**The fundamental violence of physiotherapy: Emmanuel Levinas’s critique of ontology and its implications for physiotherapy theory and practice**

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<https://www.openphysiojournal.com/article/the-fundamental-violence-of-physiotherapy-emmanuel-levinass-critique-of-ontology-and-its-implications-for-physiotherapy-theory-and-practice/>

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Reviewers:

Anna Rajala (AR)

<https://www.openphysiojournal.com/review/review-rajala-the-fundamental-violence-of-physiotherapy-emmanuel-levinass-critique-of-ontology-and-its-implications-for-physiotherapy-theory-and-practice/>

Dorothee Holscher (DH)

<https://www.openphysiojournal.com/review/review-holscher-the-fundamental-violence-of-physiotherapy/>

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| **Section** | **Reviewer’s comment** | **Response** |
| **Main philosophical / content issues** | | |
|  | AR: More explicit explanation of what is meant / what the authors mean by violence. From ‘General comments’: It would also be helpful to explain violence more before going into the physiotherapy-specific topics.  DH (from Levinas brief intro section): you explain the extent to, and ways in which, Levinas’ writing was influenced by the rise and terror of Nazism and the pull it had on important intellectuals of this time, particularly Heidegger. However, in the remainder of the paper you do not then proceed to interrogate to what extent and in what ways the violence that characterizes physiotherapeutic relationships relates to the kind of violence that informed Levinas’s philosophy. Conversely, should you feel that these different types and scale of violence have little or nothing in common, you might want to justify why Levinas’ work is relevant regardless. In other words, in what ways might a violation of the Other by rendering them knowable be linked to the Holocaust? What, if any, is the nature of the relationship between the Holocaust on the one hand and the forms of violence perpetrated by well-intentioned physiotherapists on the other? | The entire ‘thematisation’ section was edited to address this issue and make it more readable, both in line with reviewer’s comments. This was to simplify and slightly expand our explanation of the fundamental violence of thematisation and how we apply it in our critique of physiotherapy in the following sections. The topic is also picked up again in the section on ‘philo foundations’, ‘aims’, ‘diagnosis’ and ‘prof identity’ to reconnect them to the critique of violence more explicitly again and continue broadening its explanation. |
|  | AR: Does Levinas think there is a way out of ontological violence? Perhaps the authors might think about making it clear that in Levinas’ terms there is no way out of the fundamental violence in order not to give the impression to the readers that the problem is somehow solvable (from ‘toward an otherwise’ section; this is also where this question is mainly touched in a number of formulations) | This issue was addressed through a range of edits to the ‘Towards and otherwise physiotherapy’ section to which it relates most strongly. We have felt that dealing with this question in detail would involve a fairly extensive discussion beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, we decided to briefly and broadly lay out the spectrum of arguments in this debate and position our focus (in this article) in relation to it more clearly. With additional edits and more explanation, the idea of letting-go as a practice and how it is applied to our different practical foci here as an attempt at mitigating that fundamental violence (rather than undoing it) should now be clearer. |
|  | Something about the limits of the applicability of Levinas. In ‘Prof Identity’ and ‘Towards’ sections. Most specifically related to limitations posed by healthcare systems and professional contexts on practicing otherwise. | The issue raised here was addressed in the introductory, ‘background’ section to this article through a range of edits and the addition of two paragraphs at its end that explain our position in relation to it. This positioning has also guided a range of smaller edits in the sections ‘professional identity’ and ‘towards…’ where it is primarily raised, as well as where we point to future research in the conclusion. |
| **Writing style, referencing, edits (by section)** | | |
| General | AR: There are a few typos and missing words that can be easily handled in the final proof reading.  AR: Are semicolons in lists necessary?  AR: In general, I wish to see more precision in choosing words and using quotes.  I would suggest engaging with assigning authorship to quotations more frequently (not all the time, but when there might be an ambiguity about who is speaking).  AR: Some more signposting and clarifying, shortening sentences.  AR: I also suggest the authors avoid expressions such as “one of the greats” or “the great Continental philosopher” (comment from Thematisation section)  DH: In your article, you refer to physiotherapy’s “others” as “patients”, but at times also as “clients”, but never as, for example, “service users”. These terms, of course, are also labels that categorise, limit and to the extent that they do, also violate. Against this background, I want to suggest that you include some explication (possibly also some rethinking) of the terminology used. | All of the comments in this section are addressed via the edits by section below. |
| Background | AR: “Beyond a few very brief forays … Levinas’s work still remains largely underexplored in physiotherapy …” It would be useful to offer refences to these works | References added. |
|  | AR: The overview for the article is very useful and it gives a clear picture of what is to come. The basic theses are also useful to have to guide readers. My only question is: why ‘basic theses’, why not just theses? | The term ‘basic’ was deleted in the respective sentence. |
|  | AR: rather than saying it is surprising that Levinas has not received much attention, I would express the importance of this work more explicitly here. | Changed according to reviewer’s suggestion |
|  | AR: In defining ontology, I would add that it is the study of the nature of existence and being, or the nature of reality. | Slight change made to wording to address this suggestion, albeit with a focus on simplifying the explanation of ontology and epistemology, rather than introducing ‘reality’ as an additional term that is not picked up anywhere else in the text. |
|  | AR: I would also like to problematise the use of “apply” and “application” in philosophy. … To my view, to apply something to something else glosses over the philosophical practice that happens in the “applying”, making it sound as simple and easy as plying one puzzle piece to fit with another resulting into an “application”. Rather than the result, what is important in critical philosophy is the process and practice. | DN: A good point, but beyond the scope of this study |
|  | AR: I would also suggest a rephrasing of the final statement about the authors’ hope: “Our hope is that this work highlights the critical need for a deeper engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly in relation to physiotherapy and its understanding and implementation of ethics that is so fundamental to its practice. [my emphasis]”. The statement would also be more effective if it would be expressed as an argument (adding a because-clause): The authors’ hope is that the work highlights the critical need for a deeper engagement with Levinas in physiotherapy and its ethics that is fundamental to it. | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
| Levinas-brief intro | AR: In quoting Fagenblat, it is not entirely clear that the pronoun in “his famous exposition of ‘ethics as first philosophy’” refers to Levinas, not Heidegger. In writing about Heidegger and how Levinas was shaken by his Nazi affiliation, the authors quote Critchley but it is not clear whether it is Critchley’s paraphrasing of Levinas or his interpretation on Levinas, or something else. The easiest way to solve this would be to assign authorship to Critchley: “Levinas simply could not understand, as Critchley explains, ‘how a philosopher as undeniably brilliant as Heidegger could have become a Nazi, for however short a time’.” | Both sentences were changed according to reviewer’s comments. |
|  | AR: I suggest that the authors be more precise on Bergson. The sentence now reads as “he was the most prominent luminary of modern philosophy of the 1920s” on which I do not entirely agree. | Changed according to reviewer’s comments. |
| Thematisation | AR: In the first paragraph, I suggest putting the Heidegger reference after “Being and Time”, rather than at the end of the paragraph, in which the authors give their own argumentation rather than Heidegger’s. | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
|  | AR: The longer Critchley quotation towards the end of this section, I suggest that the authors introduce it. Structurally, now they have a quotation after another without any contextualisation or connecting the quotations to each other. | The quote is now introduced according to the reviewer’s comments, alongside a few other suggested stylistic changes to the paragraph. |
|  | AR: In the first paragraph, it would be more useful to mention how Nazism influenced or didn’t influence Heidegger’s work (e.g. his black notebooks?), rather than “despite his affiliation, his philosophy is influential.” … If the authors have space, it would be more interesting to have the information about Heidegger’s controversial past in some more detail, rather than a reassurance that reading Heidegger is okay despite his affiliation. | We have made some changes to the first two paragraphs of this section according to the reviewer’s comments. The comment to Heidegger’s affiliation to Nazism was omitted from these paragraphs because this is already dealt with in the preceding section. In that place, a little more detail is also provided. We felt, however, that expanding on this in still more detail was beyond the scope of this article. |
|  | AR: In the second paragraph, there is some repetition: the authors have described ontology above, so they can omit “or the study of being” here to avoid repetition in “uncover the nature on ‘being’ (Sein) …” | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
|  | AR: I would also combine the first two paragraphs. | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
|  | AR: Towards the end of the section, the writing starts to fall apart a little. My suggestion for the whole section, which is heavily philosophical, is to think about how to make it more accessible: | Punctuation has been simplified, some sentences shortened and some divided. We have clarified who is speaking, and reviewed all quotations to make sure quotes are used only when necessary and only when it supports what the authors are trying to say. |
|  | DH: This section is crucial for all the arguments that follow and as such, I would find it important to ensure that it is as easily accessible as possible to an audience that might well be unfamiliar with Levinas’ work. To this end, I would recommend that you revise this section with a view to reducing somewhat the number of direct quotes and further translating your summaries, paraphrases and interpretations of the original work into everyday language. | To make this section more readable, we have made changes to this section in line with reviewer’s comments. |
| Fundamental violence | AR: Shortening the opening sentence to invite readers to keep reading along | Change according to reviewer comments |
| Philosophical foundation | AR: The beginning sentence here is again structurally complex, perhaps it might help to switch the order around? | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
|  | AR: In saying that “Levinas’s work … goes much further than these in arguing that positivism leaves no room for difference…” … It would be clearer to say that, rather than Levinas challenging positivism in physiotherapy, it is the authors who challenge positivism in physiotherapy thinking through Levinas’ critique of ontology. | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
|  | DH: as not all readers may be entirely familiar with the concept and practices of phenomenology, you might want to provide at least some explication. Moreover, while Levinas critiqued phenomenology, your critique appears focused on physiotherapy as a predominantly positivist science and practice. Given that phenomenology developed, at least in part, as a response to positivist sciences, it would make sense to make more explicit the logic by which you apply Levinas work to contemporary physiotherapy.  AR: When the authors use “Western philosophy” I think they are using it in the sense that Levinas uses it. … I would not go so far as to say that biomedicine is based upon Western philosophy, rather, it is based on the positivistic/objectivistic assumptions of post-Enlightenment philosophy. Perhaps the authors could frame “Western philosophy” in Levinas’ terms. … In other words, the authors need to be careful of not conflating Western philosophy and positivism, because positivism is essentially what they are criticising, not the whole of Western philosophy (without further qualification). | Changes to the early paragraphs of this section have been made in line with this and other comments by the reviewer, while preceding sections frame Western philosophy in Levinas’s terms (ie. as ontology, with primary reference to Heidegger). An additional paragraph was added in the middle of this section that further explains how Levinas’s critique of phenomenology equally extends to positivism without substantial difference. |
|  | Also AR: The final paragraph (of philo foundations of PT section) could be clearer. This is where the authors bring their argumentation to the fore, so they would have to make sure it is accessible. All in all, the argumentation in this section is sound, but I would like to see more explicit argumentation on violence. My suggestion is to work on the final paragraph to make sure, again, that the important message is accessible to a wider audience, not just those already interested in philosophical writing. | The final paragraph was changed into three smaller paragraphs in an effort to make it more readable and more closely related to the exposition of violence in the preceding section. |
| Aims of PT | AR: I would use “has been argued” rather than “has been shown” to challenge (perhaps covertly popping up in our language; the positivistic or empiricist assumptions of physiotherapy research | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
|  | AR: In the second paragraph, I think the final sentence is the author’s argumentation, but there is a reference to WHO at the end. | The reference was deleted, and all terms derived from the reference in the preceding sentences highlighted in italics. |
|  | AR: This section could again benefit from addressing violence explicitly: both “maximum movement” and “complete physical, mental and social well-being” and universalizing all bodies in a Procrustean manner via quantification and making bodies equivalent/exchangeable are exactly the kind of violence the authors have addressed, however, it would be helpful to state this to remind the reader (the one perhaps new to different concepts of violence) that these practices are fundamentally ontologically violent to otherness. Perhaps signposting might again help.  AR: Compared to the previous section on philosophical foundations, it is more difficult to draw out the point the authors are making in this section. It might be helpful to clarify what is it that the authors are arguing?  DH: the last paragraph (from “More specifically, physiotherapy’s aim …” to the end of the section) is quite compact and abstract. Could you unpack this a bit more? | The entire section was edited to clarify the argument and relation to the reductive, limiting violence of thematisation. |
| Theory and practice of diagnosis | AR: I suggest that when the authors quote, it is always beneficial trying to find the original source. → The Kierkegaard quotation | Changed to better reflect our reference |
|  | AR: I would expand the discussion here, perhaps looking at the glossary definition of EBP by the WCPT that addresses client/patient characteristics, preferences, and situations. Or looking at something else, but I would argue that the case is stronger if the authors had an object of criticism here from which they draw their argument (which I think is valid, but could be supported better). | This was not addressed as we felt that further expanding the discussion here was beyond the scope of this article |
|  | DH: At the end of paragraph 2 (starting with “The issue with these diagnostic labels …”), you state that “… the act of diagnosis itself may be seen, paradoxically as…”  “…diametrically opposed to ‘the ethical foundation of medicine’…” My question is: which ethical foundations of medicine is the act of diagnosis diametrically opposed to? In what ways? Further, if brief, explication of this claim would be needed.  “… the supposed aim of physiotherapy to maximise movement…” This claim is confusing. Why is this only a supposed aim? I thought maximising movement is in fact physiotherapy’s explicit aim?  DH: Similarly, in the last paragraph of this section it remains unclear exactly how labels and categories serve to immobilise and incapacitate patients. Given the importance of this claim in your overall argument, I recommend that you carefully explicate this point.  AR: Diagnostic practice doesn’t have to be labelling in physiotherapy … I think there is more to the problematic than thinking diagnoses in terms of labels, perhaps the authors might address this a bit more? | The entire section was edited to account for these comments. A brief explanation for the notion of the ethical foundation of medicine was provided by linking it back to ideas explained in the preceding (aim of pt) section. This also made use of the term ‘supposed’ unnecessary in this place and hopefully provides for clearer reading. We have refrained from discussing other nuances of diagnostic practice to keep the focus on the specific point we have tried to make here and that keeps with the main narrative of this article. |
| Professional identity | DH: While I share your criticism of the idea of professional identity as a whole, I found myself perplexed nonetheless: the question of attributes to me seems debatable, for sure, but if not knowledge and skills, what would be their substitutes? Surely, competent practice is ethical practice? What would be the alternatives?  DH: Linked to this is the question of the professional context within which physiotherapists are staking their claims, in that the health sector is made up of competing professions. I think it would be important that a critique of the notions of professional identity – including physiotherapists’ particular claims to knowledge, skills and attributes – considers the very real dynamics that are at play in this field. After all jobs, relative authority and pay are at stake. Is it possible, that the ability of Levinas’ work to inform a critique of contemporary physiotherapy reaches its limits here? In other words, might this be a good place to critically engage with Levinas as well?  DH: Finally, I am not sure how the concluding sentence (from “… what remains as the broad, underpinning professional identity …” to “… we find the irreconcilable tension at the heart of the profession’s aim to ‘develop, maintain and restore people’s maximum movement’”) follows from the arguments presented in this section. Could you please re-look at this? | The entire section leading up to its concluding sentence, as well as the concluding sentence itself were edited to clarify the argument put forward in this section. |
| Towards an otherwise | AR: I would omit “Beyond its general value as a critical theory…” and simply begin with “The overarching implication…” | Changed according to reviewer’s comments |
|  | AR: “… in full recognition of the underlying harm they cause.” It would be clearer if the authors you used “violence” throughout, not to confuse readers. Using “harm” here might make people think that physiotherapy is doing only physical harm. | The sentence was changed to include both terms, both for consistency with the term violence, but also to juxtapose it with the minimisation of ‘harm’ that is so central to healthcare. |
|  | AR: The sentence “Not that this is particularly heroic, given that it is, in our case, an iatrogenic violence.” … Perhaps the whole sentence could be omitted, or the meaning clarified. | Changed to improve clarity |
|  | AR: My other worry is the question whether we can refrain from conscious knowing and doing? … What would a refraining from conscious doing and knowing look like? If we think in Levinasian terms, I don’t think there is a reconciliation in sight (again, I might be wrong, but I don’t think Levinas agrees with Hegel)? However, I agree that seeking to challenge our knowing and doing does constitute an otherwise practice.  A few sentences later: The final sentence also raises some questions: “letting go of our knowing and doing frees the other from the constraining grip of the self-same, and thus liberates the other to her fundamental, unknowable otherness.” This is difficult to grasp with the knowledge of Levinas provided in the beginning. It might be helpful to think about the audience, hopefully some of these questions help to clarify the passage: Can we simply let go of our knowing and doing? Does Levinas think such freedom can be attained? What does Levinas mean when he says the Other is unknowable? Why is it figurative?  AR: I’m not sure we have to choose between “traditional” and “otherwise” physiotherapy. Perhaps again thinking about some questions might help clarify the argumentation and convincing the reader: Are traditional and otherwise physiotherapy necessarily incompatible? Is it about “letting go” of our identity or critically “altering” it? … I think these questions address choice of words. I suggest thinking about precision in choosing words to avoid question begging.  AR: It might also be helpful to think about bringing in primary sources on Levinas to see what he says about whether it is possible or not to not being violent might help with rigour. | Because all of the points relate to the questions of whether or not the fundamental violence can be avoided, we have grouped all of these points together and addressed them via edits to this section as outlined in relation to main philosophical question (1). |
|  | DH: Some of the issues raised above resurface here. Thus, in paragraph 1, you say that “… Levinas’ critique … underscores the extent to which physiotherapy may … immobilise otherness, rather than liberating it.” Up to this point, it remains unclear to me exactly how, against the goal of maximum movement, otherness can be liberated. So given its importance to the possible solutions and recommendations you want to present here, I think this point needs better development in the preceding sections. | We have made extensive edits to the entire sections to clarify our argument, signposting and linking every point made to our initial exposition of ‘thematisation’ more clearly. With additional edits to this section we have additionally tried to clarify how we might think about liberating otherness and try to do so, as much as that is possible. |
|  | DH: Similarly, at the end of paragraph 1, you say that physiotherapeutic practices “… achieve colonisation and containment of the other, rather than mobilisation”. This claim, too, would require some building-up to. | The terms colonization and containment were deleted from this sentence and the entire section edited to follow the thread of our main argument and terminology more consistently. |
|  | DH: I wonder if you shouldn’t at least acknowledge some of the forms of violence in contemporary health systems that would make difficult the application of your propositions in practice. You may not need to resolve these concerns entirely but could at least acknowledge them. And of course, the question arises again: does the applicability of Levinas reach its limits here?  DH: Considering such possible limitations and translating them into recommendations for further research, debate and practice might indeed strengthen your work. | See response to (2) in ‘main philosophical points’ |
| Conclusion | DH: Attending to my suggestions above would lead to some necessary revisions of the conclusions reached. | See response to (2) in ‘main philosophical points’ |

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