

BETHLEM PAPERS

Art and the Other



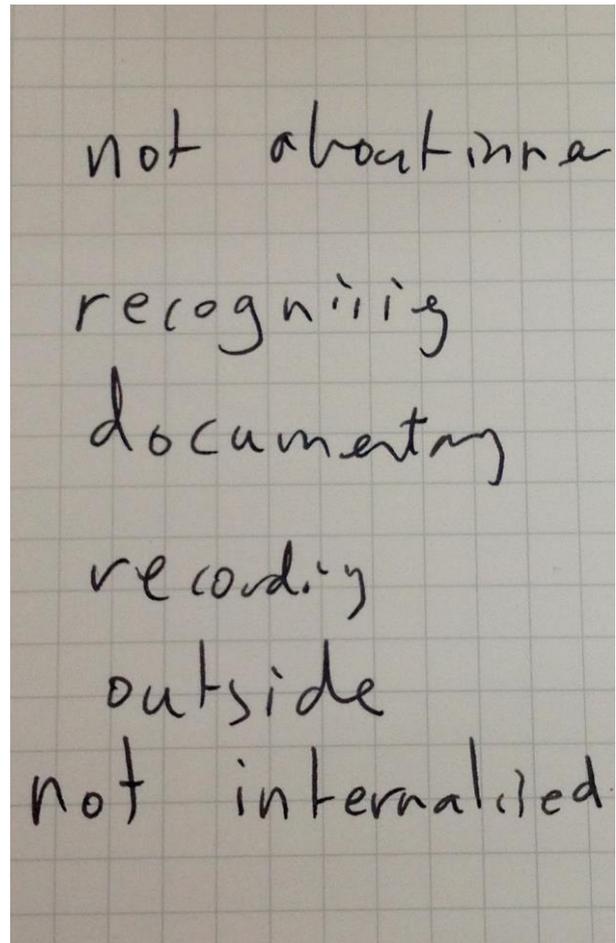
Untitled (detail), David Beales

'Art and the Other - on the ethics of otherness', was an event that took place as part of the Bethlem Salon Series. The series brings together artists, academics and clinicians to discuss themes that offer a unique insight into art production on the site of the psychiatric hospital.

On this occasion, the salon took the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as a starting point and discussed his ideas in relation to art, psychiatry, subjectivity and the ethics of relations with others.

Contributors:

David Beales (artist), Dr Juliette Brown (psychiatrist at East London NHS Trust), Dr Tania Gergel (visiting research fellow in Philosophy and Psychiatry, King's College London) and Dr Alana Jelinek (artist and senior researcher at the University of Cambridge).



Notebook (detail), David Beales

**"The other faces me
and puts me in
question and
obliges me."**

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

JULIETTE BROWN

In January 2015, I took part in a discussion on 'Art and the Other', linking psychiatry, the practice of artists working at South London and Maudsley, the practice of ethics in art, and the phenomenology of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. My contribution was a discussion on common approaches to understanding the experience of mental illness, and the potential challenges to these that lies in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, based on a more ethical approach of self to other. From that discussion has stemmed an exhibition of work by some of those artists themed around the Other in the form of the external object. Some of the thoughts that structured our discussion earlier this year are outlined here:

Often, in mental illness, one's own experience of self and others shifts markedly, becomes alien to one's own past experience, and to reality as it is experienced by others. Furthermore, the experience of having been mentally ill itself creates a sense of difference from others. In a world in which sameness is a virtue, this produces its own set of debilitating conditions. As both philosophy and psychiatry are fundamentally concerned with the nature of reality and our experience of it, what can we continue to learn from the philosophical inquiry into the nature of human experience that might influence the practice of psychiatry?

The guiding influence of phenomenological philosophy on psychiatry is the work of Karl Jaspers whose aim in the 1913 *General Psychopathology* was to foreground the subject's experience. He argued against interpretation, but proposed that it is possible to represent as 'familiar' the mental state of the subject. Psychic life 'becomes an object to us through that which makes it perceptible' (Jaspers). Based on empathy, the approach assumes sameness. From the perspective of post-colonial and post-structuralist theory with regard difference, this is a problematic imposition. Influenced by Heidegger, Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas produced a wholly different approach to the other (not limited to those in mental distress).

Writing 40 years later in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Levinas talks of a foundational un-ethics in ontological philosophy. Relations with the other are based on an assumed sameness. For Levinas, the other is unknowable and cannot be made into an object of the self. As a task, responsibility for recognising this unknowable nature of the other is the foundation of ethics, precedes wisdom and is the basis of one's own subjectivity, meaning and purpose.

In the work we do as psychiatrists and patients, can we find something in Levinas that helps us re-frame a joint endeavour? Levinas re-distributes difference, refutes the assumption of sameness across all and any interaction. Alterity, our presence as objectively other from the other, limits each of our freedom to enact our interpretation, to reduce one to the other, to digest individual subjectivities but also presents us with a privileged face to face encounter. Realising as much, I cannot honestly subject you to the same interpretational violence, which is regardless of the degree of empathy I have or how closely my interpretation meets your experience. When I shift the responsibility to you to navigate the interpretations I make of you, I place the same burden that is placed on all who are markedly othered in our societies. The possibility in Levinas is that we recognise all human interaction as alien, both intimate and distant, and we establish a more profoundly ethical stance on which to begin the work of communication.

Questions remain about how those who are troubled by altered realities should communicate their experience? And, how should we who are tasked with supporting recovery best attempt to understand and interpret those communications? Can we move away from sameness as a virtue and as an assumed quality, and toward a greater recognition of difference approached ethically? And would a greater understanding of the unknowableness of the other more broadly help to remove some of the stigma from the mentally ill? To date we have tackled stigma by denying difference (normalising) or emphasising difference (pleading tolerance). Levinas extends difference, offering an alternative option.

TANIA GERGEL

Human beings understand the world and other people through our own eyes, and find it harder to relate and feel moral obligation to those whom we perceive as truly different in nature or beliefs. Levinas, by contrast, views the irreducible 'otherness' of other people as the basis of our ethical responsibility towards them, and suggests that we should accept 'otherness', rather than trying to reduce it and interpret it on our own terms.

A dominant approach to psychiatric stigma is to highlight the similarities between the experience of mental disorder and 'well' or 'ordinary' human behaviour, in the hope that prejudice and discrimination will fade if people can see mental disorder as an extension of 'well' or 'ordinary' human behaviour. Stigma is 'a characteristic that individuals possess (or are believed to possess) that conveys a social identity that is devalued, or a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person' (Thorncroft). In other words, when we stigmatise, we mark someone off as having an unacceptable 'otherness' which alleviates us of our moral responsibility towards them.

Anti-stigma strategies which emphasise the biological differences within mental disorder may incite fear of otherness. In theory, an anti-stigma campaign which emphasises sameness should avoid these problems. However, 'continuum' type models which portray mental disorder as just an extreme reaction to ordinary stresses risk pushing us towards moral condemnation. For, we may then revert to the belief that those with mental disorder are simply those people without the moral strength to withstand pressure like 'ordinary' people. So, mental disorder creates a stigmatising difference either based on fear ('unlikeness-based' stigma) or blame ('likeness-based' stigma).

Perhaps we need to accept that, however one looks at it, mental illness, like any condition, sets aside those who experience it from those who do not. If we can dispel the false beliefs about where these differences come from and what their consequences might be, we can move towards a more Levinas-based approach, in which this 'otherness' like any other becomes not a basis for fear or disgrace, but for moral obligation.

ALANA JELINEK

An encounter with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is a poetic encounter. While it may be true that most philosophers offer a challenging and arduous read, in the case of Levinas, it is not so much a tortuous journey of logic but an emotional demand that creates in the reader a profound new understanding. I will not pretend there is one single way to interpret Levinas, though I do believe there are many dubious and incorrect ways of reading him (or anything else). Here I offer my interpretation not only of the philosophy of Levinas, but more importantly perhaps, how we may apply it in the everyday.

Levinas believes that all of (Western) knowledge is built on the foundations of ancient Greek epistemology. In itself, this is fairly uncontentious as historians acknowledge our indebtedness to ancient Greek culture for concepts such as democracy, science, art, maths and architecture. What Levinas uniquely points out is that all of this knowledge is predicated on specific ancient Greek assumptions, which have set in train great fault lines in our understanding, and therefore in every aspect of our culture and our knowledge. By implication, these fault lines also exist in our attitudes and behaviours. Levinas points out that the ancient Greeks had a horror of the Other. This Other included other cultures, other ways of life and ways of seeing, and the other gender, woman. Woman was perceived as a faulty, incorrect, maimed version of Man. Similarly other cultures were similarly perceived as faulty, incorrect and barbarous or maimed. Importantly, the obverse was also true: for the ancient Greeks, there was an assumption that all within the ancient Greek brotherhood are the same. It was a culture of *philia*. For Levinas, it is this assumption of sameness and not just the subjugation of otherness as substandard forms that lies at the heart of the problem. In short, the foundational problem of our ancient Greek-based culture is that we imagine that the other is the same as our self.

In defiance of our ancient Greek inheritance, Levinas challenges us to engage with the other as Other. Moreover, we are to form ethical engagements with the other as an Unknowable Other and have encounters that are predicated on the profound truth of this unknowableness. At best, I may know myself but I cannot expect others to know me. I am Other to them, just as they are Other to me. If we begin our encounters from this basis, we may have an ethical engagement.

For me, I have taken up this challenge and attempt to encounter both human others and non-human others as essentially unknowable and therefore to engage with all ethically. As an artist, I have tried to make this Levinasian ethic central in one particular location: The Field. The Field is an artwork and a place where art may be located. It is an ancient woodland and grassland near Stansted airport, Essex and an invitation to engage with each other, the humans and non-human others, as Other.

BIOGRAPHIES

David Beales, artist

David Beales studied art at Croydon School of Art before he was admitted to psychiatric hospital. He has painted and drawn pictures of the old asylums and the world of the care in the community patient. He has written 'The Road to the Asylum', a study of some of the alienated outsiders in London who were patients on the psychiatric wards.

Dr Juliette Brown, psychiatrist at East London NHS Trust

Dr Juliette Brown is a Specialist Registrar in General Adult and Older Adult Psychiatry at East London NHS Foundation Trust. She completed undergraduate study in English Literature at Leeds and a Masters in Gender at Birkbeck and wrote on art before studying Medicine at St George's. She has published on Kristeva and has an interest in continental philosophy as it relates to experiences of and understanding of mental illness. In 2014/15 she is Darzi Fellow in Clinical Leadership at UCL Partners.

Dr Tania Gergel, visiting research fellow in Philosophy and Psychiatry, King's College London

Dr Tania Gergel came to King's in 1996 and became a lecturer in Classics and Ancient Philosophy after completing her doctorate on Plato. Following an extended career break, she re-joined Classics in 2011, as well as developing new research interests in philosophy of medicine and psychiatry through the Centre for Humanities and Health. She now works closely with clinicians from the Institute of Psychiatry and various Mental Health research committees, and her current research focuses on ethics, capacity and advance decision-making in psychiatry, as well as the more general applications of phenomenology within a medical context.

Dr Alana Jelinek, artist and senior researcher at the University of Cambridge

Alana Jelinek has been a practicing artist for 25 years, exhibiting both nationally and internationally. Her recent and ongoing participatory work, The Field (2008-ongoing) is an art experiment in Levinasian ethics and she has written about the challenges in engaging the other as Other, including both human and non-human other. Her PhD was in 'Art as a Democratic Act' (Oxford Brookes University 2004-2008) and she is currently working at the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge on knowledge, collections and their interpretations.

A New Admission

"And he will have to stay here?" the relative asks the doctor, while a couple of patients look on knowingly.

DAVID BEALES

bethlem
gallery



Maudsley Charity
Health in Mind