxical in the face of co-being, dialogue requires two or more voices, two or more experiences, never totally unmerged, and never totally merging (Baxter, 2004; Morson & Emerson, 1990; Bakhtin, 1986c; 1990; 1993). If the voices totally unmerged, dialogue would cease, replaced by two separate voices speaking not to an Other, but to nothing. If two voices totally merged, no dialogue could take place, only a monologue composed of two sounds. In both cases, co-being ceases, dialogue ceases, and the possible transcendence collapses into a totalized immanent. Outside-ness grants us "surplus" with the Other.

Three types of surplus relate to our current discussion. The first is *essential surplus*. "This type of surplus occurs when one has a single, finalized image of another, which defines him and rules out any future change. It is as though one person has 'the truth' of the person they're observing, and the person observed could never know the truth of the matter" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 242). In this case, the psychologist essentialized his surplus of George as George the disgusting, George the pedophile, George the mis-user of therapy, George the unchanging. Confident in his perspective, he believed he knew the truth of George at first, even if George did not. However, to Bakhtin, this proves

97

problematic. "[T]he encounter with the other must not be an assimilation of the other into the Same; it must leave the alterity of the other untouched, irreducible; above all, it must grant the other's transcendence of any containment and closure from without" (Erdinast-Vulcan, 2008, p. 45).

Essential surplus, to that end, is not the only surplus available. Another type is *information-bearing surplus* (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 242). This is our understanding of our mutual lived world, time, space, and location that we bring to a dialogic encounter. This perspective is simultaneously mutual (we might stand in the same room as we dialogue) and different (as we face one another you can see what is behind me, and I can see what is behind you). Both perspectives bear information that is brought to the dialogue, informing the participation of both parties. Rather than providing value-neutral or objectively detached knowledge desired by many psychologists (Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1999; Slife & Williams, 1995; Woolfolk, 2001), information-bearing surplus informs the dialogue because it arises from the embedded shared meaning of our co-Being. George's surplus entailed his perspective on prison life and the therapy room, while the psychologists' did likewise, each from their differing perspectives.

The third type of surplus is the type that happens when two people truly come together dialogically. This type of surplus is the *addressive surplus*, and it is the

> [S]urplus of the "good listener," one capable of "live entering." It requires an active (not duplicating) understanding, a willingness to listen without trying to finalize the other or define him once and for all, one uses one's "outsideness" and experience to ask the right sorts of questions. Recognizing the other's capacity for change, one provokes or invites him to outgrow himself (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 242).

This surplus entails addressing the other, of hearing his perspective and experience, dialogically imagining with them what they are undergoing or undertaking, and offering what we see as possible to them due to our outsideness, the very options or understandings

they may not see or understand from their perspective. This value-laden event presents many opportunities for engagement and introduces possibilities for change.

Christopher (1996) a philosopher of psychotherapy, points out that sometimes therapists, in their quest to be value-neutral or objective, undermine their capacity to work with clients by ignoring their values instead of allowing these values to dialogically engage with the values of the client, to work in tandem with them in an ongoing and effortful way. By feigning objectivity, therapists hold to their essential surplus, treating objectivity as a "good" in its own right (Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1999). By objectively looking at the other, we finalize them, the very totality Levinas resisted so strongly. In this regard, Bakhtin and Levinas share similar concerns:

> "The face", Bakhtin says in what sounds like an echo or a pre-figuration of Levinas, "is that which should speak. Becoming an image, accepting a definition from without, away from the speaking face, is a kind of death. It is an extinction of the infinity of one's axiological self-consciousness, a metamorphosis into dead matter, into an object for swallowing up and consuming." (Erdinast-Vulcan, 2008, p. 47)

In the story, the psychologist failed at first to address George dialogically with the surplus available uniquely to him. Instead, he saw only his essential and information-bearing surplus and treated him instead as "dead matter"—until he saw George's injury. Then he became compassionately mindful due to his understanding of the meaning of George's suffering, and proceeded to help.

Addressive surplus requires a mindset, one Bakhtin moralizes quite strongly, which he called "openness" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 242, 267; Bakhtin, 1984; 1986a; 1986c; 1993). Openness entails a commitment to understand, to "live enter" the experience of another, but it does not entail losing oneself within, but instead possessing a willingness to be informed, a willingness to be wrong. When experiencing compassion, Bakhtin argued that psychology's definition of empathy as "feeling what another feels" (Rogers, 1957;

Rogers, 1959) can prove somewhat problematic. We cannot experience exactly what another experiences, for to do so would entail our pretending that we can give up our surplus. Rather, Bakhtin argued, we should "experience [another's suffering] precisely as *his* suffering, in the category of the other, and my reaction to him is not a cry of pain but a word of consolation and a gesture of assistance" (Moreson & Emerson, 1990, p. 185, emphasis in original).

There is here also an assumption that the therapist knows the experience of George due to previous knowledge of certain symbols, such as blood stains, particularly in specific contextual situatedness, thus better understanding, albeit in a visceral manner, what the injuries mean and therefore elicit a sharp change in reaction. Baxter (2004) refers to this phenomenon as *chronotopic similarity* in dialogue. "Chronotopic similarity is accomplished in both the mundane communication events that a pair engages in while conducting everyday relating and those momentous events that function as turning points in transforming a relationship" (ibid, p. 4). By striving for openness, both parties can create this chronotopic similarity and with it new possibilities within that unfinalizeable relationship. When one suffers, such suffering proves meaningful to both participants in dialogue, but they take the suffering up from two different points of reference, one outside the suffering and one in the midst of it. In the story, the psychologist experienced George's suffering as *George's*, and he took up that suffering through authentically living the moral call of the pain, which was to strive for amelioration.

The Body in Conversation

From Mensch and Merleau-Ponty, we learn of a visceral compassion, one of shared body and of shared experience. From Bakhtin, we learn of a meaningful compassion, one of shared voice and engaged perspective. Bridging the two we have Levinas, who both helps us explore otherness and who moralizes the relationship strongly. As different as these two processes seem, the process of embodied compassion and the process of dialogical

compassion are ultimately the same. The visceral empathy of the suffering of another is understood and languaged in the open, unfinalizeable dialogue. Without the body, we could develop no language (neither symbol nor sign) for embodied suffering. Likewise, our understanding of the other's suffering would prove greatly diminished without the symbolizing of that through communication.

Bakhtin addresses this connection in the body through his evocation and development of *spirit* and *soul* (Bakhtin, 1977-78). *Spirit,* according to Bakhtin, is the experience we have of ourselves from within. It is our always-in-process and creative nature, our capacity to outgrow ourselves and even surprise ourselves. Our spirit is us at our most inward, although inescapably in-relation; it is also that part of us that can transcend another's understanding of us. This understanding others have of us Bakhtin called *soul*. When others see our bodies in-action they finalize us to a greater or lesser degree by offering us a definition of ourselves. The psychologist finalized George, for example, as an unrelatable pedophile with poor hygiene. Basically, our unfinalizeable spirit creatively understands the embodiment of another and we treat them according to our understanding of them, finalizing them either temporarily or permanently, which then informs their understanding of themselves. "The soul is a gift of my spirit to another" as Bakhtin stated, (1990, p. 116), and sometimes that gift can prove problematic, as it did initially between the psychologist and George.

Bakhtin's writings parallel those of Marion (2002), who highlighted the process of immanence and transcendence in our perception of others. That which is immanent of another is that which I can see and understand, the *soul* of another that I finalize long enough to relate to them (while hopefully resisting the urge to totalize them completely). However, the other presents so much more than I can ever see, a creative capacity (*spirit*) that will prove transcendent if I am open to it, indicating that there is an infinity to the other, the depths of which I could never completely plumb. In the case of the psychologist and George, he could see George and finalized him problematically, but George's experience

transcended the finalized immanent and the psychologist felt prompted to respond

otherwise, taking up a new understanding of George in contradiction to the old (as one

worthy of compassion rather than contempt).

From the perspective of embodiment in dialogue, how did the experience of the

therapist change from revulsion to compassion? Openness to possibility seems the first part

of the change in experience for the psychologist. As we argue elsewhere (Polizzi & Draper,

2013), the hermeneutic crust remains intact without openness to possibility. Presaging our

argument by more than one hundred years, Kierkegaard back in the in 1840s and 50s

argued that possibility remains even in the direst of circumstances, even unto death

(Kierkegaard, 1980). The hermeneutic crust, in this case, was the psychologist's re-

instantiation of the penitentiary, a system designed to preclude or foreclose possibility. He

interpreted George as a pedophile, a criminal, as a disgusting bad guy. Insofar as the

therapist perpetuated that interpretation, the crust would have remained, walling the

therapist from compassion. Even if the psychologist would have moved to help George

upon learning of his injury, he would have done so from the perspective of "you deserve

this." However, openness proves key here.

From this perspective of embodied dialogue, compassion requires a willingness to co-

be with another, an openness to their Being. This openness does not necessarily imply

harmony, however; nor does it guarantee an outcome that either party would like.

Likewise, openness exists on a continuum moment to moment both within and across

meetings (Polizzi & Draper, 2013). This may be humbling for the psychologist to learn that

his openness to George's injury does not guarantee his compassion or understanding in

future meetings, because agency remains for both parties. Dialogically, "Bakhtin's work is

not perceived as immanent in the constitution of subjectivity: it is an attitude of 'facing' the

other in a dialogic relationship, a position of choice" (Erdinast-Vulcan, 2008, p. 45) and in

the ongoing dialogue each participant continually chooses their willingness to engage with,

or "face" the other.

In terms of their experience of the body and the experience of the meaning of relationships, many differences still exist between George and the psychologist, differences that simultaneously strengthen and divide in the dialogue (Baxter, 2004). In the moment of his compassion, however, he was open to George's trauma. Viscerally he could relate to George's pain, humiliation, and suffering, and dialogically understood the meaning of the blood and of the silence. Both connected him compassionately to George, and prompted his action. Had he remained closed off to George, then he would have felt no compassion, and nothing could have changed in his relationship with George. Change, from this perspective depends on the degree of finalized meanings that the therapist and George will employ and whether they elect to remain in the shared, embodied relationship and dialogue.

Recommendations for Forensic Psychotherapists

Compassionate empathy, from this dialogic phenomenological frame, seems a natural process of human relation. However, in the clinical treatment settings such empathy faces daily erosive forces. Some arise from the difficult nature of the population we treat. Hearing stories like George's, or other stories of trauma, crime, callousness, and man's inhumanity to man prompts some psychologists to withdraw from deeply relating, as the psychologist did with George. We withdraw to protect ourselves and our understanding of our world, to hold at arm's length those meanings which would trouble us and hence we hold apart those who express those meanings. The psychologist did so because George's embodied expressions entailed dissonant and difficult experiences for the psychologist to hear. To protect himself from the disgust and dissonance of hearing stories of abuse, the psychologist withdrew from the dialogue and maintained a monological relationship with George. He would not let himself go and lose himself in the emotionally dangerous dialogue, so he did not resonate empathically in an embodied way until George's assault when he felt the moral call to open himself compassionately to George's suffering.

The setting itself also potentially erodes compassion. From the parking lot inward every level strips humanity away and replaces it with objectification. The security checks and pat-downs, the bars, barbed wire, restricted movement, uniforms for officers and offenders, the distinctions in every symbol and sign between "us and them" or "good guys and bad guys" all finalize the parties involved and subtly or clearly indicate those deserving of compassion and those who are not. Psychologists can find themselves caught up in these distinctions and finalizations. For example, one of the authors worked with a therapist in prison who evaluated a suicidal patient and at first refused to put the patient in the hospital on watch because he suspected that the patient's cellmate was raping him. When our co-author asked him about that he responded "He's not really suicidal, he's just trying to get away from his cellmate who's probably f*cking him". When our co-author followed up by pointing out that forced non-consensual sex (rape) might make the patient suicidal, the therapist replied "he should have thought of that before he committed his crime" before finally relenting and placing the patient in the prison infirmary on suicide watch.

To prevent such callous interpretation of clients, we offer three recommendations for therapists in these difficult settings.

1. Understanding suffering as *their* suffering in the category of *Other*. When people suffer, our response should not be to suffer with them (it incapacitates our ability to help) but to respond compassionately to the suffering *they* feel (Draper, Green, & Faulkner, 209).

2. Self-awareness, checking-in, seeking for the motivation of the distance you feel. If you find yourself, as the psychologist did, distancing yourself from a patient, check in and search out the motivation for your closedness or distance (Polizzi & Draper, 2013). Ask yourself if the motivation is helpful and based on your open experience of the Other, or are you reacting to your closed-off opinion of the client? Practice openness, but not at the expense of safety.

3. Practicing the reduction, practicing the dialogue, even when difficult. The "reduction" in this sense is tuning in to what is really going on, what the Other means and what he says. Perform the reduction in your between-session processing relative to your own experience as well if you cannot do it in the moment. Once you have done so, embrace of the transcendent in the face of the immanent. The "transcendent" in this case, is the unfinalizeable possibility for Being that we all embody. There's so much more to our clients in potentiality and actuality than we can see (Polizzi & Draper, 2013). This gives us reason to try to remain open, and to hold out hope, even if thin at times.

These call for an understanding of humanity that includes possibility, even in opposition to necessity, a type of hope in the enterprise of psychotherapy and even in humanity as it were. That is, hope in the notion that change can be effected, which grants humans a degree of potential that enables action and thought leading to mutual understanding and the possibility of harmonious, meaningful relationships, even if it does not guarantee it. Our ethic toward our patients becomes compassionately and phenomenologically derived rather than springing from disembodied rationality (Mensch, 2001; Marx, 1992). Such compassion can prove healing in human relationships, which is what our goal should be in clinical forensics. We conclude with the eloquent words of Werner Marx, who stated:

> When this transformation by the healing force has established itself in both regards in an individual and, when his ethos has developed into the virtues of acknowledgment, compassion, neighborly love, and social sympathy, then this force must also be at work when we related to contexts of meaning and worlds, for the life that experiences meaning and world belong together (1992, p. 138).

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