

LEVINAS' PROPHETIC ETHICS

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LEVINAS' PROPHETIC ETHICS:
HIS USE OF THE SOURCES OF JUDAISM

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to the discussion of two questions central to the scholarly study of the work of Emmanuel Levinas: the question of the nature of his hermeneutics, and the question of the nature of the relationship between his philosophy and his religion. The thesis consists of an extended examination of how and why Levinas reads certain of the sources of Judaism. I watch him utilizing images, ideas and quotations from the Bible, Kabbalah and Talmud in support of his larger philosophical project, a project which consists mainly of a polemic against modern ontology -- philosophical and political -- and against the hermeneutic of reification which supports that ontology. The Bible, Kabbalah and Talmud become, in Levinas' reading, weapons in a battle against Hegelianism, Nazi totalitarianism, and modern progressivist liberalism; or, more precisely, they come to represent ways of turning away from the battles these structures inscribe towards a prophetic peace.

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Bibliography of Works by Levinas and a Key to Abbreviations

- BTV *Beyond the Verse*. Trans. Gary D. Mole. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- CPP *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Trans. A. Lingis. *Phaenomenologica* 100, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.
- De l'évasion*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1982.
- DEHH *En decouvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1949.
- DF *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. S. Hand. London: The Athlone Press, 1990.
- EI *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. R. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982.
- EDM see footnote 181.
- EE *Existence and Existents*. Trans. A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978.
- EN *Entre Nous*. Trans. M.B. Smith and B. Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- GCM *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- LR *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- NTR *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Trans. A. Aronowicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- ITN *In the Time of Nations*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- OB *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.
- PL *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*. Eds. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- PN *Proper Names*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- RPH "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1990): 63-71.

- RK with Richard Kearney. "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas." *Face to Face with Emmanuel Levinas*. Ed. R. A. Cohen. New York: SUNY Press, 1986. 13-34.
- RM with Raoul Mortley. "Levinas." *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Scheieder, Seres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida*. London: Routledge, 1991. 10-23.
- TO *Time and the Other*. Trans. R. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.
- TI *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- TrO "The Trace of the Other." *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*. Ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 345-359.
- WO "Wholly Otherwise." *Rereading Levinas*. Ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 3-10.

Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas was born on January 12 1906¹ in Lithuania, a country where, as he explains, “Jewish culture was intellectually prized and fostered and where the interpretation of biblical texts was cultivated to a high degree” (RK 17). At home and in his secular schools he spoke Russian and read the great Russian novelists, but in addition he began at an early age to study Hebrew and to read the texts of the Jewish tradition; indeed, he describes his childhood as an immersion in the way of life of the Lithuanian Jew, a way which rested “in a tremendous curiosity for books.”² In 1915, when Levinas was eleven, the Jews of Lithuania were expelled by government decree and his family moved to the Ukraine. Here, despite the antisemitic pogroms which occurred during the general upheaval caused by the revolution, he was able to attend high school. By 1920, the revolutionary government had revoked the decree of expulsion and Levinas’ family returned to Lithuania where he finished his early schooling.

He left in 1923 for France, where he enrolled at the University of Strasbourg and studied under a number of professors, among them Charles Blondel. With Blondel he read Henri Bergson, who was probably his earliest philosophical influence: Levinas was impressed by Bergson’s theory of time and his reflections on technology. In the mid 1920s he became interested in Husserl and went to Freiburg to study with him for the academic

¹The confusion about his birthdate evident in his various obituaries results from the fact that Lithuania was at the time of his birth using the Julian calendar. His birthdate was therefore recorded as 30 December, 1905.

²Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas: Qui êtes-vous?* interview by François Poirié (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), 67; translated and quoted in Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 116. I have drawn mainly on Cohen’s biographical chapter for this short biographical sketch; Cohen, *Elevations*, 115-132.

year of 1928-29. There he also studied with Heidegger who had published *Being and Time* in 1927 and had thereby become “the leading light in German philosophy” (RK 14). He returned to France in 1930, this time to Paris, and completed his dissertation, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, under the tutelage of Jean Wahl. It was this book, together with a number of Levinas’ early articles and his 1931 translation (with Gabrielle Pfeiffer) of Husserl’s *Cartesian Mediations*, which, it is generally agreed, introduced phenomenology to France.

Beginning in 1930, Levinas taught at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an organization which had as its goal the spread of Jewish education in the countries of the Mediterranean. He married Rachel Levy, a friend from his childhood in Lithuania, and eventually had a daughter, Simonne (b. 1936) and a son, Michael (b. 1948). During the 1930s he occasionally attended lectures at the Sorbonne, those of Brunschvicg regularly and those of Kojève irregularly. He also attended Gabriel Marcel’s soirées. He began, in the early thirties, to write a book on Heidegger but abandoned it when Heidegger announced his support for the Nazi party, producing instead a short article called “Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” in which he began subtly to trace connections between the Heideggerian and Nazi comprehensions. Then, in 1935, he published the essay ‘*De l’évasion*,’ in which he took up for the first time what would become his lifelong question: whether it is possible, contra Heidegger and certain other philosophers, to think outside of ontology, or to ‘otherwise than be.’ Already, he was beginning to come to the idea that to think outside of ontology must be to think ethically first.

He fought for France in the war, serving as an interpreter of Russian and German, but was taken prisoner in 1940. Because the Nazis treated Jews who were army officers under the laws of the Geneva convention, he spent the rest of the war in a labour camp in Germany for French POWs. There he wrote the bulk of *Existence and Existents*, which further describes his movement away from ontology and begins to make use of the idea of

the Good Beyond Being. Levinas' parents and their family, still in Lithuania, were killed in an early Aktion, but Maurice Blanchot -- who had been his closest friend since the Strasbourg days and remained so for the rest of his life -- arranged to have his wife and daughter hidden and cared for in the monastery of Saint Vincent de Paul near Orleans for the duration of the war. When Levinas was released he rejoined them and went to work for a branch of the Alliance, the Oriental Israelite Normal School, of which he was appointed Director in 1947. He continued to pursue the philosophical question of how one might move beyond being; in 1946, Jean Wahl invited him to give the series of lectures, later published as *Time and the Other*, in which he rethought human relation as a function of temporal lapse. In addition, he became seriously interested for the first time in Jewish thought. The awakening of this interest which had previously been "latent -- I might even say dormant" (RK 18) is attributable to his acquaintance with "the prestigious and merciless" (DF 291) R. Mordachai Chouchani, who taught him Talmud and other texts between 1947 and 1951. In 1960 Levinas gave his first talmudic lecture to the Colloquium of French Jewish Intellectuals and gave another almost every year for thirty years; all of his talmudic interpretations are offered, he explains, "in the shadow of [Chouchani's] shadow" (RK 18).³ In 1961, he published *Totality and Infinity*. He was awarded the *doctorat d'état* with this text as primary thesis and the bulk of his previously published work as secondary thesis. He was offered a professorship at the University of Potiers, and then in 1967 at the University of Paris--Nanterre, and then in 1973 at the Sorbonne.

This is as far as Levinas sketches his life in the catalogue of deeds which opens the autobiographical essay "Signature" (DF 291-5). What happens afterwards is more difficult to lay out; his doings are those of the mind, and an account of them would require at the very least an exegesis of *Totality and Infinity* and an explanation of its relation to his second

³Levinas never, or almost never, used Chouchani's name. Elie Wiesel, another student, says in his description of Chouchani that he did not even know the man's name. Elie Wiesel, "The Wandering Jew" chap. in *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston 1968), 87-109.

great book, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, published in 1974 -- tasks I do not intend to take on. Levinas wrote a great deal during the '60s, '70s and '80s, largely perhaps because he received a great number of invitations to speak. A complete bibliography of his work would include more than four hundred entries. In addition, he traveled in a wide circle: among others he knew Sartre, de Beauvoir, Hyppolite, Ricoeur, Marcel, Maritain, Derrida -- in effect, the whole intellectual community of Paris. His influence on many of those he knew and on their students is considerable, although its extent cannot properly be determined for several more decades; in short, he introduced to French philosophy the idea of the other as the rupture of the same, the idea which was to become the foundation of late modern and postmodern continental thought.⁴ He died on December 25, 1995, about a year after the death of his wife. Their daughter, a doctor, and their son, a pianist and composer, are still living.⁵

*

As all students of Levinas know, it is easy to speak about his thought using his language but difficult to translate the core of that thought into common speech. The first of many problems an interpreter faces is simple: where to begin? Levinas' ideas are interconnected; none of his concepts can be grasped in isolation. He himself writes in a style that might be called 'provisional,' introducing ideas and rubrics which, at the moment of their introduction, can only partially be understood; they are later modified and modified again. My preliminary examinations must likewise be understood as provisional; my initial account of any given movement in Levinas' thought is, to use one of his phrases, 'not my word of honour.' Nevertheless, each one will provide a foothold from which to move

⁴For a definitive analysis of continental philosophy as founded on the interaction of same and other, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. J.-M. Scott-Fox and J.-M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁵This account of the life may be fleshed out by a consultation of Levinas' "Signature" in *Difficult Freedom* (291-5); Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997); and the chapter from Cohen, *Elevations* mentioned in note #2.

forward.

The intent of this thesis is to watch Levinas reading certain of the foundational texts of the Jewish tradition in an effort to determine how he reads and why he reads the way he does. We watch him read certain verses of the Bible, certain motifs of the Kabbalah, a discrete collection of passages from the Talmud, and, finally, certain broken tales, images or aftereffects of the Nazi period. And we see that he reads them all in a particular way, a way which is almost devoid of historical concerns but is deeply philosophical and deeply ethical, a way of reading the goal of which is to tell the truth, or rather the *truths*, of human existence in relation.

The truths rather than the truth. This is to say, first, that Levinas tries to conceive of beings in terms more foundational than those of the fixed structures of the comprehensions he designates as ‘ontologies’ -- comprehensions which try to subordinate individuals to larger categories -- and, second, analogously, that he tries to conceive of persons in terms more foundational than those of the egalitarian or hierarchical groupings necessary to political thought or public action. In short, he tries to think as much as possible of a given being before thinking of the whole of being and its parts, or of the existent before existence. And for him this means thinking of the other before the self, which is to say, thinking ethically. Thinking of the other before the self is his route out of ontology because, according to the structures of his thought, the respect for the infinite uniqueness of the human being which breaks the certainty or priority of one’s categorizations and groupings cannot arise for the autonomous subject, but comes to the subject only from the otherness of the other. Levinas’ philosophical writings consist largely, then, of trackings back from a great many different manifestations of ontology, categorization, classification, unity, truth, coherence, sameness -- in short, from all the varieties of what he calls totality -- to a fundamental point in which ‘totality breaks up,’ in which we are called by the other to

ethical responsibility.⁶ He seeks always to move back out of the historical, theoretical, 'interested' self with its conception of truth as a graspable totality to this prior 'dis-interest' -- or from the indifferent self tied up in itself to this prior 'non-indifference' -- and, subsequently, to draw a connection between this prior dis-interest or non-indifference and what stands outside of the dominant ontological modes of thought and outside of political forms, that is to say, the human being who can 'otherwise than be' and the Good Beyond Being, the God who is never present in time or space but appears only in the response to his command. And to show others that movement is the challenge he sets himself.

In a sense he is not tremendously successful. As part of his trackings back, Levinas offers an account of human relation in which the ethical impulse always precedes the selfish or murderous impulse; an account, moreover, in which this prior impulse bespeaks an

⁶It is because of these trackings *back* that Levinas can be called a phenomenologist. Despite his arguments with Husserlian intentional phenomenology, he retains from the phenomenological method its basic aim: to move back from structures of representation or form to what is behind them and gives rise to them (see TI 21). He rejects Husserl only insofar as Husserl does not complete the phenomenological work, instead resting in the knowledge that the subject becomes master of what he senses. Thus, as Susan Handelman puts it, "Husserl's idealist pure consciousness . . . represents the object to itself as a pure present, proceeding from the same and foreclosing alterity and temporality." Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 189. Whether this judgment (i.e. Levinas' judgment) of Husserl is legitimate or not is a subject I will not take up. See TI 122-6 for an extended discussion of phenomenology.

Other terms, might also be applied. 'Empiricism' is certainly possible. Rosenzweig calls his philosophy an "absolute empiricism"; later, Levinas mentions this in one of his essays on Rosenzweig; later still, Derrida playfully charges Levinas with empiricism. See Franz Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," in *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (2nd ed., New York: Schocken, 1961), 179-213, 207; DF 188; Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," chap. in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-153, 151-2. But empiricism -- and this is the substance of Derrida's charge -- still carries the cast of ontology.

Alternatively, because of Levinas' focus on experience, one might call him an existentialist, but, like everyone to whom the term has been applied except Sartre, Levinas rejects it, mainly in an effort to disassociate himself from Kierkegaard (see TI 40), but also because he is critical of philosophies of experience (see DEHH 177; TI 109, 196; CPP 59).

See also Cohen, *Elevations*, 274-286, where he argues, on the basis of Levinas' rejection of Husserl, that his philosophy should technically be termed "an ethical overloading of phenomenology;" and Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics?: Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), in which he argues that Levinas gradually abandons phenomenology for a variety of semiotics. I think it likely that Levinas would reject any term for his philosophy which ended with the suffix -ology or -ism, implying certain knowledge or a static position. But, keeping this in mind, I continue to use term phenomenology, for the reasons stated at the beginning of this note.

extraordinary responsibility by which the subject finds herself⁷ called to preserve the otherness of the other even at the cost of her bread and breath; an account, to cap all, in which this always prior ethical impulse represents the trace of the absent God. Many readers find these descriptions inadequately supported by evidence; indeed, Levinas' ethics must almost certainly appear naive to people who are persuaded by evidence and only by evidence. But Levinas himself is not a devotee of evidence. He shows his movement back by walking through it; his philosophy is fundamentally appeal, an offering up of ideas for the taking. He does not intend to impress us with the facticity of his understanding, but rather with its ethical nature. Indeed, to say, as Levinas often does, that 'ethics is first philosophy' is to make an ethical statement rather than a factual or logical statement; more precisely, to say that 'ethics is first philosophy' is quite simply to perform an ethical act. Thus, insofar as I defend Levinas in this thesis, I do not attempt to adduce proof for his

⁷Levinas always uses the male pronoun to refer to the human being in general in its function as the subject and *almost* always uses the male pronoun to describe the other, i.e. the one whom the subject meets. The points at which he refers to the other as female are specific descriptions of what he understands to be feminine aspects of the other, e.g. that aspect which is the home-maker, the lover, or the mother. This usage gives his work a cast of masculinity which offends some commentators; it is now, therefore, quite common to use the female pronoun ubiquitously in descriptions of Levinas' thought. I have not done this, but instead have adopted a strategy similar to Levinas' own, referring to the subject with the female pronoun (since I am female), and the other with the male pronoun (to emphasize an aspect of his difference from me or from the subject). Like Levinas, I do not wish these usages to be taken too literally. He writes:

Perhaps . . . all these allusions to the ontological differences between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or into two sexes), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and the feminine were the attribute of every human being. Could this be the meaning of the enigmatic verse of Genesis 1:27, "male and female created He them"? (EI 68-9)

For an extended account of some recent feminist articles on Levinas see Cohen, *Elevations*, 195n.1. Cohen documents the charges brought against Levinas by feminists, following Simone de Beauvoir's attack on him in 1949 and Derrida's assertion, made in 1967, that "it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that [*Totality and Infinity*] could have been written by a woman" -- and, later, the various feminist defenses of Levinas. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), xix; Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 320-1n.92. Four interesting texts (besides Derrida's) on Levinas and feminism which Cohen does not discuss (or does not do justice to) are: Geraldine Finn, "The Space Between Ethics and Politics" in *Who is This 'We'?*, eds. E.M. Godway and G. Finn (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994), 101-116; Michael Oppenheim, *Speaking/ Writing of God: Jewish Philosophical Reflections on the Life with Others*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); Catherine Chalié, *Figures du féminin: Lecture d'Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: La Nuit Surveillée, 1982); and Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," trans. Margaret Whitford, in *Rereading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 109-118.

ethics drawn from experience or to display in the ethics an analytic coherence. Rather I pronounce myself persuaded. In other words, I suggest that we consider his ideas seriously because they offer ethical address to the philosophical and political falsehoods and perversions of our age.

This is not to say that Levinas is as critical of falsehoods and perversions as is sometimes made out. Admittedly, he regularly expresses his ideas as a critique of all, or almost all, of the Western philosophy (and theology) which precedes him; in fact, he takes this pose so often that one commentator, Richard Cohen, defines it as one of the two basic aspects of Levinas' work, the 'negative' or 'critical' aspect as opposed to the positive description of ethical responsibility. "Negatively," Cohen writes, "[Levinas] opposes the primacy which philosophy quite naturally accords to ontological . . . interests, the hegemony to which it raises the quest for truth," and Cohen continues by telling us that "basically the West is a will to truth, the quest for universal knowledge of the real, [i.e. for] reason," a quest with which Levinas wants little to do.⁸ But this way of understanding Levinas, although true enough to the way he sometimes speaks, is not fruitful. For the West is, in actuality, *not* a will to ontological truth. Levinas himself finds the otherwise than being in the Old and New Testaments, in the rabbinic texts, in Plato, in Augustine, in the Pseudo-Dionysius, in Descartes, in Kant, in Dostoyevsky, in Bergson and perhaps even, to some extent, in Heidegger.⁹ Robert Bernasconi is correct to point out that "Levinas

⁸Cohen, *Elevations*, 121-123.

⁹Levinas speaks often of the otherwise in Plato and Descartes; they are mentioned in a list which also includes Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius in RK 25, but see also CPP 62 for Plato and CPP 159-61 for Descartes. That he finds the otherwise in the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic writings is uncontroversial, and his mentions of it in the New Testament are also fairly frequent, see for instance RK 27. Robert Bernasconi adds Kant, Bergson and Heidegger to the list in R. Bernasconi, "Scepticism in the Face of Philosophy" in *Rereading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, 149-161, 152. Among these additions, Heidegger is the most dubious, for ultimately his philosophy is, according to Levinas, deeply ontological. Kant is less dubious; on the correlations between Levinas and Kant see Lyotard, "Levinas' Logic" in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 275-313; and see also OB 129. Bergson is mentioned frequently by Levinas as having laid the ground for an a-ontological position in his conception of time; see RK 13, TO 132. Adriaan Peperzak adds to the list, in his own name, Plotinus and Bonaventure, thus redeeming the central thrust of Christian mysticism along with

is at his weakest when he sets himself up against . . . philosophy in general, [and] at his most penetrating when he finds the otherwise than being within philosophy”¹⁰ -- to which we may add, *also within theology*. The strong or ‘penetrating’ Levinas does not criticize everything that came before him. In fact, he does not even criticize all forms of totality or ontology. This must be understood before one can proceed to find out where Levinas’ real critique lies and at what it is directed.

Levinas is concerned to combat certain ways of reading and thinking prevalent in our age, ways which, as he puts it, ‘prevent speech.’ These ways constitute a basic catalogue of reductivist rubrics --ideologies, sociologies, psychologies, politicizations, historicisms, dialectical structures, orders of being, theologies -- all of which share the basic characteristic of subsuming the individual into a scheme or categorization from which she is understood to draw her meaning. They are supported, as he sees it, through a hermeneutic of reification, that is, the wrapping up or fixing of the symbols which express ethical relation in a time-in-a-history and a place-in-a-hierarchy. In Levinas’ understanding, what is concrete to experience is without a time in an order-of-time or a place in an order-of-place; what is concrete is a clash and a breaking, a constant questioning, a reversal in the psyche in which what ‘I’ come into contact with is constantly being revealed as devastatingly new and as ‘higher.’ To say that such an experience is fundamentally the experience of such-and-such object in such-and-such place and time is to abstract the experience, and thereby to risk losing altogether its novelty and its capacity to devastate. It is also, potentially, to ‘sacralize’

Western philosophy; see A. Peperzak, “Presentation” in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, 51-66, 53; for Levinas on Plotinus see TrO 347. Finally Wes Avram offers a long list in which he mentions, besides those treated above, Kierkegaard (see CPP 66-67) and Marx (see RK 33); moreover Avram’s short explanation of the various philosophical concepts which display the trace is useful; see W. Avram, “On the Priority of ‘Ethics’ in the Work of Levinas,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24.2 (Fall 1996): 261-284. I leave Franz Rosenzweig out of this discussion, since he has his own ambivalent relation to the history of philosophy; it should be said, though, that his influence on Levinas is enormous. See Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in the Thought of Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992), throughout; Cohen, *Elevations*, throughout; and Handelman, *Fragments*, throughout.

¹⁰Bernasconi, “Scepticism,” 152.

the experience, to subsume it into a reductionist rubric. Indeed, if one holds that the most significant aspect of an experience is its place or time in a larger order of place or time, one is in danger of creating with this order a fully articulated second reality, a screen through which things can be seen and explained and by means of which the foundations of experience can increasingly be ignored. The second reality takes the form of a sacral system, apparently giving its adherents a God's eye view of the world or of history, which is to say that a reductionist ideological second reality is already a certain type of theology: a 'sacred grove' (DF 232). Such second realities are the mark of our age. If one wishes to create and impose one, one must abstract experience by reifying its components and placing them in a larger order. If, on the other hand, one wishes to combat second realities, one must deconstruct the abstractions. To this effect, Levinas offers us experiences without referential objects, meanings without reference to an ontology, or, as he puts it, "signification without a context" (TI 23).

Among the sacred groves against which Levinas stands, I am particularly concerned with three: Hegelianism, totalitarianism, and modern progressivist liberalism. A Levinasian framework allows us to see that each of these systems views reality through a single unifying lens. Hegelianism is a monism or ontology which explains everything by means of the overarching rubric of the historical plan thus undermining particularity and individuality; and totalitarianism and progressivist liberalism put this kind of thinking into practice -- since both ideologies see world history as marching toward a time when human beings will be fulfilled because they have everything in common. Many critiques are brought against these systems, critiques which seek to replace them with a different 'more responsible' way of thinking or a different 'more responsible' form of politics. But Levinas' critique is the first to suggest that responsibility emerges from the disruption of system qua disruption, from difference, from what is uncommon in human beings, from what is unlike me in the other. This is what has persuaded me of his ethics; or, to be

precise, this is what has persuaded me that it is ethical to adopt his ethics. Any critique of sameness which accepts the assumption -- common to Hegelians, totalitarians and liberals -- that difference gives rise to antagonism, will not be able to maintain a strong front against Hegelian, totalitarian or liberal sameness. A critique which assumes that difference gives rise to ethics is stronger, and for this reason alone is worth pursuing. To speak broadly, Levinas' thought is enormously attractive in an age characterized by three apparently conflicting phenomena: first, by the justification of oppression on the basis of differences between human beings or cultures; second, by the growing homogenization of human beings and cultures justified by the shibboleths of democracy, universal justice and peace; and third, by a backlash against this homogenization in the name of distinct groups within the whole which insist on their autonomy. Levinas undercuts the primacy of all such ways of thinking, and offers an alternative: an ethics of each-to-each-other commenced in the face-to-face.¹¹ And this alternative ethics is a real alternative precisely because it is not a

¹¹Let me lay out the three phenomena more slowly and describe their relation to the word 'other.' Until recently, the word other in the language of the Social Sciences generally denoted a pejorative designation used by one group of people to exclude or marginalize another; to call someone 'other' was understood to be committing an injustice. Levinas, of course, stands against such injustices; he repudiates all justifications of oppression on the basis of totalizing groupings. However, he does not repudiate them in the usual way, which is to claim that at bottom we are all the *same* or to privilege inclusion. Instead, he reclaims the word 'other' as a designation of something real (rather than something imposed by a culture) and, moreover, as something positive (rather than pejorative); the other, for him, is not just truly other but also *better than the same, better than I*. Thus he seeks to destroy the very possibility of the oppressive injustice, and at the same time, refuses to fall into the potential injustice of the second position mentioned above, namely, the assumption of global sameness in the name of universalizing, totalizing shibboleths -- which, for him, is tantamount to global samemaking. But here, once again, he is not refusing the second (potential) injustice in the usual way; he is not at all moving in the direction of a politically correct vindication of cultural isolationism or particularism. Levinas' other is other in himself, not because he speaks a different language or eats a different food, or even because he follows a different religion -- and to assume that his otherness stemmed from these things would only be to judge him on the basis of another, smaller totality, and thus, once again, potentially to do him an injustice. Thus, to clarify the point, Levinas *repudiates* the injustice of the imposed designation of otherness as a justification of oppression (you are other and therefore inferior), and *undercuts or calls into question* the other two alternatives, that of global democracy (there is no other) and that of identity politics or multiculturalism (we are other; my group is your other; your group is my group's other). That he repudiates the first injustice is uncontroversial; that he undercuts the other two potential injustices is highly controversial. I speak at length in the course of the thesis about his undercutting of global democracy, especially in my discussion of his uneasiness about modern liberalism in chapter four. I speak more briefly of his undercutting of identity politics in the discussion of ethics, politics and 'community' in section three of chapter one; see especially note 52.

reaction to the above mentioned phenomena; it is not designed as a band-aid for contemporary problems. It is always already there in human experience. Moreover, it is best expressed in old books, particularly, as Levinas sees it, the foundational texts of the Jewish tradition.

As Levinas sees it -- but is he right? Levinas' relation to the text is as ambiguous as his descriptions of relations between human beings. He struggles to remain open to it but he is also conscious of his responsibility to its 'other others,' that is, to previous interpreters and to us. What results from this responsibility -- spread wide and thin as it must be -- is a way of reading which is neither strictly exegetical nor strictly eisegetical nor precisely a combination of the two, a way, which, as I mentioned, tries to 'tell the truths.' His responsibility to the text and the text's previous interpreters is, I think, straightforward; his deepest ideas are illuminated primarily through biblical reference or kabbalistic motif and his Bible and Kabbalah are read from the perspective of the Talmud. But his responsibility *to us* is more complex. It emerges in a hermeneutic which I will at times call 'de-ontologization,' at times 'de-ontologization and de-historicization' and at times 'desacralization,' a hermeneutic which combats the reification and sacralization characteristic of our age by pulling out of stories and symbols their ground in the experience of ethical rupture. A number of the central symbols of the Jewish tradition will serve as brief examples. Levinas' *creation* is createdness: an expression of the experience of not being one's own origin, and thus of being responsive to revelation. His *revelation* is the experience of being called into question by the trace of God in the other. His *election* is the experience that this calling into question comes from without, that it is not a matter of choice but rather of being chosen. And finally his *messianism* is the result of these experiences: ethical responsibility. This is not to say that Levinas denies that God created the world in the beginning, chose the Jews, revealed his Torah at Sinai, and will send a messiah at the end. But these events, qua events, are, as he sees it, matters of evidence or objective fact,

and therefore not subjects of philosophical discussion; in short, they are less interesting than the ethical experiences which are expressed in the symbols.

For Levinas these a-sacral understandings or interpretations are embedded in the texts themselves, in the experience of alterity which underlies the texts' symbols and narratives. But they are also very much 'what we need to hear today.' In his understanding, the rigidities of the prevalent modern comprehensions can be broken or at least called into question by an encounter with ancient Judaism, and *that* encounter is the one he provides, at the cost perhaps of other possible kinds of encounter with the old books. Levinas tells ethical truths, now; it is on this basis that he is defensible and on this basis that he should be read. And he tells them *through* and *with* the sources of his religion.

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Chapter one of this thesis lays the groundwork for the arguments of subsequent chapters by detailing what I understand to be the philosophical structure most basic to Levinas' thought: the dynamic in which the rupturing relation between two human beings both conditions and also gives way to the non-rupturing social relation. I discuss this structure using various pairs of terms -- ethics and politics, saying and said, and infinity and totality -- and then take up some of the structure's difficulties -- notably the problem of temporal order or whether rupture or non-rupture 'comes first,' and the reasons for the apparently strict distinction between ethics and politics. In the course of these discussions I begin to clarify the place in Levinas' thought of what I have just called the 'second reality' and call in the body of the thesis the 'avoidable totality.' I explain that totalities may be classified in many ways and choose from these ways a distinction between the 'endemic totality,' i.e. the kind of categorization necessary to political life or in a thesis like this one, and the 'avoidable totality,' i.e. the kind of categorization which claims completeness and forgets its origin in rupture. I imply that because Levinas' critique of the second reality or avoidable totality is a critique of a forgetting, the critique must be enacted as an anamnesis:

a reading and recalling of old books which grounds a reading and recalling of the origins of experience. And, as I begin to show in the final section of chapter one, for Levinas, the old books are the sources of Judaism and the experiences are Jewish experience. Levinas' Jewishness is at the core of his philosophy.

Chapter two begins the process of watching Levinas read. Here I turn to the fifth chapter of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* which contains a series of biblical references dense enough to form a sub-text of midrash. I begin with an analysis of some of the philosophical themes of the chapter, an analysis intended to supplement the account of the basic structure of Levinas' thought from chapter one and to clarify -- insofar as is possible -- the role of God in that structure. This involves some discussion of a structure secondary but critical to the basic structure, namely what I call the 'witnessing structure' whereby God is withdrawn and his command appears only as the response of the commanded one. I then move on to the midrash on which I comment speculatively and unrestrictedly. My argument with respect to the midrash has two parts, though they are presented at once, together, in the play of midrashic analysis. First, I am curious to see how many of Levinas' basic ideas are illuminated with biblical reference, including metaphysical desire, the trace of the absence of God in the face of the other, the ethical turn to the other as the path to the withdrawn God, the occurrence of this ethical relation as speech, and, finally, the necessity of having a non-rupturing politics as well as a rupturing ethics and the moral dilemmas raised by this necessity. Second, I look to see how Levinas reads the Bible in order to draw these ideas from the text. Clearly he stands here in the tradition of homiletical midrash, a freewheeling method of sermonizing in which biblical verses are expounded or manipulated in a sequence governed not by their biblical order but by the train of the midrashist's thought, a sequence which always returns, as Levinas' sequence does, to repeat the first reference at its close. But I argue that Levinas also understands himself to stand in an Isaianic tradition, wrenching images and verses from

their original context and rearranging them in order to make the hearts of his readers fat and their ears heavy and their eyes shut (Isa 6: 8-10). This analysis constitutes the beginning of my exposition of Levinas' attack on the modern tendency to reify expressions of ethical experience into locatable things and ideas thereby relinquishing any ability to re-experience the ambiguities of the alterity expressed in the text. Levinas draws on Isaiah's negative theology, and yet feels that in order to be responsible to the understandings and misunderstandings of his contemporary readers he must go further than Isaiah, into a theology which is neither negative nor positive, a theology of the God who was never 'here.'

Chapter three takes up certain kabbalistic motifs in Levinas' thought. I begin with an extended defense of this endeavor, a defense which is necessary, in general, because Levinas is highly critical of what he calls 'mysticism,' and, particularly, because Levinas' critique of this 'mysticism' is one of the general premises of this thesis, which precisely watches Levinas dispose of sacred groves and God's-eye views. Levinas uses the term 'mysticism' to refer to the sacred grove, but I argue that this is not actually the nature of Jewish mysticism, and that Levinas knows it. Indeed, Jewish mysticism, even the unitive mysticism found in Abulafia and Luria (as opposed to the *mitnagdic* school of mysticism on which Levinas overtly draws) has more in common with Levinasian relation than it does with the obfuscatory ontology Levinas calls 'mysticism.' I show this by means of two comparisons, one between Levinas and Abulafia and the other between Levinas and Luria. Both are intended to be broad and tentative; they sketch the outlines of further work to be taken up. But, that said, I believe that there are enough proximities between Levinas and these kabbalists to suggest a deliberate textual relation: a withdrawal of God, a rupturing connected to a height, an extraordinary responsibility, and a connection between ethics and difference or particularity. Moreover, there is, in Abulafia, the basis for a hermeneutic which would take up where Isaiah left off, a hermeneutic which is not only based in

negative theology but which would suggest, further, that experiences of God can only be understood as broken, dynamic and un-fixed -- and concomitantly, a critique of any understanding of such experiences in the static terms of a hermeneutic which reifies. I argue for a similarity between this hermeneutic and that of Levinas, and, further, that in the same way that Levinas has to push the Isaianic envelope because of certain unsalutary modern hermeneutical tendencies, he has to push Luria into an Abulafian a-ontologization and a-historicism.

In chapter four I treat Levinas' first three lectures to the Colloquium of French Jewish Intellectuals, the first of which, "Between Two Worlds" is an exposition of Rosenzweig's life and thought, and the second and third of which, later published together as "Messianic Texts," constitute Levinas' first Talmudic reading, the first of some thirty he delivered to the Colloquium annually during the sixties, seventies and eighties. This chapter is the only one in which we watch Levinas engaged explicitly in the act of reading; therefore many of the issues that have lain under my analysis to this point come to the fore. Levinas presents a desacralized conception of Judaism, but, unlike in the other passages in question in this thesis, he has an opportunity here to explain to his listeners that this *is* his conception -- moreover, he makes a strong argument that it is also the Talmudic conception. In order to do this, he turns to the Talmudic texts which are perhaps most difficult to claim as a-sacral, that is, certain texts on messianism. Levinas brings from these texts (drawn from close to the end of *Tractate Sanhedrin*) an a-historical a-ontological understanding of messianism, in which the coming of the messiah has nothing to do with ontological transformation in a historical future and everything to do with ethical transformation in the here and now. He is convinced that these texts are expressions of a profound experience which is neither contingent on the circumstances in which the rabbis lived, nor based on vain speculation about the beginning of time or the end of time. They are, moreover, expressions which can only be offered in the open forum of dialogue and debate.

Not only are Levinas' rabbis a-historical and a-ontological, they can also, as it were, see ahead to the deformations which are supported by the modern reifying hermeneutic, the deformations of our second realities or avoidable totalities. As I have said, the contemporary avoidable totality takes several forms in Levinas' thinking -- the two most notable philosophical forms being Heidegger's ontology (which I do not treat in this thesis) and Hegel's historicism. In these lectures on Talmudic messianism, Levinas reveals the rabbis to be proto-anti-Hegelians, questioning ideas of End of History because they are aware that such ideas relativize ethical judgment in the here and now. Certainly the rabbis utilize what seem to modern readers to be Hegelian categories and questions -- the nature of the end of history, the growing universalism and commonality which heralds its advent, the question of how human beings might bring it about or how they might be pawns in its unfolding -- but these questions, read with the desacralizing hermeneutic that Levinas claims is the rabbis' own, are revealed as speculative discourse about ever-present questions of ethical philosophy rather than assertions about historical, ontological transformation. Levinas attacks the modern sacred grove or ontology which is Hegelian historicism, and insists, as he sometimes puts it, that Jews must stand outside the course of world-history, or, as he puts it at other times, that Jews must understand there to be no Meaning of History.

Chapter four returns to a part of the basic structure presented in chapter one, a part which was followed through in chapter two with the midrashic commentary on the dilemma of ethical politics but left behind in chapter three since the Kabbalah, at least as Levinas uses it, is largely a-political. The critical point here is that Levinas accepts Hegel's central insights, including a link between 'war' or dialectics, and totality or reality understood as a self-contained whole. Experienced reality, especially in the modern progressivist liberal state with its universality and homogeneity, is a totality best explained by Hegel, but the totality, as Hegel explains it, is grotesque, and therefore it is necessary for us to search for

meaning outside Hegelian rubrics, and outside totality. In short, chapter four finishes the exposition of the basic structure by showing the extent to which we do live in the sameness of the endemic totality (of which Hegel is the single best expositor) while at the same time being aware of the difference in the same, or the brokenness of the totality (of which Hegel was not aware). We avoid the second reality of the avoidable totality by living in the endemic totality and understanding it to be broken, in other words, by living in it and outside of it at the same time. Levinas presents this case in the names of Rosenzweig and the rabbis of the classical period. For him, they present a way of life and thought which is an alternative to ontology or to system, and they do it both by continuous reassertions of the ethical face-to-face and also by erecting and then breaking Hegelian-type totalities.

Chapter five, my final chapter, is a different kind of account of how Levinas reads. Here I ask two questions: why is Levinas so concerned about the breaking of sacred groves? and why does Levinas present and advocate an ethics of difference and infinite responsibility? I answer both questions by examining Levinas' reflections on the Holocaust, reflections which, as I see it, shape and provide a space for the readings of the old texts at which we have so far looked. Levinas' attack on ontology and history -- his attack on the system -- is an attack on the Nazis in two senses: not merely in the sense that the Nazis almost won and therefore that the rubric of progressive history in which success is the guarantor of virtue must be abandoned, but also in the sense that the Holocaust revealed, once and for all, that those groups of regimes which understand themselves to be the beginning of the culmination of a historical plan or attempt to create an ontological utopia on earth are the most inhuman in their actions. In other words, the Holocaust ruptures any idea of an overarching system, first, by wiping away historical hope from the world in the repletion of suffering, and second, because the Nazis, not their victims, were the quintessential systematizers. There must now be no more systems, and above all, no ethical systems; Levinas' ethics is and must be, as I argue in the chapter, one which 'does not

work,' one which does not provide room for judgment of the other -- and this is accomplished in Levinas' ethics by his focus on difference and his demand for infinite responsibility. And yet, there must a way to judge the Nazis -- this is accomplished by the distinction between ethics and politics with an exposition of which the thesis began.

Chapter five, more specifically, begins with four stories from the Nazi period (three of which are drawn from Levinas' works) all of which detail a shift from second reality or avoidable totality to ethical responsibility. The stories deal, in particular, with the abandoning of the God of history in favour of a God who arises in human relation. I then take up Levinas' most detailed essay on the Holocaust, "Useless Suffering," and draw out Levinas' strong criticisms of the philosopher Emil Fackenheim, a defender of providence. From here, I turn to more general questions about what it means to live without a God of history, to live in the world in a Levinasian way, to otherwise than be.

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If Levinas' work is an anamnesis, a thinking back out of totality to its ground and back out of the modern world to old books, then this thesis also constitutes an anamnesis. I read Levinas backwards: beginning with *Otherwise than Being* (1974) with its biblical references and its references to Abulafia; then *Totality and Infinity* (1961), from which I draw the comparisons to Luria; then "Between Two Worlds" and "Messianic Texts" (1959-61); and finally Levinas' reflections on the Holocaust. Like Levinas' thought, then, this thesis is a structure seeking to unravel itself in its origin in the past, a structure which, however, is also directed concretely at present conditions and at the future. Levinas' Judaism has little to do with the questions Jews often ask themselves -- who is a Jew? or, what is required of a Jew ethically or *halachically*? -- and everything to do with the fundamental question which Jews and everyone should ask, now more than ever: what am I to do to or for the different one who stands before me? This question, for Levinas, is a Jewish question which nevertheless grounds the philosophy and the way of life of anyone

who asks it. All of Levinas' arguments are slanted, overstated, iterated and reiterated -- all in order to force, cajole, encourage, and manipulate his readers into asking this question. All his readings are what Harold Bloom would call strong readings; they alter the surface of the text at issue -- but the intent is to preserve and convey the text's meaning, which always bears on the necessity of asking the ethical question. Levinas is aware of the conditions under which his readers read and addresses them, partly simply by drawing us back into his hermeneutical anamnesis -- by responding, for instance, to questions about Hegel with answers about the Talmud -- in order to pave the way for an existential anamnesis, and partly by offering a strong clear critique of modern sacred groves, a critique which is already a turn to the other on his part and can subsequently be adopted as a turn to the other on the part of his readers. Levinas' writing, both hortative and critical, is an ethical act. When he goes to the past to speak of the future, this is his prophecy.

CHAPTER ONE: THE STRUCTURE OF LEVINAS' THOUGHT

When Levinas thinks back phenomenologically, he is thinking *from* all the various human structures which give reality a cast of 'sameness' *to* a prior point where sameness breaks up and reveals primary, underlying differences. The structures of sameness from which he thinks back may be said to fall into three types, types which are, however, not terribly distinct and certainly not mutually exclusive. Some involve participation, in which different components of reality are understood to come together in an intimacy or an identity: thus ecstatic conceptions, certain eschatological conceptions, theoretical structures which accord all beings a place or a function in an ontology, the understanding of human relation Plato attributes to Aristophanes, interpretations of the thought of Hegel which emphasize Hegel's telos, i.e. absolute knowledge or the universal and homogeneous state, and also certain interpretations of the thought of Heidegger. Some involve what Levinas terms 'egology:' thus simple consciousness and self-consciousness, commonplace egotism, megalomania, solipsism, and also a certain interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology. Finally, some involve an opposition in which the terms opposed to one another are defined against one another and in this way together form a whole: thus interpretations of Hegel which emphasize the dialectic, and war in all its variations, including definitions of social relations as trade-offs of power. Most of what we do, according to Levinas, fits into one, two or all three of these categories, and thus involves the imposition of some sort of sameness on the differences that exist in reality. Politics, for instance, always takes the three forms: it is always in some sense a participation in which individuals insofar as they

are political beings take their places as parts of a collective; it always involves at least to some extent the imposition of the egos of a few individuals on the rest; and it is always at least partly founded on the provisional peace of a temporary cease-fire in the war of all against all. But the political realm is not the only realm of the same in Levinas' thinking. All ideologies or theories impose sameness; so too does the attempt of conceptual thought to be comprehensive and consistent, and even the coherence necessary to linguistic communication. One of Levinas' key ideas is the link he draws between the three kinds of sameness; participation, egology and war are all effectively the same for him since they are all same-making. What he seeks is the space where individual human beings stand outside the realm of the same, a space before the realm of the same. He finds it in the relation between two human beings, a relation in which -- at least at the beginning or in the approach -- the two parties neither come together as a whole, nor stand alone as autonomous egos, nor are defined against one another. In relation one meets up with what is not the same; one meets the 'other.'¹²

The most basic structure in Levinas' thinking, then, involves the interaction of the same and the other. The same occurs in the three forms delineated above (and might also be categorized in other ways, one of which we will look at presently), but otherness or difference cannot be categorized; it takes an infinite number of forms, since each other being one meets is infinitely different or unique. The discovery of these infinite differences, the respect for them, the service of the other in his otherness is, according to Levinas,

¹²The word "other" is one of the foundational terms of Levinas' thought. He uses the word in four French forms: *autre* and *autrui*, capitalized and lower-case. At times, the forms seem to have some distinct nuances: thus *l'Autre* seems to mean the concept of the other, or otherness; *l'autre* means another; *l'Autrui* means another one, and refers to another person or God; and *l'autrui* seems always to refer to another person. However, as I read Levinas, the forms are not used systematically, and he is more interested in how they cross one another or coincide than in maintaining the distinctions. I have, therefore, always used the simple lower-case form in my own descriptions, using the upper case only when transcribing someone else's work. Alphonso Lingis, with Levinas' permission, translates *autrui* and *Autrui* "Other," and *autre* and *Autre* "other," thus already obscuring any distinctions which might exist (see TI 24-5 note). I do not believe that a great deal is lost by Lingis's move, and some sense of connection or continuity may be gained.

ethics. This is an ethics which has no fixed rules -- no rules which would stand as always the same -- but involves the rupture of all fixities or samenesses, a rupture which emerges from the encounter with unique particularities. 'Same and other,' then, can also be expressed as 'same and ethical'; these are the parts of the structure most basic to Levinas' thought, and the structure itself is the interaction of these parts.

In the first section of this chapter, I build up the structure using three pairs of terms central to Levinas -- ethics and politics, saying and said, and, briefly, infinity and totality. The second section opens with a fuller discussion of infinity and totality and then uses these terms to take up some of the structure's difficulties, namely the problems of temporal order. The third section treats another difficulty with the structure, the question of whether politics can be ethical. Finally, the fourth section begins to sketch the boundaries of the themes which are critical to this thesis, but which rest on the analyses of the first three sections: Levinas' conception of God, and the relation of his Judaism to his philosophy.

I. The basic structure: same and other

Ethics, according to Levinas, is discovered in the context of the interaction of two people, that is, the face-to-face encounter. In my coming into 'proximity' with or facing another human being, I discover, very simply, that he *is* other. I can come to him with a vast variety of different intentions but in all cases his otherness --or, to use Levinas' technical term for otherness, his 'alterity' -- strikes me, both because it is an otherness *per se*, or a not-me-ness, and also because it is the other's particular unique otherness. I am arrested by it, and my intentions, whatever they were, are called into question. Who am I to have intentions toward the other? Who am I to have intentions at all? For Levinas, everything that human beings do suggests that these questions at all times both underlie and undercut our intentions, and also that these questions, if they are asked meaningfully, can only have arisen out of the shocking, frightening, 'traumatic' discovery of the otherness of

another human being.

Levinas often says that I see in the other's eyes or face -- which are, for him, the seat of the other's otherness¹³ -- the command: 'thou shalt not kill.' This becomes a relatively useful way to verbalize the effect that the other has on me only when it is understood that 'thou shalt not kill' has at least two meanings. It may be that I do actually approach the other murderously, which is to say that I approach him, whether deliberately or in ignorance, with the intention to subsume him into a sameness. If I cherish the notion that I might become one with him or if I conceive of him as a part of a whole -- be that whole political or conceptual, harmonious or made up of warring parts seen as opposite -- then I approach him with the various tools of the makers of the sameness, *one* of which is my ability actually to bring about his death and *all* of which can be described figuratively as murderously. And I am tempted all the more in this direction by the fact that his face is vulnerable; it reveals to me some of what he is; it allows me to imagine that I can understand him, subsume his differences, or kill him. But the temptation is cut short, for I see, suddenly, that I cannot touch his differences, that his otherness belongs to him alone and cannot be made part of a same, even were I to kill him physically. In *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas makes clear the connection between one of the ways of the same, namely my desire to know the other, and murder; and he also describes how the murderous impulse to knowledge is arrested by the other's face.

Knowledge reveals, names and consequently classifies. . . . Knowledge seizes hold of its object. It possesses it. Possession denies the independence of being, without destroying that being -- it denies and maintains. The face, for its part, is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, none the less offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation of absolute negation. The other is the only being that one can be tempted to kill. This

¹³Levinas defines the face as follows: "the way in which the other presents himself before me, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face" (TI 50). Handelman has an extended and comprehensive discussion of why Levinas chooses to use the image of the face, including descriptions of the work of other scholars on the issue. Handelman, *Fragments*, chapters seven and eight, especially 208-223, 227-8 and 359n.5.

temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear 'thou shalt not kill.' (DF 8)

It is incidental to the main line of my argument, but very much worth noting, that in this description the three types of same-making all merge into egology or solipsism. I mentioned that the three types were not tremendously distinct from one another. When any structure of the same -- participation, simple egology or war -- appears as a structure of consciousness, it takes the form of an egology; in other kinds of accounts, for instance philosophical overviews or ontologies, all samenesses might appear as participations, and, seen from within, all might appear as wars, dialectical structures, or power struggles. But, the critical point is that all samenesses -- all of which can, from a certain perspective, be described as forms of 'knowing' -- are broken irreparably by alterity.

The solipsistic restlessness of consciousness, in all of its adventures finding itself captivated by the self, here terminates: true exteriority is the look which prohibits me from embarking on any sort of conquest. . . . I simply *cannot any more*. (DEHH 173)

The first meaning of 'thou shalt not kill' refers, then, to what we will call the *asymmetry of identity*: the fact that the other is different from me and from all samenesses, and that I 'simply cannot' make him same.

But once my murderous intentions have been arrested by the command, or in a case where I approach the other with intentions that are as close to non-murderous as possible, the command takes on another layer of meaning, a meaning by which it strips me of my certainties and calls into question my very right to exist. This second 'thou shalt not kill' reminds me that I *have* killed. "Was not my 'in the world' or my 'place in the sun' and my home a usurpation of places that belong to the other man, already oppressed by me or hungry?" (GCM 175).¹⁴ The simple fact that I have not always done everything for the other means that I must consider whether I have not, at some time or in some way, taken

¹⁴Levinas cites here the line from Pascal which he uses again as one of the five epigraphs of *Otherwise than Being*: ". . . 'That is my place in the sun.' That is how the usurpation of the whole world began" (Pascal, *Pensées*, 112).

from him what might have been his sustenance and his life, that is, whether I have not participated in various structures of the same which oppress others in concrete terms, economic or otherwise. This is not to say that Levinas is engaged here in casting blame; his meaning is larger in scope. When I find myself forced by the other to ask whether I have not participated in structures of the same, I am not so much asking whether I have done something wrong as simply whether I have done *something*, anything. Levinas writes of “a guiltless responsibility, where I am nonetheless open to an accusation of which no alibi, spatial or temporal, could clear me” (LR 83), and elsewhere that “it is *as though* I were responsible for [the other’s] mortality and guilty for surviving” (OB 91, italics mine). The other judges my very existence and his judgment is always harsh. To be before the other is to be unjustified.

Let us clarify this second meaning of ‘thou shalt not kill’ further. My relation with the other can never be at rest or symmetrical; this vision, perpetuated by the devotees of participation or identity or merging, is according to Levinas false. In the relation between two people, there must always, to speak loosely, be a movement of giving or a movement of taking; the relation is always asymmetrical. To take from the other would be to impose upon him an expectation, or to force him into a pattern arising from me, to attempt to make him same. Thus I find that in the encounter with the other, my desires to take are transformed into the desire to give. My

power and emprise [are now] positively produced as the possession of a world I can bestow as a gift on the other. . . . For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. (TI 50)

So, to the *asymmetry of identity* -- to the fact that I do not assume that the other is like me but instead allow myself to be guided by his differences -- is added, in the second meaning of ‘thou shalt not kill,’ an *asymmetry of responsibility*. The latter follows directly from the former: it is because the other’s difference has struck me that I become aware of my

participation, by virtue of my very existence, in the structures of sameness, and that I turn that awareness into service or gift or responsibility. With the awareness comes the realization that the other is spiritually unbridgeably higher than me, that he is my judge. With the awareness comes too the realization that he is economically unbridgeably lower than me, that he is the one to whom I must give all I have, the destitute one, the widow or orphan or stranger. In other words I find myself responsible before him in several ways. I am responsible *to* him because he is my judge. I am responsible *for* him because any material needs he has are mine to fulfill, to the point where I must ‘feed him with bread from my own mouth’ (OB 55, 77, 142). And, above all, I am responsible *for* him in the sense that in order to make a space for his difference or to make him free I must bear his responsibility; I must answer for him and take his punishment.¹⁵ I find myself, then, his breadwinner, his keeper, his hostage, his martyr, and his ‘substitute.’ And through it all the command ‘thou shalt not kill’ continues to stand over me, both in its negative form, in which it stands for my awareness that I cannot murder him or make him same, and in its positive form, in which it stands for my awareness that not to murder him means to serve him. Ultimately, as Levinas sometimes says, it means that the other cannot be left to die alone (RK 24, GCM 175), which is to say that I must stay with the other and always do more until there is no more to do. Responsibility “increases infinitely, living infinitely, an obligation more and more strict in the measure that obedience progresses and the distance to be crossed untraversable in the measure that one approaches” (OB 142). The continuous pressure of the command from the other’s face is never allowed to give way to pride in its fulfillment; the command disqualifies apology.

So much for a preliminary account of the face-to-face situation and the birth of responsibility. We can summarize the account (without attempting to defend it) as follows.

¹⁵Levinas makes the distinction between responsibility to and responsibility for in various passages, speaking for instance of “the face of a neighbour, ambiguously him *before whom* (or *to whom*, without any paternalism) and *for whom* I answer” (OB 12).

When I meet the other all my certainties, theories, conceptions, motivations, expectations predictions, judgments, needs or wishes -- all my samenesses -- are called into question, and all my resources are put to his service. The other and I do not blend with one another, though a blending of some sort was probably one of my intentions before the encounter; we do not find one another equal, though this, too, may have been in my mind. Rather, the encounter is an epiphanic, traumatic and terrible celebration of difference, in which I discover an absolutely unbridgeable gap between us, a gap which can be described spatially (he is higher and lower, my judge and the destitute one) or, as we will see, as an aspect of language, or as an aspect of time. This gap or difference strikes me, as forcefully as it is possible to be struck, appearing as an ethical command, or as the command to an ethics of difference, an ethics which has as its purpose to preserve his difference by giving to him, answering to him, and answering for him. This is not a series of movements which occur in a particular order. The other's alterity *is* the rupture of my same, *is* my service. We move on now to politics.

The encounter with the other engenders the extraordinary response of infinite service, but the encounter takes place in the every-day world in which such responses are quite simply impractical. We will set aside for the moment the obvious and problematic fact that I may refuse the command 'thou shalt not kill' and slit the other's throat. According to Levinas, even before I make any decisions about accepting or refusing the command, a prior problem, a ubiquitous problem, intrudes on my desire to serve the other, namely, the conflict of competing responsibilities. For the other and I do not inhabit the world to ourselves. The existence of other things, and especially of other people -- which Levinas describes by speaking of the 'third' -- necessitates certain impositions of sameness. The third

is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces,

and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing before a court of justice. (OB 157)

In other words, when there is more than one other person to consider, asymmetry must give way to symmetry, difference must give way to equality, and infinite service to the other must give way to calculation of how best, in necessarily finite ways, to serve the needs of the many. Moreover, the third is always there, and not just because the other and I happen to live in society. The third is there in the very face of the other; as Levinas often puts it, 'I see the other's other in the eyes of the other.' In fact, in the eyes of the other I see all of the other's others, and their others, and theirs, and so on and so forth until I see in the eyes of the other that if I wish to be responsible for him I must also be responsible for the whole world: "in the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and that obsession already cries out for justice" (OB 158). So the face-to-face, for all that it *ruptures* impositions of sameness, also *calls for* imposition of sameness in the form of universal, egalitarian justice, or calculative reason, or the postulation of models of behavior, or the imposition of expectation, prediction, and judgment; indeed, the face-to-face calls for the imposition of the very economic structures which usurp the livelihood of the other, since these structures -- for all that they are unjust -- are instituted at first for the sake of the third with the intention of distributing necessities over the widest possible field. The ethical encounter itself demands the imposition of the samenesses which compromise or even betray ethics by overlooking the uniqueness of *each other* in a vision of *all the others*; the ethical encounter demands politics.¹⁶

Is politics then the end of the story? It is certainly an end in a sense. Politics is one of the many structures of the same that Levinas thinks back from; he is deeply interested in

¹⁶Gibbs points out that "in French grammar, there is no informal plural of the second person: two *tu*'s must be addressed as *vous*." Gibbs, *Correlations*, 231. This comment offers insight into the formal nature of the Levinasian plural -- with a *tu* there can be intimacy and ethical rupture, but with a *vous* there must be formality and the imposition of the same. A grammatical account of Levinas would, in fact, have to regard *vous*-- and therefore two *tu*'s -- as tantamount to *ils*.

the question of how politics is grounded in the ethical experience. But if, as we have so far laid matters out, politics is founded on the experience of the rupture of the structures of the same in the ethical encounter, then it will be a ruptured politics, a politics full of doubt and self-examination. Moreover, since each member of the political order is an ethical being in the deepest possible sense, a being who has had and continues to have ethical encounters, the political structure, though a structure of the same, is constantly being reminded of its origin in brokenness or broken anew. Levinas' basic structure, the interaction of same and other, is an extraordinarily complex dynamic, involving degrees of rupture, repeated rupture and above all the memory of rupture. But before we examine it more closely, let us look at some other sets of terms by which the structure can be described, beginning with 'saying' and 'said.'

According to Levinas, my encounter with the other is played out in discourse, since discourse -- whether verbal or constituted by gesture -- is the way the other and I can come into intimacy without merging into a unity. The motivation for discourse is my impulse toward something I do not already know, something other than me; what moves me to converse is the desire to hear the other express his differences, to hear him surprise me. Thus, for Levinas, all discourse begins -- and to a large extent continues -- in listening; it begins and continues when I make space for the other, when I give him my ear, when I expose myself to him. The role of the subjectivity in discourse -- *my* role -- can be described as 'taking instruction,' but taking instruction is actually not a taking but a giving; instruction is *taken* when I *offer* myself to the other to be stamped by his words. The other, then, is among other things my teacher, a teacher who teaches me about himself. Teaching is a facet of his judgment over me or his height; his presence "dominates him who welcomes it, comes from the heights, unforeseen, and consequently teaches its very novelty" (TI 66). However, the other and I cannot spend an entire conversation expressing our differences to one another. We find immediately, or always already, that since we two

are not alone in the world, we are discussing other things. And because discourse involves talking about something, it involves having a topic and thus 'thematizing,' that is, explaining as a theme, placing under a category, making same. Levinas uses the term 'said' to describe the aspect of speech which is thematization. He uses the term 'saying' to describe the self-exposure which motivates and underlies the speech, the aspect of speech which is the willing expression of openness to teaching.

The saying is nothing miraculous or fantastic or particular to certain modes of discourse. It is merely the generosity of every-day speech, the impulse to cover for the other, to put the other at his ease -- not in a vulgar sense or for a vulgar purpose, but with the intention simply to let him know that his words are of value. It begins with the uneasiness of silence into which one interjects a remark, and then continues with saying and saying again, saying 'said' to be sure, but saying 'said' in order to say. The openness of the saying is not a springboard; the idea is not to move into saying something 'important,' nor is it even to move into greater intimacy with the other. The saying *is* the intimacy; the whole of oneself is already offered in the word of approach. As the conversation continues after the approach, the said functions to make something -- an appearance, or theme, or object, or structure -- manifest, to disclose it or bring it to light. But underneath this there remain the two interlocutors, naked of themes and structures, revealing to one another what cannot be brought to light, their otherness which in its infinity and absolute alterity evades disclosure; they reveal to one another glimpses of what nevertheless remains in its essence always concealed; they offer themselves. On the level of the said, where discourse is the work of disclosure, questions arise of whether the interlocutor tells the truth or lies, questions of objectivity. But there always persists the level of saying, where discourse is the work of revelation, and where there is no dissembling, where the face or the eyes speak of themselves, always differently, always uniquely, in utter frankness.

The underlying level could not exist without the superficial trappings of discourse;

the saying requires the said as its vehicle and so it calls for the said. But, too, the saying and the said vie with one another. The said always dissimulates the saying, covering it over until the saying is indiscernible; at times it even betrays the saying by trying to make alterity itself into a theme. The saying, in return, undermines the said; it “always seeks to unsay that dissimulation -- that is its very veracity” (OB 152). The structure represented here is another version of the structure which relates ethics and politics. There is a moment of approach or inception in which I find that I offer myself to the other, exposing myself to him in his uniqueness: this is the saying as well as the ethical ‘thou shalt not kill.’ This moment calls for a structure of sameness to be imposed: this is the said as well as politics. The sameness compromises or covers over its ethical origin: the said compromises or betrays the saying just as politics compromises ethics. And the initial or primary moment continues to reside in the structure of sameness, breaking it again or reminding it that it is was born in brokenness: the saying unsays the said just as ethics ruptures politics. We now have two accounts of how the ethical which is the service of otherness calls for us to impose the a-ethical which is same-making and yet vies with that same-making, both in the sense that the ethical is threatened by the a-ethical it has called forth, and also in the sense that the ethical ruptures the a-ethical it has called forth. This is the complete form of what I am calling the basic Levinasian structure. Levinas at one point calls it (or a part of it) “the great paradox of human existence,” and describes it by saying that “we must use the ontological for the sake of the other; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to technico-political systems of means and ends” (RK 28). He omits here the remainder of the structure: that those ontological or technico-political systems undermine otherness, but otherness also undermines them.

Before we move on to a fuller discussion of the paradoxical structure, we should mention several of the other words which Levinas uses to describe it. In the camp of the same, we have already come across a good many connected terms: symmetry, participation,

collectivity, identity, egology, objectivity, war, thematization, the said, system, ideology, ontology, theory, conceptual thought, comparison, assembling, copresence, disclosure, vision or visibility, intentionality, the third and politics. In the camp of the other we have: difference, alterity, relation, ethics, responsibility, novelty, teaching, asymmetry, height, destitution, revelation, listening, saying and unsaying. We should briefly note three things about these lists. First, some of these terms are more or less synonymous in Levinas' understanding -- for instance ontology and system, or ethics and responsibility -- while others bring their own nuances to the structure. Second, all the terms carry some form of their common meanings; it is their juxtaposition which allows us to see them in Levinas' way. For instance, the link between sameness and disclosure encourages us to see disclosure as the conveyance of a piece of knowledge already in some sense present, while the juxtaposition of disclosure to revelation allows us to see that what is critical about the revelation conveyed by alterity is its novelty. Third and finally, all the terms offered here share a particular virtue: they never switch sides and take up places in the other camp. This is not true of all of Levinas' words. Justice, for instance, switches from its place as an ethical term or a term of otherness to a political term or a term of sameness at a certain point in Levinas' thinking life. Philosophy, morality, religion and the good frequently play both sides.¹⁷

One more critical set of terms must be added to the list: totality, as a synonym for the same, and infinity, as a description of otherness or othernesses. In common parlance, totality and infinity can at times be used interchangeably, since both are synonyms for

¹⁷In the interview with graduate students conducted in 1986, Levinas says: "In *Totality and Infinity* I used the word 'justice' for ethics, for the relationship between two people. I spoke of 'justice' although now 'justice' is for me something which is a calculation, which is knowledge, and which supposes politics; it is inseparable from the political. It is something which I distinguish from ethics, which is primary. However, in *Totality and Infinity* the word 'ethical' and the word 'just' are the same word, the same question, the same language" (PL 171). The way all these terms switch sides will be taken up later in this chapter; in addition philosophy will be further discussed in chapter two, religion in chapter four, and the good in chapter five.

‘everything.’ They refer, however, to different aspects of ‘everything’: totality’s everything is closed or finished while infinity’s everything is ever-increasing and always incomplete. The two terms thus express the nature of same-making as the attempt to bring a kind of closure or fixity to the beings in reality, and the nature of otherness as a rupture of that closure. The introduction of these terms will lay the ground for what I want to do in the next section, that is, to raise some of the many problems that arise out of the basic Levinasian structure just described and attempt to suggest solutions for them.

II. The problems of temporal order

Let us first categorize the ways of the same in a manner different than the one I used in this chapter’s first paragraph, taking as our guide Adriaan Peperzak’s attempt to offer an introductory definition of the term totality. Peperzak begins as follows:

Levinas presents a critique of the whole of Western civilization, which he sees as dominated by the spirit of Greek philosophy. Western thought and practice in his view are marked by a striving for totalization, in which the universe is reduced to an originary and ultimate unity by way of panoramic overviews and dialectical syntheses. This kind of monism, according to Levinas, must be criticized from the point of view of a thinking which starts from phenomena as they present themselves. Such a critique is consonant with ancient traditions of thought that reach back to Biblical and Talmudic sources, but it also occurs in Plato and Descartes.¹⁸

This description (comparable in some measure to Richard Cohen’s ‘negative’ Levinas) is already problematic. Totality seems to be a philosophic error, one that is presumably relatively easy to avoid. But what is its source? Is it found in Greek thought, as opposed to Hebrew thought; Western thought, as opposed to Middle Eastern? Peperzak suggests this, but also tells us that Plato was not a totalizer. Is it found in modern thought, as opposed to ancient thought? Peperzak suggests this as well, but also tells us that some modern thought does not totalize, and some ancient thought does. Now Peperzak continues, explaining that

¹⁸Adriaan Peperzak, preface to *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Emmanuel Levinas, ed. A. Peperzak, S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), x.

Levinas links totality with the same or assimilation, and infinity with the other or what cannot be assimilated, and also that “whereas the category of totality summarizes the way in which the Ego inhabits the world -- its worldly economy -- the infinite names the other’s ungraspable or incomprehensible character.”¹⁹ Suddenly totality no longer appears to be an avoidable error, but rather a condition of our being in the world. It appears that we can divide samenesses or totalities into two types: avoidable errors (for instance, Heideggerian ontology, or pre-Socratic monism) and conditions endemic to human life (for instance, politics and thematization). Moreover, as we noticed with reference to the first quotation from Peperzak, the nature of the first type of totality is not obvious; as an avoidable error, totality appears in many varieties. The same is true of the second type; as a “worldly economy,” totality also takes many forms.

By definition, infinity or otherness cannot be categorized. But I have already begun to suggest that it too appears in two different aspects in Levinas’ thought, or functions in two ‘times.’ On the one hand, the other’s alterity or infinite difference exists as what cannot be contained by totality. It overflows all attempts to categorize it, and at the same time as totality is trying to make it same, it breaks totality. On the other hand, infinity is what Levinas thinks back to: alterity is the infinite origin and motivation of politics as saying is the infinite origin and motivation of the said. Thus infinity seems both to follow totality and also to precede it.²⁰ This difficulty is similar to the one we saw with respect to totality. The tension between totality’s two meanings -- as a condition of human life or an error in life which can be avoided -- is analogous to the tension in infinity -- which also

¹⁹Peperzak, preface to *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Emmanuel Levinas, x.

²⁰A great many passages from Levinas inscribing this ambiguity might here be cited. I content myself with two besides those that will be cited later in the body of the text: (1) “The signification of my responsibility for what escapes my freedom is the defeat or defecting of the unity of transcendental apperception, the originary actuality of every act, source of the spontaneity of the subject or of the subject as responsibility” (OB 141). Responsibility precedes every act, but it also defeats conceptions which assemble things into a unity of apperception, thus, presumably, following certain acts of conception. (2) “Critique [of dogmatism] precedes dogmatism” (TI 43).

appears as a prior condition of all existence, and as something one encounters (from totality), at a particular time, in the face of another human being.

The problem is, perhaps, not insoluble. It becomes a confusion largely as a result of the fact that Levinas sometimes chooses to lay out the structure of reality in a theoretical 'order in which it is,' and, at other times -- more often -- to lay out the structure in a phenomenological order, the order as it occurs to human beings or as it 'happens.'²¹ Infinity or brokenness or rupture, as it is in itself, is prior; it has always already come to pass, or passed. However, infinity occurs or happens insofar as it intrudes upon and breaks samenesses. Ethics is first philosophy, but one must think out of experience back towards it. Once one does, one can speak of a theoretical ordering; one can put one's thoughts in an order that is not the order one thought them in, not the order of experience. Levinas' theoretical ordering, offered in *Totality and Infinity*, moves from the human being alone, to the human being in relation, to the human being in society, that is, from the one, to the two, to the three. We will only sketch its outlines here.²²

First, there is the primary or primal anarchy, which is to say, an infinite number of different things, beings, aspects, and qualities. A human being cannot, however, see these things as separate until she herself is separated from the chaos; until this point they appear to her as a formless mass, or as Levinas describes it, the *il y a*, the throb or pulse of undifferentiated being. From this, a human being wrenches herself, separating herself as a particular different one, a consciousness, an autonomous being, ('the one'). Thus she becomes able to see others as others, or to experience exteriority. But at the same time, and before she meets any others, she finds that in separating herself from the *il y a*, she becomes

²¹The structure 'as it is' is probably best laid out in "God and Philosophy" (GCM 55-78), though the account of it offered here is drawn from *Totality and Infinity*. The structure as it occurs to us, or at any rate to Levinas, is what he generally presents in his philosophical writings; it is, for instance, the main thrust of *Totality and Infinity*.

²²I draw heavily in this sketch on Edith Wyschogrod's seminal article "Derrida, Levinas and Violence" in *Continental Philosophy II* ed. Hugh Silverman, (New York: Routledge, 1988), 182-200.

her own sameness, which is to say, a being who is the same as herself, a being who understands herself to be herself, a being, who, qua that being, is consistent with herself despite the possible existence of conflicts in the soul. Moreover, in order to preserve her her-ness, her autonomy or realm of the same, she must continually be assimilating to herself the things she finds in the world: eating, breathing, knowing, taking and making. She becomes the sole possessor of her world, an 'atheist' engaged in innocent use of the good things that come to hand. This position -- or, as Edith Wyschogrod says, 'ontic level' -- is not evil; Levinas' describes it in an early text as 'salvific' (TO 62, see EE 92) and in *Totality and Infinity* as 'enjoyment' or 'living from . . . ' or 'good soup' (TI 110-115). However, it is not yet enough; the subject here is not yet a true human being; the position is 'ec-static' or without movement (EE 80-82).²³ Now the subject meets the other ('the two'), and the face-to-face encounter takes place. Her realm of the same is put into question by the other, and, as a result, her abilities to take, to own and to make are put to the service of the other; even her very bread and breath are his for the asking. She gives herself, and in doing so, she becomes a true self: no longer an autonomous locus of sameness but a human being in relation or in dialogue. However in the eyes of the other, she also sees the other's other ('the three'); indeed, she sees the whole world and thus an infinite number of infinitely different things. Now, despite *and* because of this awareness she finds herself called to impose various kinds of sameness: those of the said, and conceptual thought, and coherence, and symmetry, and politics, and justice, and equality. But she is free to impose these samenesses in a great many different ways. Her speech, though it must employ a said, can employ the said of French, or English, or Hebrew or Greek; though it must be coherent, it can utilize the coherencies of a logician, or a novelist. Likewise, her political understanding or her philosophy may take a host of different forms. Her impositions of

²³'Ec-stasy' means here, as Levinas explains, 'ex-stasis,' where ex is the root form of the verb 'to exist' (EE 82). 'Ecstasy' thus means participation in a totality, wherein, ultimately, there is no movement, or all movement is illusion, since the horizons are already known and fixed.

sameness at this level are better or worse depending on whether or not she remembers, in them or through them, that they were called for not because of any ultimate ascendancy or priority of sameness, but by the other's rupture of all samenesses.

Infinity's two aspects or functions find temporal places in the scheme. The command to respect alterity is already inscribed in the initial anarchy, the myriad of differences at the beginning of things or at the heart of reality, but it is discovered only in the encounter with another person. Totality's two aspects or functions also find their places here. Totalities are necessary or endemic at the levels of the 'one' and the level of the 'three;' the subject's autonomous or atheistic same-making is necessary, and so are the samenesses she is called to impose by the other's other or the rest of the world. Avoidable totalities are simply the versions of these totalities which are less responsive to difference, the versions which claim that there never was an anarchy (either primal or introduced by the 'two'), that they never have been broken, that they can explain or describe everything; in short, those which forget that they themselves are always already ruptured, are conditioned by rupture, and were called forth by rupture. Egologies, participations and wars are at times endemic totalities and at times avoidable totalities. One might chart the typology of totality with which I began this chapter onto the typology of endemic and avoidable as follows. As endemic, egology is consciousness, participation is justice, and war is just war, or -- a phenomenon we will take up in the next section -- inter-totality critique. As avoidable, egology is possession or solipsism, participation is ontology, and war is unjust war and dialectical philosophy. But this double-typology is hardly comprehensive, for these are just a few of the many terms that might be adduced here, and all of the terms in Levinas shift about in meaning. 'Ontology' for instance, is almost always used for avoidable totalities (of any variety), but we have already come across a passage where it is applied to endemic totalities (RK 28, cited in section I of this chapter). What may be said with certainty is that all of the avoidable totalities Levinas criticizes are perverse versions of endemic ones. The

egologies and some of the participatory structures he repudiates are perverse varieties of the necessary egology of getting a self or attaining consciousness; they happen when consciousness conceives of itself as alone in the world, or the ruler of the world. The monisms or ontologies and most of the participatory structures he criticizes are perverse varieties of the necessary political, philosophical, conceptual or linguistic structures; they are political, philosophical, conceptual or linguistic structures which forget that they were ever broken, which pretend to an ultimate or absolute coherence. It may be said, in short, that endemic totality is simply an exigency of finitude while avoidable totality is the belief that all is finite, the misunderstanding of a finite construction as infinity.²⁴

Levinas would, I think, not be averse to another illustration of the scheme, one drawn from Genesis chapters 1 to 11. The tower of Babel, the first attempt at third-level totalization recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, must be 'broken' by the introduction of alterity or diversity in the confusion of languages. But the very attempt at totalization would not have been possible without the prior alterity or diversity which is described in the creation account in Genesis 1. Infinity -- otherness or diversity -- is the primal precondition for thought and action. Once it is established, totality and infinity each appear in various manifestations, intertwined with one another, answering or breaking one another. Some of the totalities which subsequently appear are towers built precisely with the intention of obfuscating difference; these are avoidable totalities. Most, though, are simply the huts we

²⁴In his recent work, Peperzak gets at this dynamic more clearly than in the introduction to *Basic Philosophical Writings* cited above. In *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997) 225, he notes that Levinas criticizes some ontologies, accusing them of "not doing justice but violence to the Other's absoluteness and of ignoring transcendence" and also that Levinas connects ontology to the said and to totality in general. Then he writes:

Does this mean that ontology, and even the Said of discursivity as such, is necessarily violent? I do not think that this is Levinas' thesis. Violence is rather the effect of the absolutization of ontology. Within its own limited horizon, ontology is innocent; in the dimension of philosophy, it is the expression of a necessary condition for a politics of general peace and justice. Peperzak's distinction between 'innocent' and 'violent' is precisely my distinction between endemic and avoidable. I would, however, defend my usage against his. Edith Wyschogrod (to whom Peperzak addresses these remarks) is quite correct to point out that Levinas is willing to use the word 'violence' of all totalities, and, moreover, of the claims of the other. See my revisitation, in chapter five, of the central scheme in her "Derrida, Levinas and Violence."

need to live in; these are endemic. This illustration also makes it clear -- though perhaps it is clear already -- that the notion of totality itself is flawed or in the deepest sense false.

Robert Bernasconi comments on Levinas' statement that "we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where the totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself" (TI 24), writing that "it might be said in consequence that the conditions for the possibility of the experience of totality are at the same time the conditions for the impossibility of the experience of totality, in the sense that the rupture of totality shows that there never was a totality."²⁵ Bernasconi is quite correct. Because all totalities are always already broken, totality never was; totalities are shams; or, as another commentator puts it, the same 'hallucinates' its sameness.²⁶ But in most cases they are a relatively noble sham, made up of good intentions and leading often to good results. In any case totalities, despite the fact that they are broken and therefore not total, are the way we live.

The reason I did not begin this chapter with the temporal scheme I have just outlined is because, useful as it is to understand certain things about Levinas' thinking, it is not really a good reflection of his understanding of reality. No one actually begins alone, or with the experience of the *il y a*; no one takes or makes for herself before ever having met another human being. The scheme is not an account of the development of a child, nor of the development of civilization, nor of any actual temporal development. It should be recalled

²⁵Robert Bernasconi, "Rereading Totality and Infinity," in *The Question of the Other*, ed. Arlene Dallery and Charles Scott (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 23-34, 24.

²⁶Donna Jowett is referring here particularly to the totalizing forms which pass these days under the name of 'communities.' She writes:

This sameness is actually never successfully totalizing; these communities and regimes are never vigilant enough to completely succeed in guarding against 'impurity.' The Same exists only by displacing the difference within it to 'others' marked as inferior through the burden of difference they are forced to carry so that the Same can continue to hallucinate its sameness, purity and privilege to itself.

D. Jowett, "Origins, Occupation and the Proximity of the Neighbour," in *Who is This 'We'?* ed. Godway and Finn, 11-30, 24. While Jowett's condemnation of community as justifying prejudice is intended to apply only to certain totalities, hallucination is a good description of totality in general.

that the comparable scheme in Genesis appears in what is sometimes called the “primeval history,” which may be understood as a non-temporal ‘history’ before the beginning of history, an account of all the elements of reality -- love, sin, the family, the political unit -- laid out in a narrative governed more by significance than by chronology. Levinas’ scheme is similar. All of us can recognize each of its movements without necessarily placing them in a particular order. The terrifying hum of being as an undifferentiated chaos which constitutes the experience of the *il y a* is something we all sense; the dread that it brings, the fear of the absolute indifference which is non-difference, is recognizable as a common variety of angst. So too the need to declare oneself autonomous, the impossibility of such a declaration, the ethical arrest, the conflicts between politics and ethics. Both Levinas and the authors of Genesis 1-11 offer narrative progressions explaining how the human being comes to be as it is or live as it does. But the truth lies in the narrative and not in the progression; the critical thing is not that we came to be what we are in this order, but rather that these stories explain all the parts of what we are.

The most artificial aspect of the Levinasian theoretical scheme -- and it is a fault shared by much of my own discourse up to this point -- is the way it represents totality’s and infinity’s various functions or movements as happening at different times. The misrepresentation is less serious with respect to totality; while totality on the level of the one need not precede totality on the level of the three, they are, at any rate, two distinguishable movements or actions. But infinity’s movements cannot be distinguished from one another except on the level of theory; in experienced reality, there is no prior infinity as opposed to a rupturing infinity. Let us lay the matter out more gradually, at the same time extending our understanding of infinity. It might be said that, in Levinas’ thought, infinity actually has four theoretical functions. (1) It is the primal pre-condition, the basic diversity of things and their differences one from the other. (2) It is the command in the face of the other, his alterity, which accuses me and breaks my totalities. (3) It is the awareness or

acknowledgment of that command, the transformation of that accusation to infinite responsibility. (4) It is what follows the totalities that are engendered by the encounter and re-breaks them or reminds them of their origin in brokenness. None of these functions can properly be expressed in speech, for any words that would express them would nullify them: the word ‘difference,’ for instance, renders all differences as the same difference, and thus as the same *per se*. Levinas does, however, offer certain phrases which can *provisionally* describe the third function, and we could easily follow him by according all four functions provisional words or phrases: for the primal precondition, ‘difference;’ for the command, ‘I am accused;’ for the acknowledgment, “here I am” or “after you;” and for the unsaying or the reminder of brokenness, “interrupt me.”²⁷ The critical point, however, is to say any one of these things is already to have said them all. They are the same moment: they constitute the face-to-face.

I believe this point to be at the core of most of the confusions that arise as one reads Levinas, and so would like to dwell on it a while, offering three examples of the coincidence of two or more of infinity’s functions. We begin with the command and the response to the command (numbers 2 and 3). These ‘two’ events -- the command and the response, the order to serve and the service -- are one in Levinas’ thinking, since, as he understands it, the only way one knows that the command exists is through the graciousness of one’s initial response to the command. To be sure, when a reader of Levinas considers her own experience it may seem to her less problematic to say that one is charged with responsibility before all thought, and rather more problematic to say that one responds to the command, initially, positively, that one’s first response to it is generosity, hospitality, welcoming. But phenomenologically, the two must be there at once; one’s acceptance of responsibility is the way the accusation appears in consciousness. Without the acceptance, one would not be

²⁷“After you” occurs at OB 117 as well as EI 89. “Here I am” occurs frequently throughout *Otherwise than Being*. Gibbs uses “interrupt me” in *Why Ethics?*, drawing on Maurice Blanchot.

able to speak of the command -- or, rather, if one were to speak of a command without recalling the experience of its acceptance, one would be making a dogmatic statement, based on nothing in reality.

Thus when Levinas describes the face-to-face, he refers not only to a great primal laying on of the yoke, but also to great primal shouldering of responsibility. Certainly one can refuse the command and murder the other; this is a commonplace event. In such a case, "the impossibility of declining responsibility is reflected only in the scruple or remorse which precedes or follows the refusal" (OB 6). But the existence of that scruple or remorse is enough already to show that the refusal is secondary to the primary experience in which one is commanded, in which one *feels oneself* to be commanded, and in which one's awareness of being commanded is translated into an awareness of being responsible. "Violence can only aim at a face" (TI 225). All attempts to make the other same occur after one has seen the other as ultimately different, even if this 'seeing' does not rise to the level of what might be called conscious awareness; all dealings one has with the other occur after one has been shown that the other cannot be made same. We will not obscure the fact that this claim is radical and shocking. Although there is certainly a prescriptive or hortative aspect of Levinas' account of ethics -- a call not to forget the ethical encounter -- it is in the main descriptive; the ethical encounter is, for him, built into the nature of reality and the responsibility he describes is something we all know. Levinas' extraordinary descriptions of responsibility -- I am in the other's debt, I am accused, I am persecuted, I am martyred, I am responsible for the other's responsibility, I am responsible "for the very outrage that the other, who qua other excludes me, inflicts on me, for the very persecution with which, before any intention, he persecutes me" (OB 166) -- these descriptions are not spoken for himself alone, or even for himself and then as a call to his readers, but as the conclusion of his thinking back. Were this experience not a shared one, we should not have ethical behaviour at all; "it is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world

pity, compassion, pardon, proximity -- even the little there is" (OB 117).

The second example involves the prior infinity and the infinity discovered in the face-to-face (number 1 and what we can now call number 2-3). Robert Bernasconi postulates, at one point, a distinction between these two things, though he classifies both of them as part of the face-to-face, speaking therefore about a "transcendental" face-to-face and an "empirical" face-to-face.

The question is: what status is to be accorded the face-to-face relation? Here interpretations diverge. Some interpreters understand it as a concrete experience that we can recognize in our lives. Other commentators have understood the face-to-face relation to be the condition for the possibility of ethics and indeed all economic existence and knowledge. If the first interpretation arises from what might be called an empirical reading, the second might be referred to as the transcendental reading. The puzzle is that Levinas himself seems unable to decide between these rival interpretations.²⁸

Bernasconi's problem is not insoluble. The face-to-face is always a concrete experience and nothing but a concrete experience. The transcendence which it inscribes appears only in the concrete, and the possibility for ethics -- which is also the possibility for the subsequent totalities of "economic existence and knowledge" -- also appears only in the concrete. There is no direct experience of the infinity which precedes everything and conditions everything; infinity is discovered in the face -- and its pastness or precedence, its *already-there-ness*, is discovered in the face.

The matter is re-complicated by the fact that Levinas speaks at length in *Totality and Infinity* of Descartes' "idea of the infinite" in which the thinking subject finds herself to contain more than she can contain, or finds in herself an infinity that overflows her. This suggests that there is an access to infinity which is not the face, and which can be found by the human alone prior to an encounter with the face. But, ultimately for Levinas -- if not for Descartes -- one does not have the idea of the infinite outside of or before the encounter with the other.

²⁸Bernasconi, "Rereading *Totality and Infinity*," 23.

To approach the other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly, to have the idea of infinity. . . . The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. (TI 51, 196)

Thus Levinas can describe his thought as “a transcendentalism which begins with ethics” (GCM 90). The transcendent is met only in the empirical; the trace of what is not in the world is met in the world. One cannot ask why we need we need to have an empirical face-to-face if plurality, and thus the ethical assignation, is transcendently always already there; this is the sort of question one can only ask if one has taken the temporality of *Totality and Infinity*’s scheme too literally. By offering us an artificial temporal scheme, Levinas intends only to offer a way back to ethics or infinity from all our starting points, not to restrict himself to that scheme’s chronology.

The third example is constituted by all of the many passages in which Levinas says that infinity does not precede totality, but occurs only after it as what breaks it (number 1-2-3 and number 4).

. . . the idea of infinity is the mode of being, the infinition of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. Its infinition is produced [*se produire*] as revelation, as a positing of its idea in me. . . . [It is] produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality. (TI 26, 104)

Levinas uses this term “*seproduire*” frequently with reference to infinity’s movements. It is possible that he intends to play with the passive/ reflexive nature of the French verb, wanting both the sense of “is produced” (which is the translation Lingis prefers) and also “produces itself.” But he clarifies his use of the term with reference to a different tension, ‘is made’ vs. ‘is revealed.’ He explains that

The term production indicates both the effectuation of a being (an event ‘is produced,’ a car ‘is produced’) and its being brought to light or its exposition (an argument ‘is produced,’ an actor ‘is produced’). The ambiguity of the verb translates the essential ambiguity of the operation by which, at the same time, a

being is accomplished and revealed. (TI 26)²⁹

This ambiguity between being accomplished and being revealed is critical. The mode of being proper to infinity is not the mode of being proper to an objectivity that simply exists as accomplished, and of which one can say ‘it exists first.’ Rather, infinity’s mode of being, its accomplishment, is its revelation. The passage about the ‘infinition of infinity’ stands, then, not only as a crystalline expression of the problem of temporal order in Levinas, but also as its solution. In the passage, all the functions of infinity seem to come together: the revelation (as a rupturing force) is the accomplishment (infinity itself); the empirical is the form of the transcendental. Infinity is always experienced as a breaking; it is “produced [made/ revealed] by withstanding the invasion of a totality” (TI 104). It is only after the fact that we can say that this withstanding refers to a responsibility, this responsibility to a rupturing command, and this command to an always prior transcendent infinity.

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Levinas’ desire to restrict his speech to the level of experienced reality has another result, a result which recomplicates the entire issue. In order to inscribe or express the nature of infinity, in which what appear to be several times come to pass, as it were, at once, in the face-to-face, he describes relation itself as a temporal phenomenon. This thrust forms the theme of his earliest philosophical works, in which *time*, rather than the *space* of *Totality and Infinity* or the *language of Otherwise than Being*, is the substrate in which or out of which relation takes place. This is not, however, to say that time drops away as a theme in Levinas’ later work; it is maintained in the subsequent descriptions of the face (which however are more spatial in form) and the subsequent descriptions of the response

²⁹Le terme de production indique et l’effectuation de l’être (l’événement ‘se produit,’ une automobile ‘se produit’) et sa mise en lumière ou son exposition (un argument ‘se produit,’ un acteur ‘se produit’). L’ambiguïté de ce verbe traduit l’ambiguïté essentielle de l’opération par laquelle, à la fois, s’évêture l’être d’une entité et par laquelle il se révèle (TI-French 11).

or the saying (which however are more linguistic). Let us look briefly at how Levinas' idea of time evolved.³⁰

In the early works, Levinas (very much at this time in dialogue with Heidegger and Bergson) argues against a notion of time in which instants are strung together in a 'time-line' to form an 'eternity.' That vision of time, he suggests in *Existence and Existents* (1947) is a feature of what we have called the level of the one, where the instant is the point at which one wrenches oneself from the *il y a* and eternity is the time one subsequently makes for oneself, an ec-static projection of a past and future made up of a theoretical string of instants of me-ness, a 'postponement,' or 'extension' of immature subjectivity, a contemporaneousness or simultaneity. In *Time and the Other* (1948), he speaks of how the other brings to me another instant, irreconcilable with my instant, and thus introduces to me the real dimensions of past and future: a past in which the other existed before meeting me and a future in which novelty is possible. The critical point is that the dimensions of pastness and futurity brought to me or imposed on me by the other cannot exist, for me, as a time-line, but only as a rupturing of my time line. Thus the conflict that occurs in the encounter is not between two instants or between two time-lines, but between a an instant-made-eternity and the rupturing of that eternity. My time-line is a re-presentation of the instant *as* time, and the other ruptures it by showing me time *as* rupture. The use of time-talk, therefore, allows Levinas to solve a potentially destructive problem in his thinking, namely, that if the other is different from me, and I am different from him (which follows), then we are simply two differences, equally different and therefore equal in difference, and therefore, in a sense, comparable, reciprocal, two halves of a whole, or in short, a totality, a sameness. Levinas is always at pains to stress that his understanding 'breaks the dialectical model of unity in difference' and the use of time-talk is one of the ways he goes about it.

³⁰For this account of Levinas on time, I have drawn on R. Cohen's chapter entitled "On Temporality and Time"; Cohen, *Elevations*, 133-61.

As Richard Cohen explains, Levinas' time is not difference in contrast to difference -- his *other* time in contrast to *my* time -- for this would imply identity or in-difference. Rather it can be described as the difference between (his) difference and (my) contemporaneousness, and thus as non-in-difference, my non-indifference to the other.³¹ In effect, time is ethics.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), this understanding, while not the focus of the text, is nevertheless reiterated and even intensified. The time of 'non-return,' the time which is my going out of myself or having my time-line put into question, is identified as positive ethics. Here synthesis becomes more obviously connected with the spatio-temporal present of the immature subjectivity or egology, the present of presence or the present of representation, and pastness and futurity become more obviously connected with the other or others, with the one who is there before me, awaiting the ethical encounter, and with the one who is not yet, to whom I dedicate my life and my work. Presence or the present is always mine; any other way of thinking of it -- for instance, the postulation of a present in the life of someone else long dead and past or someone not yet born and future -- is merely a projection disguising the presence/ present of my thinking. But the other ruptures the present by revealing to me the existence of a past that was never (my) present and a future which will never be (my) present.

One of the problematic temporal structures which we have identified -- that an already-there infinity only appears or 'comes to be' in the face -- can now be seen as the only possible mode of relation. It is not that several times come to pass, in the face-to-face, at once -- but, as it were, that *the face-to-face comes to pass in several times*. There must be a temporal gap or lapse between me and the other if his alterity is to be maintained, a gap such that he both arrives on the scene first and also remains on the scene afterwards, presenting to me a past and future that repudiate my 'past' and 'future.' If he is to become

³¹Cohen, *Elevations*, 149.

my first priority, my 'before-me' -- if the reversal of priorities that constitutes ethics is to take place -- then he must be temporally beyond and the source of a temporality that ruptures my temporality. His height (to use the spatial term from *Totality and Infinity*) must be a non-simultaneity with simultaneous time.

In *Otherwise than Being* (1974), the philosophy of time is reinscribed, once again, into the linguistic forms that mark that text. Thus the saying, which bears reference to a past insofar as it is constituted by exposure and to a future insofar as it exists as an unsaying, becomes "the impossibility of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present, the insurmountable diachrony of time" (OB 38). From this text on, 'diachrony' becomes Levinas' term for the time of rupture. In "Diachrony and Representation" (1985), diachrony is connected to alterity, but it is not equivalent to alterity. It refers to the non-synchronic existence together of sameness and alterity; or, to be more precise, the non-synchronic existence together of synchrony and alterity. Diachrony is the tension between a tension and a harmony; it is not a time, but the coexistence of two times on different planes. Were diachrony merely alterity as opposed to synchrony, the two terms would exist as opposites, that is, on the same plane; they could be synchronized. But "time and ethics effect a curvature."³² Diachrony and synchrony cannot be synchronized; the attempt to synchronize them is one way of describing avoidable totality.

The reason Levinas uses temporal speech is that it succeeds in moving beyond the 'locations' of ontology to a point where spatial speech fails. Diachrony is otherwise than being; it is wrenched out of the kind of history that places or locates things on a line, in a way more profound than any spatial speech can wrench things out of their placement or location in a space. But the things engaged in a diachronous relation are not themselves outside of history, nor are they outside of ontology: they are existents and cannot escape the

³²Cohen, *Elevations*, 157.

temporality and locales that accrue to beings. What is outside, in a time which is not a temporality or a history, and which cannot therefore be pinned down or hung up, is their relation. Their relation exists in a non-time or a non-space; it is diachronous.

But let us step back from these elevated and somewhat abstruse analyses of time. It is enough, for now, to draw from them some insight into the extraordinary boundaries which Levinas draws around infinity or alterity, boundaries which protect it from being subsumed into a contemporaneousness, a synchrony, a simultaneity -- in short, into a presence or a totality. Infinity remains never-present even when it is manifest in experience in the face of the other. It is thus preserved, so that as well as standing always at the beginning of things (although never as a starting point) it also stands always at the end. Or rather, it stands as the lack of an end, the destruction of all *teloi* on which one might come to rest. All totalities have the tendency to claim finality, even those that are endemic; which is to say that all totalities lean toward their perverse versions. It is relatively easy to forget the saying in one's said, or the other in one's politics. Most people, most of the time, are armed against the face-to-face; we do not see the eyes of the other because we are busy looking at whether they are blue,³³ or whether the other has a higher social standing, or whether he is carrying a knife, or one of a hundred considerations which have nothing to do with his alterity. Conceptual totalities -- categorizations and closed structures -- appear to us to be what is most important in making our way through the world. And they seem, too, to

³³The face is a metaphor. It may, thus, be taken too literally, which is perhaps why Levinas insists that it would be best not even to notice the colour of the other's eyes (EI 85). But the fact is that the face mostly drops out of *Otherwise than Being*, replaced by the more abstract term 'proximity.' The common argument is that *Otherwise than Being* differs from *Totality and Infinity* by being less ontological, following the critique of Levinas made by Derrida in "Violence and Metaphysics." I am convinced that this is not so. Some aspects of Derrida's charge of ontological thinking are merely playful, some are critiques of Derrida himself as much as of Levinas or laments about the necessary inadequacies into which philosophy is forced, some are quite serious and trenchant. In the sense relevant here, however, Levinas was never an ontologist. The figures, times and locations in *Totality and Infinity* are all metaphors. They are made less metaphorical and more abstract in *Otherwise than Being* simply because they were understood too literally. This shift comes, unfortunately, at the expense of their concreteness. I will discuss the problematic loss of the knack of reading in any manner except the literal in chapter two.

be capable of structuring infinity; indeed, the very interchangeability of the two terms in the common parlance -- by which the term infinity is understood as totality and thus rendered closed, or finished -- suggests that totality is a concept greater than infinity, or that infinity is a part of totality. It is very difficult to shake the conviction that the diachrony can be rendered a synchrony, especially given the fact that Levinas' writing itself --like all speech and all writing -- synchronizes, re-presenting all diachrony as there, on the page, in the moment of writing or the moment of reading. But since infinity is unencompassable, it renders totality or synchrony always ruptured, always not-closed. Levinas writes that after the ethical encounter "I simply cannot anymore" by which he means that I cannot ontologize or thematize or synchronize the other. My structures remain broken.

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And yet it is not so. As we have seen, not only am I perfectly capable after the ethical encounter of ontologizing, synchronizing and thematizing, I do these things of necessity; I *must* do them. I must do what I "simply cannot anymore" do. How is this to be unraveled? The answer, broadly, is that to create totality 'infinitely,' or history diachronously, or sameness ethically, I must do it badly. And 'doing it badly' is the beginning of the answer to the narrower problem we are about to take up.

III. Ethics and politics

I can make sameness ethically, but I cannot make sameness ethical; I can totalize ethically by totalizing badly or 'untotally,' but I cannot make an ethical totality. That this is so, for Levinas, and the reasons why it must be so, will form the subject of this section. We will restrict our description to politics, but at the same time we should note that this is hardly a restriction at all. There are many ways in which one might lay out the relations that exist between an individual, her other, their society, various societies, 'society' as a concept or phenomenon, their state, various states, the 'state' as a concept or phenomenon, groups

or allegiances that exist within the society or state, and groups or allegiances (such as religious communities) that cross the boundaries of societies or states. All of these things exist concretely, all of them are related one to another, and most of us have opinions about how they ought best to relate. Levinas, however, is in general interested only in a single aspect of these relations, an aspect that arises from his basic structure, namely, the transition between the two and the three, or the face-to-face and 'politics.' Politics, in his usage, inscribes all group relations, all relations that include more than me and the other who stands in proximity to me; all third-level totalities, including the said, are politics.

The relation of two, for Levinas, is the realm of the ethical. The entry of the third always means the ethical will be compromised. But as we have seen, the third is there in the eyes of the other. If the third is already there in the ethical encounter, why can relations of three not be ethical? When Levinas is pressed in an interview with Richard Kearney on this point, he admits readily that third level structures -- those of the said, or of institutions, or of society, or in short of politics -- can be 'moral,' but refuses to admit that they can be 'ethical.'

This distinction between the ethical and the moral is very important here. By morality I mean a series of rules relating to social behaviour and civic duty. But while morality thus operates in the socio-political order of organizing and improving our human survival, it is ultimately founded on an ethical responsibility toward the other. As *prima philosophia*, ethics cannot itself legislate for society or produce rules of conduct whereby society might be revolutionized or transformed. . . . When I talk of ethics as a 'disinter-estedness,' I do not mean that it is indifference; I simply mean that it is a form of vigilant passivity to the call of the other which precedes our interest in being, our inter-est, as a being-in-the-world attached to property and appropriating what is other than itself to itself.³⁴ Morality is what governs the world of political 'inter-estedness,' the social interchanges between citizens in a society. Ethics, as the extreme exposure and sensitivity of one subjectivity to another, becomes morality and hardens its skin as soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal 'third' -- the world of government,

³⁴With the hyphens in the words 'inter-est' and 'disinter-est,' Levinas plays with etymology. Inter-est is intended to suggest 'being between' or 'being among,' that is, living in society or with the third, while disinter-est refers to the relation with the other, which is prior to the entry of the third and thus before 'being among.' This means that disinterestedness appears in Levinas' writings with quite a different meaning than is common; it does not refer to impartiality or objectivity, which are aspects of the relation with the third.

institutions, tribunals, prisons, schools, committees, and so on. (RK 29-30)

For Levinas, a grouping of two cannot provide ‘rules of conduct’ for society, and a grouping of three cannot be ethical. He insists on the distinction, reserving the word ‘ethics’ for a second-level movement, and referring to salutary third-level movements here as ‘morality’ and, much more often, as ‘justice.’³⁵

What is the distinction’s status? What does it mean to say that politics or justice cannot be ethical? These questions must be extended or fleshed out before an answer can be provided. We have seen that Levinas’ account of the basic structure of experience or consciousness or reality involves the paradoxical interaction of same and other, such that the other calls for the same and also vies with the same. Same and other are continuous insofar as the other calls for the same; they are in tension insofar as they vie with one another. Here arises a pressing question for an interpreter of Levinas with an interest in politics. Is she to stress the continuity or the tension? Is she to treat the realm of the other and the realm of the same, ethics and justice, as fundamentally connected, or fundamentally opposed?

At times it appears that Levinas emphasizes the tension. In the last chapter of the third section of *Totality and Infinity*, he first mounts a defense of institutions, and then follows it up with a scathing denunciation. He begins:

Freedom is not realized outside of social and political institutions, which open to it the access to fresh air necessary for its expansion, its respiration, and even, perhaps, its spontaneous generation. . . . An existence that is free, and not a velleity for freedom, presupposes a certain organization of nature and society.

But then he explains that the objective judgment of these institutions kills the will of the individual as subjectivity. Having released it from a ‘brutish tyranny,’ their objectivity delivers it to a new tyranny, to the totality of “the universal and of the impersonal, an order that is inhuman, though distinct from the brutish.” He continues, explaining that man

³⁵On justice see note 16. I will use the term justice in this thesis only in the sense that Levinas gives it *after Totality and Infinity*. Morality is a much more slippery term, and though I will use it, in this section, as synonymous with justice, it should be noted that Levinas very often uses it (perhaps indeed, everywhere except the Kearney interview) as a synonym for ethics.

asserts himself against this violent reduction only by subsequent experiences of the ethical encounter with the other (TI 241). In an interview with Raoul Mortley, he calls these subsequent manifestations of the two, in and yet outside or beyond the world of the three, “charity.” There he adds one of his clearest suggestions of a tension between ethics and justice: “I always say that justice is the primary violence” (RM 18).

But there are also suggestions in Levinas that we should emphasize the continuity. These emerge often in his use of terms other than ‘ethics’ and ‘justice,’ for instance, ‘responsibility.’ Can three be responsible? Here Levinas vacillates somewhat. In the discussion of politics in chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*, he writes, first, that the symmetry required by justice is “a betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity [i.e. a betrayal of anarchic responsibility³⁶]” (OB 158), but then seems to retract this idea, writing that

in no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility, a neutralization of the glory of the infinite, a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial duo would become a trio. (OB 159, italics mine)

The first statement, which seems to suggest a tension between ethical responsibility and justice, is corrected in the second statement. And it is the thrust of the second which is sustained in the discourse that follows. The just society Levinas sketches here is one in which justice would exist without existing at the expense of ethics. Moreover, he argues that to preserve ethics in society is necessary not only because of the demands of ethics as something distinct from justice but is also the fundamental requirement for justice itself; the definition of the just society is the society which allows ethics to exist within justice. So while justice is not ethics, to be justice it must allow its justice to be ruptured by ethics. Justice suddenly seems to have a double-meaning: it appears as the element of thirdness which is ruptured by the relation between two, and also as that rupture. Justice moves ever

³⁶Illeity is God, whose role in all of this we will discuss in the fourth section of this chapter and then in greater detail in chapter two. We only need note here that the term allows him to speak of a betrayal of responsibility without speaking of a betrayal of the particular other who stands before me.

closer to ethics.

And yet this creates difficulties for Levinas. He continues, writing that because the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of two, justice remains justice only in a society where there is no distinction between those closest and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest (OB 159).

There is to be “*no distinction*” between the other who stands before me and the thousand other others in my society (or indeed, the billions of other others in the world). What does Levinas mean? If there is *truly* no distinction between the other and the other’s other, then ethics is politics, or politics ethics. If it is only that the just society does not distinguish between the one near and the one far off then proximity -- the forum of the ethical encounter -- is surely lost in society, and the alterity of the other lost in the equal claims of the other others. The fact is that Levinas does wish to maintain the distinction between the two and the three, or the one near and the ones far off; for the one closest does appear to have the distinct honour of being impossible to pass by. But he also wishes to blur that distinction, or to suggest a continuity between ethics and politics, or an ethical politics. He sums the tension up in an interview conducted in 1975, explaining that the distinction between the two terms is correct “at the same time that the proximity between these terms is true” (GCM 82). Robert Gibbs devotes much of his chapter on Levinas and Marx to an argument for a socially responsible Levinas.³⁷ His main concern is to show that Levinas’ ethics is not only a matter of two individuals *alone*, or not a ‘private’ matter. This he draws from Levinas’ delineation of the involvement of two people utterly wrapped up in one another as a realm of the same, a delineation which generally occurs in critiques of Martin Buber and his I-Thou relation. The exclusive involvement of two, or, as Gibbs puts it, the “honeymoon,” is not the meaning of the Levinasian face-to-face, and thus the face-to-face “is not exclusive, is not

³⁷Robert Gibbs, “Marx and Levinas: Liberation in Society,” chap. in *Correlations*, 229-254.

a withdrawal from others.”³⁸ Gibbs point is well taken. The fact that the face-to-face is not withdrawn or intimate suggests a continuity between it and social relations, or at least, the de-polarization of the distinction. We have already seen that Levinas praised certain three-somes, and may now add the fact that he criticizes certain two-somes. There is good and bad in both arenas; the distinction between two and three may not be understood, in any simple way as the distinction between good and bad. And there are also responsibilities in both arenas; as much as I am called to feed the other with bread from my own mouth, *we* are called together in such a way that “we give each other commands, we do work, all for the sake of social justice.”³⁹ Again the distinction is blurred, and again, it is not abandoned entirely. It remains the case for Levinas that ethics *only* occurs in the relation with the other -- even if it does not occur in everything that might, in common parlance, be designated as a ‘relation’ between two. The shouldering of the symmetrical responsibility proper to justice depends on and is conditioned by the asymmetrical face-to-face which precedes it.

The poor one, the stranger presents himself as equal. His equality in this essential poverty consists in referring to the third, thus present at the encounter and whom, in the midst of his destitution, the other already serves. He joins himself to me. . . . [But] the *you* is posited before a *we*. (TI 188)

Ethics and justice -- the *you* and the *we* -- appear more and more to be continuous one with the other but remain distinct. And the *you* remains prior to the *we*.

Gibbs also points to the transitional role of the family in between the realms of two and three. Levinas’ analyses of the family are extended and complex; here I will say only enough about them to make it clear that they are another forum in which ethics and justice are blurred. The love relation, for Levinas (and despite his critique of Buber) is at once a relation with an other and also a social phenomenon; the lover stands as paradigmatic for the aspect of every relation which commands ethically and requires justice at the same time.

³⁸Gibbs, *Correlations*, 232.

³⁹Gibbs, *Correlations*, 233. He cites the extended discussion of the “we” at CPP, 43–44.

And reproduction -- or, to use Levinas' technical term, "fecundity" -- inscribes the ambiguity even more clearly than the relation with the lover. My child is 'me' before he is 'not-me;' to be precise, he is me though I am not him. Therefore my relation with my child, or with lover and child at once, two and three, may provide a model of society in which ethics and justice occur together. Gibbs writes that there is, in Levinas, "a social programme of sorts, based on the discontinuity and separation of selves into in the family, which can stand as an alternative institutionalization of the responsibility demanded by the face."⁴⁰

What would such a society look like? The matter is clarified somewhat by the fact that Levinas connects fecundity to religion, thinking surely of Judaism which can be understood, despite the number of centuries that have passed since Abraham, as an extended family. But a Jewish society, or a society based on the model of Judaism, does not in the end quite turn out to be a society in which ethics and justice merge. Rather, such a society turns out to have, as its defining characteristic, what we earlier called, 'making totality badly,' or ensuring that justice understands itself to be a broken totality and remains open to further breaks accomplished in the name of ethics. Gibbs writes:

Jewish 'normative' thought focused intensively on [the structures between responsibility and sociality] precisely because political sovereignty was lacking. Without the power to conquer others, nor the threat of large influx -- precisely because of their oppressed condition -- Jewish thinkers framed institutions in a manner that is instructive. . . . The development of institutions that could replace the sacral practices of the temple in Jerusalem and priestly authority required a mode of reflection that holds particular interest for an attempt to develop social institutions that could replace the totalizing proclivities of modern states.⁴¹

Structures are found in Judaism, and especially perhaps in rabbinic Judaism, which, while they remain totalities, mitigate the betrayal of ethics necessary to totality. In rabbinic law, justice is structured so as always to recall the ethical. This is accomplished most

⁴⁰Gibbs, *Correlations*, 240.

⁴¹Gibbs, *Correlations*, 251.

notably by the partial erasure of the distinction between legislative and juridical functions. Rather than having a single fixed law which must be interpreted according to particular cases, the law itself changes and grows with every case that is brought before it. There is, thus, no set of principles by which all cases are measured symmetrically or equally, instead we find the constant subordination of the general rule to the particular case. In other words, rabbinic law, like rabbinic hermeneutics, is grounded in a refusal of closure. Just as one turns and turns the Torah ceaselessly, because everything is in it and there is thus no end to what can be drawn out of it, so the volumes of Responsa pile up over the centuries with no end in sight of the modifications that can be made to *halachah* as new particulars arise. Just as the Talmud preserves entire debates, including dissenting or even 'heretical' opinions, so the *halachah* contained within the Talmud and the subsequent texts is expressed and formed from a plurality of voices, each of which dissents or differs in its own way. In a society founded on these books and this law, ethics -- the respect for difference -- becomes the mode of justice. Certainly then the fecundity of Judaism is the best example of a continuity between ethics and justice in Levinas' thinking; it allows us to rethink the basic structure as more complex and nuanced than it at first appears.

But even rabbinic law -- for all that it hesitates over a judgment, subsumes the general to the particular, and preserves its breaks or its openness -- is law, and therefore to some extent works with the idea of the precedent or the rule, an idea which imposes symmetry. Perhaps this is the beginning of the explanation for the fact that, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas reasserts the tension in the basic structure, speaking less about fecundity and religion and more about the way ethical service to the other is betrayed in the institutions of the 'state.' Even before *Otherwise than Being*, the state was probably the most dubious of totalities in Levinas' understanding. Gibbs follows up his argument that "Levinas devotes much of *Totality and Infinity* to discovering a sociality that will preserve responsibility" with the qualification that such responsibility is hardly ever connected to the

secular sociality of the state. Indeed, for Levinas, “the state, as an institution of reason and of universality, is always drawn toward totalitarianism” since from its viewpoint “my obsession with the other and my infinizing responsibility for the other are impossible.”⁴² And while in *Totality and Infinity* other totalities or varieties of politics, such as those of institutional religion, need not necessarily lead to the inception of the state, in *Otherwise than Being* religion more or less disappears and “any full social responsibility has become impossible. . . . Social institutions are now limited to political ones. . . . Liberation becomes . . . a praxis [which] can never be established or instituted.”⁴³ Thus, for all the blurring, the distinction between ethics and justice remains clear enough throughout Levinas’ corpus that a profound tension between them can be reasserted in *Otherwise than Being*.

Why does Levinas not allow the distinction to drop? What is its significance to him? There are several relevant issues, and not all of them sit well with one another. They can be divided into two groups, the first of which stresses the continuity between ethics and justice and involves the necessity of preserving the two in separate spheres because of their separate functions, and the second of which stresses the tension and maintains that the separation is necessary so that politics can remain open to ethical critique. We will take up the first first.

Levinas is neither an ‘essentialist’ nor a ‘conventionalist;’ to the best of my knowledge he never makes use of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘convention’ except to dismiss them. When John Caputo describes the position of Derrida’s deconstruction with respect to this question, his words apply equally (and first) to Levinas’ ethics:

Everything in deconstruction . . . is organized around . . . the incoming of the other. . . . Indeed . . . deconstruction is best thought of as a certain *inventionalism*. For if Derrida is anything but an essentialist, someone who hangs everything on the hook

⁴²Gibbs, *Correlations*, 238, 240, 241.

⁴³Gibbs, *Correlations*, 242.

of unchanging essences, that does not mean he is a conventionalist, which is but an alternative way to hang things up (or tie them down). . . . The business of deconstruction is to open and loosen things up.⁴⁴

The ethics/ justice distinction (in one of its several aspects) is intended to supplant the nature/ convention distinction, to categorize the same phenomena in a new way, replacing 'nature' with the idea of the for-the-other and 'convention' with the idea of a social justice arising directly from the for-the-other though compromising it as well. This is to say, in short, that one of the functions of the ethics/ justice distinction is to provide a critique of the idea, proffered by thinkers from Hobbes to Freud and expressed generally with some form of the nature/ convention distinction, that ethics is unnatural, that the state of nature or the condition of the pre-social human being is a-ethical, and that ethics is the result of the stabilizing structures necessary for us to live in society. Levinas' new distinction allows him to retain any truth there might be in the old one -- that is to say, the fact that certain of our political, economic, social and religious institutions (including certainly most 'schools' and 'committees,' see RK 29-30 cited above) exist for the purpose of curbing violence, and, more generally, of making social life easier and smoother or of making their members 'good citizens' -- while also ridding himself of the idea that the difficulties that these institutions exist to solve or smooth over represent the last word on the 'nature' of the human being or the human being in 'the state of nature,' or that these difficulties are the decisive factor in the formation of polities. Levinas puts the matter, typically, in the form of a rhetorical question: One must know "if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled . . . proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendships and faces" (OB 159-60). The answer Levinas seeks cannot be stated using the Hobbesian distinction, but can be stated in terms of ethics and justice: for while convention cannot be natural, justice can be ethical.

⁴⁴John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 42.

But ultimately Levinas is not using his distinction to support the idea that some of our social rules are designed merely to keep the peace, nor indeed is the distinction intended to apply primarily to schools and committees. Rather ethics/ justice is, I think fundamentally, ethics/ *halachah*. From a Levinasian perspective, *halachah* cannot be ethics; it cannot be the epiphany of absolute rupture which is the service of the other. But it can come from this rupture, and recall or inscribe this rupture, standing as a structured set of normative rules on the basis of which a society can function but which nevertheless exists in some measure to re-rupture the conceptions or consciousness of the one who practices it, to take her, as it were, by surprise and ask of her something which could not have come from within her. Levinas does not wish, like Buber, to reject the *halachah* as non-ethical, nor does he wish, like other thinkers, to reinterpret the *halachah* until it is merely a manifestation of the ethical impulses of the human heart, or indeed, of the encounter with the other. *Halachah*, for him, is neither ethics nor non-ethical; it is the translation of the ethical encounter into the structures which will maintain a stable and just society; it is ethics with a 'hard skin' (see RK 29-30 cited above). A discussion of the role of the *halachah* in Levinas' thinking cannot, however, be completed until we have spoken of how God figures for Levinas in the ethical encounter and the social realm. We will therefore take up the question briefly in the next chapter.

So far my account of the reasons for the distinction has hung on the connection between ethics and justice, or ethics and politics; the connection is maintained both in order to criticize the Hobbesian philosophical anthropology and also in order to make a space for *halachah* without reducing it to ethics. The second set of reasons stresses the tension in the distinction and rests, very broadly, on Levinas' profound uneasiness about the hegemonic, irresponsible and violent tendencies of societies, states and communities (we will use community as the general term). What is interesting here is that Levinas is not particularly concerned about the violence done in or by involuntary communities -- communities into

which one is born or finds oneself thrust -- but is deeply concerned about the violence of the voluntary community -- the neighbourhood in which one chooses to live, the church one attends, the state to which one gives one's willing allegiance. The ultimate voluntary community is the ideology (or avoidable totality) to which one devotes oneself and in which one is lost. The ultimate involuntary community is the human race where it is possible to be found by the other.

The beginning of the problem is simply that (voluntary) communities are exclusive. Donna Jowett, speaking of her own experience, writes that "it is proximity and not community [or any third-level institution] which produces the relation with the neighbour I have not chosen."

If I regard my occupation of space, my being . . . as a matter of entitlement I may, through altruism, be moved to behave benevolently or charitably, but this comes from my sense of fortification and authority; it does not put that fortification and authority into question. . . . I may be prepared to give up some surplus . . . [but I do not give up my life, my presence in being, my occupation of this and other spaces.⁴⁵

In Jowett's experience it is not possible to be called into question by a community one has decided to become a member of; this can only happen through the unchosen face, the face that *chooses me*, or, in Levinas' terms, 'elects' me. Jowett draws support for her argument from Levinas' assertion that

it is as if the other established a relationship or a relationship were established whose whole intensity consisted in *not presupposing the idea of community*. A responsibility stemming from a time before my freedom. . . . Responsibility for my neighbour, for the stranger or sojourner, to which *nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me -- nothing in the order of the thing, of the something, of number, or causality* (LR 83, italics mine).

Levinas strikes a chord with this idea of a responsibility which is not a (voluntary) community and which stands against and breaks all communal allegiances; the idea is picked up again and again in the thought of continental philosophers who describe a

⁴⁵Donna Jowett, "Origins, Occupations," 21.

community of responsibility as one which is involuntary and incomplete, one whose 'boundaries' remain open and whose 'principles' remain un-fixed -- a community which, insofar as it can be called a community at all, must 'not yet' exist. Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of an "inoperative community," a community of lovers where community is communion with the divine and thus is always to be understood as not yet achieved; Maurice Blanchot speaks of a "negative community," a community of writers "in which the aesthetic articulation of writing signifies as a doomed effort at ecstatic communication, but which nevertheless points to a ghostly absence of community";⁴⁶ Alphonso Lingis speaks of a "community of those who have nothing in common," a community of the dying to which everyone belongs; Georges Bataille speaks of an "absence of community," a community of the passionate, again encompassing all human beings; and Jacques Derrida speaks of a "community of the question," a community of "those who can still be called philosophers."⁴⁷ All of these thinkers take off from the same experience, the experience of the closedness and violence of the voluntary or 'present' or manifest community -- the community which knows what it is and what it stands for -- as opposed to the non-violent absent community, the community of desire or of a 'trace' which cannot be achieved or realized. The position is basic anti-idealism or anti-utopianism, at least if idealism and utopianism are to be understood as representing the impulse to realize an ideal society or to build perfect institutions.⁴⁸ The political idealist conceives of his own understanding as encompassing both justice and ethics, i.e. as a realization of the ethical on the level of the third. It is, according to Levinas, the societies or regimes founded on this understanding which are the most destructive. Marxism, for instance, is, an attempt to found a society on

⁴⁶Karim Benammar, "Absences of Community" in *Who is This 'We'?* ed. Godway and Finn, 31-43. Benammar discusses Nancy, Bataille, Blanchot and Lingis.

⁴⁷Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 80, 79.

⁴⁸This qualification has to be made because, although Levinas is scornful of idealism, he is rather fond of utopianism, which he defines distinctively as the movement toward a u-topos, a non-place, a transcendence which is not realizable in institutions but which is present as the 'site' of relation.

the relation that can only be ethical, to found a society on charity.⁴⁹ And once a society believes itself to have such a foundation, nothing holds it back from violence. “Politics, left within itself, bears a tyranny within itself” (TI 300). The only way to preserve the openness of a community is to preserve a conception of an ethics which operates in its own sphere and calls all communities into question, an ethics which calls everything into question, an ethics the very nature of which is a calling into question, that is to say, the ethics of the involuntary encounter with the other. The maintenance of a firm distinction between ethics and justice means that we are able to criticize or revise justice (including *halachah*, which, as we have said, remains open to such revision) from a ground which is prior and more solid than any ground which might be provided by a different third-level institution. This is, I think, the main reason Levinas continues always to maintain the distinction.

This is not to say that institutions cannot legitimately criticize one another. Canada can legitimately criticize America for cultural hegemony; Palestine can in certain cases legitimately criticize Israel and in other cases Israel Palestine; the church can legitimately criticize the doings of the state or the condition of modern society; the state can blow the whistle legitimately on certain doings in the church. Moreover, institutions can legitimately criticize certain interactions (we cannot call them relations) between two: abusive interactions, irresponsible interactions, and perhaps even honeymoon interactions which are constituted by a withdrawal from society; a religious community or congregation which intercedes in a marriage, for instance, seeking to make that marriage better or to bring the couple into the community, is in all likelihood acting in a way which is unexceptionably praiseworthy. However, all of these interventions or critiques exist, for Levinas, on the level of the third, or the level of justice -- they refer to the level of the second for their existence, but they are not, themselves, of the level of the second. The difference between

⁴⁹From Poirié, *Qui êtes-vous?* 134, quoted in Gibbs, *Correlations*, 252. See also TI 216, where Levinas writes that “idealism completely carried out reduces all ethics to politics.”

the two levels must be maintained precisely so that the second level can continue to ground, fuel and renew the third.⁵⁰ Moreover, to Levinas' way of thinking, all communities without exception depend on the second level for this fuel or renewal. For, although the need for the ethics/ justice distinction is particularly apparent in the case of the state, it remains the case that all institutions must modify or compromise their acceptance of the infinite and extraordinary demands of ethics simply in order to act in the world; politics must operate in ways which are not absolutely ethical, even though they may be just. This is why they must remain open to the critique which comes, according to Levinas, ultimately from the face-to-face, the critique raised on behalf of the other. The ultimate purpose of the face-to-face may well be social critique, but the face-to-face cannot be the same as social critique if it is to continue to have this purpose.⁵¹

⁵⁰Levinas is becoming increasingly popular among groups seeking a renewal of our government or society. See for instance Geraldine Finn, "The Space Between Ethics and Politics" in *Who is This 'We'?* ed. Godway and Finn, 101-116. Finn criticizes the position that reduces politics to ethics as 'idealist' and the position that reduces ethics to politics as 'materialist.' [We note here some semantic conflict between her position and the statement by Levinas quoted in note 48. Levinas would, I think, link idealism and materialism -- both the reduction of everything to what might be called 'ethics' and the reduction of everything to what might be called 'politics' could be termed either idealism or materialism from his perspective.] Finn laments the fact that most feminist discourse, while it may not take up a strictly materialist position, remains on the level of the political without reference to the ethical, offering only 'technical' suggestions and thus working with the norms in operation instead of challenging them. Real political change, she holds, can only be brought about by referring, from the political level (which feminism, qua collectivity, must exist on) back to an ethical level, back to a 'space' of 'desire,' the "space of the specifically ethical encounter with others (otherness) as other and not more of the same: as otherwise-than-being simply a re-presentation of a pre-conceived, pre-scribed, pre-determined and thus predictive category and class -- a re-presentation which relieves us of the ethical responsibility of attending to the particularity of the other" ("Space," 108). All political praxis speaks from this space, she argues, and if we want good politics we must understand this to be true. We must not 'obfuscate' or 'abandon' our reference back to the ethical space, while at the same time knowing that its demands must be rendered practical, subordinated to the political.

⁵¹Levinas' distinction between ethics and justice is in many ways comparable to Derrida's distinction between justice and law, of which Caputo writes: "Justice and the law are not supposed to be opposites but to interweave: laws ought to be just, otherwise they are monsters; and justice requires the force of law, otherwise it is a wimp." Having said this, Caputo proceeds to define three 'aporias' in Derrida's thought on the matter: (1) Judgment must reside in the space between the general rule and the particular case. The law must therefore be constantly re-invented by justice. Otherwise the judge is not a human being but a calculating machine. (2) Decision must be preceded and conditioned by a moment of indecision -- or indeed, undecidability -- if it is to be anything other than mere calculation, and thus "deciding is a possibility sustained by its impossibility." (3) It is nevertheless urgently necessary to make judgments and to make them *now*, rather than waiting for 'all the facts to come in.' These aporias, which Caputo also describes as axiomatic for Derrida's 'inventionalism,' describe the nature of Levinas' distinction quite well. Caputo, *Nutshell*, 136-9.

Surely, then, Levinas' insistence that space be reserved outside of the moral for the ethical has a great deal to do with the dismal failure of third-level institutions in the twentieth century to act either ethically or morally. Why, at the time of the Holocaust did the political bodies of the world show so badly? Why did the religious bodies do so little? This is not to say that collectivities, or politics, or coherence are always or even usually evil. It is to say that Levinas seeks a moment or a point which is non-compromisable, and that this point, for him, is the ethical point. The relation between two people is itself no guarantee against murder, but in it and only in it is found something which is not clothed in the slight falsehoods necessary to social interaction or to description, something which is not tainted by demanding to be believed or accepted or conformed to -- a willingness, an openness, a frankness, an exposure, a gift.⁵²

⁵²The people who have written on Levinas' politics, besides Gibbs at whom we have briefly looked, can be divided, broadly, into three types. First, there are those who read Levinas as a champion of identity politics, ethnicity politics, interest group politics, pluralism, multiculturalism, or even gender politics. Michael Oppenheim, for instance, argues that Levinas' other can be understood to mean 'women' or 'non-Jews' both of which groups are marginalized by mainstream Judaism, and that his pro-other stance thus provides a recipe for a Jewish pluralism which would respect the two groups without making them same. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, for another instance, argues that Levinas' critique of the objectivity and cultural relativism of the social sciences is a call for moral engagement, which is to say an "activism" that can be realized not only by teaching literacy and building infrastructure, but also by working to support the local (Brazilian) candidate of the Socialist Worker's Party. Both Oppenheim and Scheper-Hughes misunderstand Levinas' other as referring to marginalized groups of people. See M. Oppenheim, *Speaking/ Writing of God*, and N. Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 36.3 (June 1995): 409-420, 438-9. The second type of writer, like Oppenheim and Scheper-Hughes, is in favour of identity politics, but, unlike them, is aware that Levinas doesn't lend himself to its support. Thus Enrique Dussel writes that "Levinas was a determinant in the late sixties in my development of a Philosophy of Liberation . . . : Levinas awakened us from the 'closed' ontological dream. But we had to go beyond him rapidly because of his inability to develop a politics of liberation." E. Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, trans. and ed. E. Mendieta (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996) 39n.20. Thus, too, Andrew Shanks explains that "a truly presuppositionless thinking must involve some consideration of the practical as well . . . Levinas' own morally therapeutic thought may be seen as a brilliant but nevertheless one-sided beginning. Given the complementary need for prophylaxis . . . its completion [i.e. the completion of Levinas' thought] will surely also bring us back into the Hegelian territory in the end. A. Shanks, *Civil Society, Civil Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell 1995) 198-9. Dussel argues for a pluralistic Marxist regime, Shanks for a pluralistic communitarian regime in which interest groups receive government funding -- but the point is that both understand that arguments for pluralisms leave Levinas behind. Dussel states why most clearly: "Levinas showed us how to formulate the question of the irruption of the Other, but we could still not develop a politics . . . which placed in question the ruling Totality (which dominates and excludes the Other) and would develop a new Totality. This critical-practical questioning of a new Totality was exactly the question of 'Liberation' With this Levinas could not help us." Dussel, *Underside*, 81-2, italics mine. Dussel and Shanks do not misunderstand Levinas but

There remains, however, a problem with Levinas' description of the relation between ethics and politics, or the two and the three. He never adequately explains how it is that we move from the ethical encounter into third-level institutions. He is much more interested in tracing all good third-level institutions and the critiques they can provide of other third-level institutions *back* to their origin in second-level ethics than he is in painstakingly describing the movement *forward*. Parts of the transition are sketched in the account of the development of economics in *Totality and Infinity*: I require a variety of things to give to the other, and thus gift requires not only labour but also exchange and therefore rules of exchange; presumably, then, the rules of justice that grow up around society emerge from these initial rules. But the account is not fleshed out. If it were, it would be possible for us to determine the precise point where ethics gets lost in the symmetrical structurings that follow, or at any rate the degrees by which it is compromised, covered over, and finally at times forgotten. It would also be possible for us to grasp more clearly why it is that the ethical encounter can at one time be transformed into the *halachah*

know that, to use him politically, one must depart from him at least to the extent of interpreting the other as a group; they also know that this re-interpretation is precisely the creation of totality. The third type of writer can be represented by Simon Critchley and Geraldine Finn. Critchley argues that although Levinas does not support a particular politics -- advocating instead a 'democracy' that is 'always not yet here' -- he does understand that politics is both necessary and good as long as it remains open to the ethical critique that arises from the *single* other. Finn argues, analogously, that although Levinas does not support a feminism, he allows us to understand feminisms as necessary and good as long as they too remain open to the critique of the single other. Critchley and Finn, as I see it, take Levinas as far into the political realm -- and the realm of interest politics or identity politics -- as he can be taken, without departing from him, or "radicalizing" him (Dussel, *Underside*, 17n.24). See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 219-247, and Geraldine Finn, "The Space Between Ethics and Politics" in *Who is This 'We'?* ed. Godway and Finn, 101-116. I will close with some words of Levinas:

The sarabande of innumerable and equivalent cultures, each justifying itself in its own context, creates a world which is, to be sure, de-occidentalized, but also disoriented. To catch sight, in meaning, of a situation that precedes culture, to envision language out of the revelation of the Other . . . in the gaze of a human being looking at another human precisely as . . . human, disengaged from all culture, in the nakedness of his face, is to return to Platonism in a new way. It is also to find oneself able to judge civilization on the basis of the ethical . . . Platonism [is] an affirmation of the human independently of culture and history." (BPW 58-9)

Here Levinas gently criticizes Edward Said in Plato's name. Groups do injustices to groups and groups do injustice to individuals -- but groups cannot be ruptured by groups but only by encounters between individuals. Levinas' thought is not incompatible with a practical pluralism or multiculturalism; his aim, however, is not to advocate these alternatives but to open them up to be questioned by the incoming of the other.

and at another time into the laws of the liberal state. These matters remain, however, relatively obscure.

IV. Ethics and Judaism

The ultimate source of the command to serve the other is God. However, in Levinas' understanding, God does not appear to human beings; he is not present to us. Only what might be called his back -- that is, his absence -- can be glimpsed, and it is glimpsed only in the interaction with other human beings, ethical and social. The glimpse of God in the social realm, or the thirdness of God, is a topic we will take up in chapter two. For now, we will say that what we have of God arises only in the ethical encounter, in a form that Levinas calls 'the trace.' The trace of God, or of God's absence, is there in the face of the other. The other reveals his alterity thus revealing infinity, and in this revelation the always-concealed God is inscribed.

The question of why Levinas' God cannot be described as present is critical to this thesis. In chapter two, I will sketch Levinas' phenomenological explanation for God's absence; later, in chapter five, I will offer a historical or circumstantial explanation. Suffice it to say now that the idea of a present God is problematic to Levinas in at least three ways. First, the idea will almost always operate to mitigate earthly responsibility, if only slightly; a present God generally suggests a God who takes care of ethics and justice and who forgives in his mercy and thus to claim God as present is already to make possible the thought that one might do less than everything for the other, and that one might perhaps *not* be always accused. Second, the idea may operate, deliberately or otherwise, as a justification of evil or violence; to say that God is present may also be to say that one knows God or understands God's will and that one is determined to act on it, regardless of the consequences for the other or the others. To claim that God is present in this sense is analogous to the claim that one's politics inscribes an ethics; it is the claim of the absolutist

who cannot be criticized. Third, the idea operates to provide an ultimate or absolute other which, in its complete otherness, may relativize the differences between beings in the world; the presence of this Absolutely Other may allow us to say that ‘we are all equal under God,’ thus loosing the sense of the asymmetry or non-reciprocity of the relation with the other, who is always unequal to me -- higher spiritually and lower economically -- before he becomes equal in the presence of the third.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas begins his description of how God is concealed in the revelation of the face by offering a phenomenology of need and desire. Need, according to Levinas, is the everyday experience of awareness of lack; it leads to seeking, finding, grasping, assimilating, same-making, totalizing. The paradigm for need is the need for food: we know about food; if we are hungry, we know that we lack food; we can absorb food. But need can also apply to objects we can intellectually absorb, things we can mentally assimilate or make part of our consciousness. I may have need of things “like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate. . . . I can ‘feed’ on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself.” In distinction, desire is the persistent human experience of wanting something that we do not know and cannot name, something we have never had, and cannot picture. Because of the element of unknowing, Levinas calls desire “desire for the absolutely other” and also “desire for the invisible,” where the word invisible “implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea.” Desire, writes Levinas, is “metaphysical desire”; it is desire for what is not in the world; it is, in short, desire for God (TI 33-4).

But desire cannot lead one directly to God. Instead it leads one to the other (for all that a particular other may be personally undesirable). While need is the basic drive that characterizes the first ontic level or state of ‘enjoyment,’ desire is what pulls us out of enjoyment’s egology toward novelty and alterity. Thus desire “has a meaning. It is understood as the alterity of the other and of the Most High” (TI 34). And thus too

the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. A relation with the Transcendent is a social relation . . . There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men. The other is the very locus of metaphysical truth. . . . He does not play the role of a mediator. The other is not the incarnation of God, but . . . is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. (TI 78-9)

It is one of Levinas' seminal claims that the other and what we have of God coincide, that ethics is revelation, that in meeting the other we experience the desire for God, and that in the desire for God, we reach out to the other. What we reach to in the other is the aspect of his alterity that reveals an infinity; this is the trace of the absence of God.

Need is linked to the totality of egology and desire to the infinity of alterity; thus God is linked to infinity. But the precise relation between God and infinity is immensely difficult to thematize. Peperzak stresses those passages in which Levinas seems to make a distinction between God and the other -- to speak, for instance, as we have seen, of "the other *and* the Most High" (TI 34) -- and on this basis he argues that while the other is infinite, God is The Infinite, and that the distinction between God and the other is always maintained, even in all of the many passages where Levinas speaks of their co-incidence in human experience.⁵³ Peperzak is undoubtedly correct: Levinas goes so far as to refer, at one point, to the other and the other's others as "intermediaries" between the subject and God (OB 128),⁵⁴ and writes in "God and Philosophy" that

God is not simply the 'first other,' or the 'other par excellence,' or the 'absolutely other,' but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other and different from every neighbour. (GCM 69)

It seems then, that God as he actually is, or *in himself*, is, for Levinas, an Infinite different from the infinite experienced by human beings in the face.

But, for all that, it is critical that Levinas almost never speaks of God *in himself*.

⁵³Peperzak, *Beyond*, 224.

⁵⁴That this is the point which he is at pains to deny in the quotation from TI 78-9 cited just above is indicative of the difficulty in understanding Levinas on God.

Instead, he speaks of the experience of infinity, and in this context, speaks of God as a word given to certain aspects of ethical relation as opposed to totalizing interaction. To recomplicate the issue, we can look again at a line previously cited:

... the idea of infinity is the mode of being, the infinition of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in me. (TI 26)

Infinity *does* seem to ‘first exist,’ beyond me, for its infinition is its positing of its idea, the idea of the infinite, in me -- and yet Levinas insists that “infinity does *not* first exist.” What the passage reveals is Levinas unwillingness to discuss the Infinite or God *in himself*, a facet of his unwillingness to discuss anything at all *in itself*. He speaks almost always of relation rather than essence, and relation is a matter of overflow or boundlessness -- that is infinity -- and not a matter of different ‘infinities’ -- or infinite things -- which can be compared as more or less infinite than one another. This is why the quotation from “God and Philosophy” cited above, which treats God in himself, closes -- must close -- with Levinas’ statement that God is “transcendent to the point of absence” (GCM 69). Whatever may be said about the essential difference between the infinite and the Infinite is said about them as they are concealed; as phenomena, they appear together. What we have of God phenomenologically is an absence, and it is experienced as the trace and desire; in other words, the infinite divine is experienced in the functions of infinity delineated in the second section of this chapter, as a diversity, a plurality, a difference, a command, a critique, a hospitality, a welcoming, a responsibility and a rupturing. This is why, in the temporal scheme offered in the second section of this chapter, I did not include God at all. That scheme was an artificial laying-out of the theoretical ordering in which the elements of experienced reality occur in themselves. God, as he occurs in himself, is not, for Levinas, an element of experienced reality but the absent ground and source of all of the movements of the infinite as we have discussed them.

Since the meeting with the other is the arena for the meeting with God, Levinas' conception of ethics and his conception of how we understand God must coincide at an original point. What, then, about ethics and Levinas' own religion, or Levinas' ethical *philosophy* and his Judaism? Are they compatible, or is he torn? It is commonly argued that Levinas' philosophy and his Judaism chafe against one another, but how so? Is there a tension in his thought between philosophy and theology, or reason and revelation, or Judaism and universal humanity, or Greek and Hebrew? Let us take up these pairings one by one.

a. Philosophy and theology: their (non-) relation to prophecy

In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas sketches a certain relation between theology, philosophy and prophecy, but his intention here cannot be understood until the meaning of the terms is clarified. We will begin by looking at a passage made up of the excerpts in which he speaks about what he calls 'prophetic eschatology.'

Philosophers distrust it. . . . [F]or them eschatology -- a subjective and arbitrary divination of the future, the result of revelation without evidences, tributary of faith -- belongs naturally to opinion. . . . However, the extraordinary phenomenon of prophetic eschatology certainly does not intend to win its civic rights within the domain of thought by being assimilated to philosophical evidence. To be sure, in religions and even in theologies eschatology, like an oracle, does seem to 'complete' philosophical evidences; its beliefs-conjectures want to be more certain than evidences -- as though eschatology added information about the future by revealing the finality of being. But . . . its real import lies elsewhere. It does not introduce a teleological system into the totality; it does not consist in teaching the orientation of history. Eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or history. . . . The first 'vision' of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) arrives at the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of *signification without a context*. . . . (TI 22-23)

Two definitions of eschatology are offered here. Philosophers and theologians both understand eschatology with reference to evidence or information, specifically, information about the future. The argument between them is only that the philosophers mistrust this so-called information, while the theologians hold it to be 'more certain' than any information

that can be arrived at philosophically. But their definition is quickly called into question, and at the end of the passage Levinas provides an alternative conception in which eschatology is synonymous with the breach of totality, or in short, with the ethics which ruptures or calls into question all systems supported by information. Evidences or pieces of information, he further suggests, are the weapons in a type of war; this is to say that they are brought forth to battle one another within a totality in which certainty or factuality is the key to living and that they do not admit of the novelty or the infinity of the face. Prophetic eschatology, in distinction, is peace; it is novelty; it is ethics; it is the rupture of totalities. We should note here Levinas' remarkable understanding of peace as related to rupture and as opposed to coherence or wholeness. Coherence or wholeness cannot be peace for Levinas, for they are false impositions of factuality or sameness; if they come in the guise of peace, it is a peace of provisional cease-fire, not a true peace. True peace, in distinction, is an anarchic and epiphanic phenomenon; it is not a stasis but a movement, not a factuality but the critique of factuality. The important opposition being erected here is not the one between philosophy and theology, but the one between samemaking, static philosophy/theology, with its objective determinations about the future or warlike rejections of those determinations, and difference-oriented, dynamic Levinasian ethics, here called peace or prophetic eschatology or simply prophecy.

Two kinds of God-talk, two theo-logies, have been offered to us here, theology which is an avoidable totality linked to war, and prophecy which ruptures totality and is linked to peace. What about philo-sophies? Is there a correlative doubling there? On the page following the excerpted passage above, Levinas recomplicates the issue, writing that

ever since eschatology has opposed peace to war the evidence of war has been maintained in an essentially hypocritical civilization, that is, attached to both the True and the Good, henceforth antagonistic. It is perhaps time to see in the hypocrisy not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets. (TI 24)

The hypocrisy involves a tension between what Levinas here calls the True, by which he

means the factual which totalizes, and the Good by which he means the ethical which breaks totality. Ethics, the Good, and prophecy -- these are linked with one another and contrasted with factuality, the True, and philosophy. However, shortly afterwards, we are offered a description of a second, different kind of philosophy, one that no more originates in factuality than does prophecy.

Is not philosophy . . . defined as an endeavour to live a life beginning with evidence . . . ? . . . Unless philosophical evidence refers from itself to a situation that can no longer be stated in terms of 'totality'. . . . Unless the non-knowing with which philosophical knowing begins coincides not with pure nothingness but only with a nothingness of objects. (TI 24)

One philosophy, like theology, is concerned with information and equivalent to ontology. Another philosophy, like prophecy, begins in unknowing, or a non-ontological 'nothingness of objects' and perhaps also seeks "signification without a context," or meaning without totality. When Levinas speaks of the 'underlying rending of the world' he is contrasting a certain kind of philosophy, ontological philosophy, to the non-ontological philo-sophy or theo-logy that is prophecy. He is not contrasting *all* philosophy to prophecy any more than he is contrasting philosophy with theology.

In order to understand the complications here we should backtrack for a moment, and in doing so keep in mind that it is in this very preface that Levinas speaks of all his words as 'unsayings' and maintains that the words given out here are "not a word of honour" (TI 30). In the first paragraph of the preface, Levinas links 'philosophy,' 'war,' and 'being' under the general rubric of the same or totality; later, in the paragraph on the True and the Good, he adds 'truth' to this list of samenesses. But before the end of the preface all these links are undone; each of these terms is wrenched out of its place as a term of sameness and offered a place as an expression of otherness; which is to say that Levinas effects his own, small-scale rupture of the same, in literary form, by reaching into the totalizing structures he has erected and pulling away their foundational terms. Thus, as it turns out, it is not being itself which is warlike and objectifying, but rather the relation with

being Levinas characterizes as ontology, and so it is possible for Levinas to speak of peace as “a primordial relation with being” (TI 22). Similarly, philosophy -- or at any rate non-ontological philosophy -- is reinscribed or redeemed in the passage cited above, where it is disassociated from evidence. And, finally, by the end of the preface, Levinas is speaking of a truth which is constituted by the “aspiration to radical exteriority” (TI 29). It is possible, then, to hold that a certain relation with being, a certain kind of philosophy, and a certain understanding of truth are properly connected to prophecy, to ethics, to peace and to the Good. (It is also worth noting that in at least one of Levinas later essays, ‘the Good’ itself takes a beating;⁵⁵ in that essay the Good is understood as an ideology perpetuated by a collectivity, and thus as a totality. What persists always in Levinas’ esteem is the Good Beyond Being, and this cannot be understood as anything other than a philosophical concept, the culmination of a philosophy conducted face-to-face.⁵⁶) There is thus a higher philosophical truth (let us call it ‘philosophy-a’) than ontology (which we can call ‘philosophy-b’). The world which is rent in its attachment to philosophy and prophecy is a world which may have a glimpse of the meaning of prophecy, but does not understand philosophy-a, seeing philosophy only as philosophy-b, objectifying analytics or ontology. So while the ‘hypocrisy’ of the attachment to the ‘True’ and the ‘Good’ is Levinas’ own hypocrisy insofar as he refers to prophecy vs. philosophy-b, he does not think of true philosophy, philosophy-a, as standing in tension with prophecy.⁵⁷

⁵⁵This is “Beyond Memory” in *Difficult Freedom* which I discuss in chapter five.

⁵⁶At TI 103, he writes: “The place of the good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology but of philosophy.”

⁵⁷In the next chapter we will take up the matter of the tension in Levinas himself between ontology and prophecy, in the context of his acknowledgment of the necessity of ontological language and his attempt to subvert it through ‘abuse.’ At that point we will also take up again the existence of two philosophies in the discussions which close chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*. It must be said, however, that Levinas almost always speaks of philosophy in the pejorative sense; he almost always uses the term philosophy to refer to the reason that seeks proof, or simply to ontology, in short, to philosophy-b. When I use the term philosophy in this thesis, I generally use it in this sense as well.

b. Reason and revelation

In the essay “God and Philosophy” we find a similar movement of thought with respect to reason and revelation. When Levinas writes that “if, for the benefit of religion, [rational theology] pulls out some domain over which the supervision of philosophy is not exercised, then this domain shall have been, on good grounds, recognized as philosophically unverifiable” (GCM 55), it sounds as if he is erecting a reason/ revelation distinction, or indeed erecting the very distinction between philosophy and theology he rejects in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*. However, he immediately proposes a rational discourse, or a ‘reason,’ which would be based neither on verification nor on the unverifiable, but on the experience of desire.

To ask oneself, as we are attempting to do here, whether God cannot be uttered in a reasonable discourse that would be neither ontology nor faith is implicitly to doubt the formal opposition, established by Yehuda Halevy and taken up by Pascal, between, on the one hand, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob involved without philosophy in faith, and on the other the god of the philosophers. It is to doubt that this opposition constitutes an alternative. (GCM 57)

Here we find a doubling of reason, analogous to the doubling of theo-logy and philosophy. First there is the ‘rational theology’ of the theologians, concerned with (unverifiable) information. Then there is the ‘rational discourse’ of Levinas’ own thought, which is concerned neither with the verifiable nor the unverifiable.

A philosophy of alterity breaks down the distinction between reason and revelation as it is usually understood. For Levinas, no primacy can be accorded the distinction between what comes from ‘within me’ and what comes from ‘without’ or ‘beyond,’ since my very foundations come from without and beyond. This is not incompatible with what philosophers and theologians have always said about reason and revelation, but in Levinas it is perhaps a more radical position, since its adoption means that, for him, the reason/ revelation distinction has little or no value. Everything I see is shown to me by the other (and proceeds ultimately from God) and in this sense all reason is revealed. Every

experience takes its place in human consciousness and in this sense all revelation is reasoned. Unreasonable revelation is the folly Levinas terms 'mysticism;' he would refuse such experiences the name of revelation. Unrevelatory reason is the folly he sometimes calls knowledge, or intentionality, or egology; only occasionally does he call this reason. It may be that, for Levinas, the degeneration in the terms reason and revelation, by which they vie with one another over the source and authority of their information, results largely from their division one from the other, for this division leads almost inevitably to competing claims based on evidence. If reason and revelation are not divided one from the other, then an understanding of both as arising from the ethical encounter may be taken up more easily. What is needed is a different starting place, one from the two terms appear as companions, or perhaps as aspects of the same movement. Levinas' starting place, the other, does not refer to a present God, that shibboleth of revelation which offends the devotees of reason, nor does it assume that nothing transcendent exists, that shibboleth of reason which offends the devotees of revelation. To speak first of the other allows for a discourse which can say the word God, as reason and as revelation, and yet does not take that word to signify as a theme, that is to say, a discourse which does not denominate and therefore does not dominate. This is the beginning of philosophy-a, of that philosophy which Levinas refers to in *Otherwise than Being* as "the wisdom of love in the service of love" (OB 162). It is also the beginning of religion; the encounter with the other is

the latent birth, in the other, of religion; prior to the emotions and to the voice, prior to 'religious experience' that speaks of revelation in terms of the disclosure of being, when it is a question of the unusual access, at the heart of my responsibility, to an unusual derangement of being (GCM 72).

The categories by which philosophy and theology vie with one another -- verifiable, unverifiable, reason, revelation -- do not concern Levinas. What is good -- i.e. what is ethical or moral -- has reference to the God, and reference to the God is made only through what is good. There is no special or irrational or non-verifiable revelation to be believed

outside of the ethical, but neither is the ethical understood reductively as including only those concepts which can be subjected to severe analytical tests to prove their rationality. The reason and the revelation of evidences are totalities; moreover, they are avoidable totalities, totalities which have all but forgotten the ethical encounter. Both constitute ontologies; both restrict meaning; neither pays attention to the novelty of the encounter with the other.

The pattern that emerges in Levinas treatment of reason & revelation and philosophy & theology occurs quite often in his writings. He takes a distinction that is a commonplace of thought, allows the two sides of the distinction to merge with one another, and then confronts the resulting synthesis with something entirely new, something which cannot be merged or synthesized. Philosophy, theology, reason and revelation all look the same when put up against ethics; they all appear as totalities when faced with what breaks totality and cannot itself become totality. The mode of alterity which is contrasted with them -- by the light of which they merge, and their arguments appear in their true shape as the internalized war or dialectic that marks totality -- is given several names. Sometimes Levinas simply uses the terms ethics or morality to fulfill this function, sometimes religion (distinguished from theology or 'the revealed opinions of positive religions' and also from ecstasy or religious experience), sometimes philosophy (distinguished from ontology or philosophy-b) and, in at least one notable discussion, scepticism. But the term which Levinas most often uses to show up the totalizing nature of the synthesis is prophecy. But more of this in chapter two. And more, in chapter four, of the structure that has just emerged: the introduction of a distinction, the merging of the two sides, the contrast to what cannot be synthesized. We leave these things behind for the moment. For in the distinction between Hebrew and Greek, which more generally is the distinction between Jewish and universal, we return to the basic structure that we have spent much of this chapter tracing. Hebrew is to Greek -- or the Jew is to 'humanity' -- as ethics is to politics, or the two is to the three.

c. Hebrew and Greek

It is quite easy to think of Levinas as a rather dubious sort of Jew, either on the basis of an anti-nomian thrust in his thought, or an a-historicist thrust, or a universalist thrust, or perhaps especially on the basis of his suggestion, foundational to his thought, that one should, as it were, turn the other cheek. But to drum Levinas out of the fold for these things would be to drum him out on the basis of a definition of Judaism formed in antagonistic response to Christianity, that is, to Christian claims to antinomianism, or a-historicism, or universalism, or compassion. Such antagonistic or negative definitions of Judaism are only a small range among a great many. Levinas' own definition is quite different. He thinks of Judaism as having some fundamental insight into plurality, diversity, alterity, infinity -- into the fact that each human being is particular and unique. In short, Judaism is for him a mode -- or at times *the* mode -- of relation or ethics. To be sure, in various contexts and for various reasons, he speaks of the Jews as a collectivity like other collectivities, for instance in his discussions of Zionism. But he is more likely to generalize the phenomenon of Judaism, saying for instance that

Jewishness stands for giving the other bread from one's lips, bread that some non-Jews would describe as a wafer. It stands for a certain universality that transcends Judaism. Don't be shocked! The authentically human is everyone's Jewishness and its echo in the singular and the particular. (ITN 8)

As John Llewelyn puts it, Israel in Levinas' thought refers at times to the particularity of a people, and at other times -- more often I believe -- to the particularity of each person.⁵⁸

Judaism, for him, is paradigmatic for particularity, the Jew for the particular.

Problems arise. How is it even possible to speak of Judaism as distinct from universal humanity, if everyone is at some level Jewish? And, if the Jew is paradigmatic for the particularity of *every* person, do we not have in Levinas' conception of Judaism a

⁵⁸John Llewelyn, *The Genealogy of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 211.

resurgence of the universal, or the symmetrical, or equality, or synchrony, or totality? The answer is that Judaism does refer to a kind of universal, but it is not the universal of 'the all,' or the totalizing universal of the collective made up of humanity in general, for this is what he calls 'Greek.' Rather, Judaism or the 'Hebrew' refers to the universal of 'the each,' which is the universal of infinity or of ethics. Thus the distinction between Judaism and universal humanity or 'Hebrew' and 'Greek' is the distinction between second-level actions and conceptions -- bearing reference to each other in his difference -- and third-level actions -- bearing reference to the whole or the all. Indeed, the distinction between each and all is perhaps the single most important distinction for understanding the difference not only between Judaism and universal humanity or 'Hebrew' and 'Greek,' but also between ethics and politics, and infinity and totality -- not to mention the other correlative distinctions at which we have glanced. All of these pairings describe a situation in which the each is prior to the all, calls for the all and conditions the all; in which, in addition, the all poses a threat to the each, but the each persists and ruptures the all. Thus it can be said that Levinas uses the term Judaism to refer to an awareness of infinity, to those *infinite considerations of the infinite* which ground ethical action, and which are prior to the considerations of the other's others, or the universal all, which ground politics or justice.

These analyses are not arbitrary; they are founded in the texts of Judaism which are founded in turn in Jewish history. Judaism inscribes the respect for the particular, but it also calls for the universal; the Hebrew Scriptures present an ethics and a *halachah* of particularity, but also an ethics, a *halachah* and a cosmology which are to be taught to everyone; moreover the latter universalizing tendency is intensified in later Scripture and in subsequent historical attempts to define the nature of Judaism. Judaism is, of course, threatened by the universal, in ways that need no explanation. But it also asserts itself against the universal, reminding the universal of its ruptures, and in order to be able to do this it preserves for itself certain duties and rituals which it guards jealously from adoption

by universal humanity. The whole of the basic structure of Levinas' thought is here. To be sure, this is a loose analysis. But there is no doubt that for Levinas the history of the relation between Jews and the world has been paradigmatic for the relation between ethics and politics, infinity and totality. The concrete history of the Jewish people is what allows him to use the term Judaism for ethical rupture, for uncertainty, for the experience of being called into question on which his philosophy rests. Judaism, like any collectivity, can support fixed social structures, class interests, ideologies, ontologies and theologies, but in general it has not done so to the same extent as other collectivities have, in part because of an innate or textual unwillingness and in part simply because it has not had a chance. As Levinas points out, although there were hierarchies within the ghetto, everyone was oppressed; thus Judaism is a religion of survivors, and a people with no security or fixed structures (BTV 3). The Jews stand outside history. They are a diachrony breaking the Western time-line. Levinas frequently refers to Judaism as an 'anachronism' (for instance at OB 148, or DF 80), meaning not only to refer to the Hegelian notion that Judaism should, by rights, have disappeared by now into the universal all, but also to its status as happening in another time than world-historical time.

We do not quibble here with the fact that Levinas seems to be projecting the history of his nation into the cosmos at large and making it the basis for a metaphysics. This sort of projection is not without precedent. But we should mention that Levinas seems at times to sense a hubris in his links between Israel and ethics, and Greece and totality. In some late works he seems to have rethought the matter through Derrida, and to move in the direction of new links, links between Israel and writing, and Greece and speaking-thinking.⁵⁹ Moreover he never loses sight of the fact that the same experiences recorded in the sources of Judaism are also present in other great works of literature, not just Plato and Descartes

⁵⁹See, for instance, Levinas' forward to BTV.

but also Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky.⁶⁰ But he remains, despite all qualifications, always convinced that Judaism, in its worldly doings and sufferings, represents fundamental truths about the human being.

When Levinas makes a distinction between ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Greek,’ then, he usually refers to one form or another of the distinction between the each and the all. What he calls ‘Greek’ is not exactly a language but a “sub-textual . . . way of thinking and speaking”; thinking or speaking in terms of the all, or in terms of other tools of totality such as “*morphe* (form), *ousia* (being), *nous* (reason), *logos* (conceptual thought), or *telos* (goal) -- that constitute a specifically Greek lexicon of intelligibility.” The distinguishing mark of the ‘Greek’ is the equation of truth with “an intelligibility of presence,” which is to say that ‘Greek’ thought is equivalent to ontology (RK 18-19). ‘Hebrew’ thought or speech, in distinction, is polyphonic or dialogical; it hesitates or stutters; it is never complete; it evokes the concealed, preserves dissent and asks to be interrupted. The sub-textual modes, ‘Greek’ and ‘Hebrew,’ bear some relation to the languages, Greek and Hebrew, but the relation is a loose one. Certainly it would be possible to speak ‘Greek’ (conceptually) in Hebrew (linguistically) but it would perhaps not be terribly easy, since the forms of the Hebrew language have developed, in some measure, in accordance with the forms of the thinking Levinas labels ‘Hebrew.’ It is even more difficult to speak ‘Hebrew’ (conceptually) in Greek (linguistically) or in any language which has Greek (or Latin) roots -- including French. Levinas, however, almost manages to do so, with the use of certain linguistic twists which we will discuss in the next chapter. When he speaks of his own thought as ‘translating Hebrew into Greek’ he is, however, not correlating a conceptual mode with a linguistic one, but referring to the two conceptual or sub-textual modes and

⁶⁰His single favorite quotation is drawn not from any Jewish source but from Dostoyevsky. It is Father Zosima’s line that we are all responsible for one another but that “I” am more responsible than anyone else. The line is cited in one form or another in at least half of Levinas’ published works and almost all of the interviews. See for instance GCM 72, EI, 98, 101, RK 31, OB 146.

speaking of the difficulty of conveying infinity in a said, of conveying the each in forms which tend in the direction of the general or the all, as all language does.⁶¹ In any case, there is no doubt that Levinas understands both Jews and Greeks, prophets and philosophers, to be capable of thinking otherwise than ontologically, otherwise than with reference to the all. The labels 'Greek' and 'Hebrew' -- which suggest a connection between infinity and Judaism, totality and what is not Jewish -- can obscure this truth, and thus perhaps should not be taken as definitive for Levinas' thought. (Very occasionally, Levinas uses the 'Greek'/'Hebrew' distinction in another sense: to divide his own writings into two groups, that is, to divide his talmudic works from the rest. This is not say that he regards the two as in any sense incompatible; on the contrary, "they may ultimately have the same source of inspiration" since "the existence of God . . . is the sacredness of man's relation to man through which God may pass" (RK 18). It is only to say that he does not want his general works read as if they were strictly confessional, or contained something which only Jews could grasp.)

Much play may be made with the paradoxes or difficulties that emerge from the twists in Levinas' use of these terms. Is Levinas a Jew? Or does his definition of Judaism as a kind of universal make him a Greek? Is he in any sense more Jewey in the talmudic works -- and are the philosophical works, which he calls translations from the 'Hebrew,' then simply translations of the talmudic works? Or are the talmudic works themselves, despite the fact that Levinas refers to them as his 'Hebrew' works, in another sense 'Greek,' since, like the other works, they are involve thematization, *logos*, *telos*, not to mention having their own *morphe* and proposing, to reapply a line from the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, 'a certain relation with *ousia*.' The play that is possible here, while it is of some interest, is ultimately not terribly fertile. The critical distinction in Levinas

⁶¹"My concern everywhere is precisely to translate this non-Hellenism of the Bible into Hellenic terms . . . There is nothing to be done: philosophy is spoken in Greek" (GCM 85).

remains always same and other (or all and each); or, to be more specific, (1) the other, (2) the same that remembers the other, and (3) the same that forgets the other. The various uses of the terms 'Hebrew' and 'Greek' can be understood most fruitfully in terms of how they fit into this pattern. 'Hebrew' stands at best as representing the other and at worst as representing the same that remembers the other; Judaism is Levinas' philosophical ethics; it is, for him, the conscience of the world. 'Greek,' in distinction, runs the gamut; it may refer to Plato's otherwise than being in which case it represents the other, or to the language necessary to communication, in which case it is a same that remembers the other, or to ontology, in which case it is a same that forgets the other. The best Greek thought, i.e. true philosophy, is like the best Judaism -- both are breaks in complacency, disallowings of what is allowed by universality.

Why Levinas thinks of Judaism in the way or ways described above is the subject matter of this thesis. Here, we may extend the question by pointing out that he wishes to retain many of the words common in the Jewish tradition but also to qualify their meanings rather severely (though he would perhaps regard this as clarification rather than qualification); moreover there are certain terms used by some Jews that he simply abandons. Let us briefly take up two cases. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that

historically, morality⁶² will oppose politics and will have gone beyond the functions of prudence or the canons of the beautiful to claim itself unconditional and universal when the eschatology of messianic peace comes to superimpose itself upon the ontology of war. (TI 22)

We have already seen that, despite the use here of the future perfect tense, eschatology as it is explained in this preface has nothing to do with knowledge of the future; we may now add that it has as little to do with an end of time or an eternity which destroys time, and,

⁶²In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, and indeed throughout much of the text, Levinas uses the terms *morality* and *ethics* interchangeably. He does not make the distinction that he describes to Kearney.

moreover, that these disassociations are also true of Levinasian messianism. However, eschatology and messianism are commonly understood with reference to knowledge of the future or a cessation of duration; for this reason, in later years, Levinas abandons one of the terms and takes great pains to give the other a different nuance. When Richard Kearney asks him in 1984 if it is possible to have an eschatology in which man does not ultimately fuse with God -- a question almost certainly suggested by the passage above and by other statements about eschatology in *Totality and Infinity* -- Levinas replies:

But why eschatology? Why should we wish to reduce time to eternity? Time is the most profound relation man can have with God, precisely as a going towards God. There is an excellence in time that would be lost in eternity. . . . The term *eschaton* implies that there might exist a finality, an end to the historical relation of difference between man and the absolutely other, a reduction of the gap that safeguards the alterity of the transcendent to a totality of sameness. To realize the *eschaton* would therefore mean that we could seize or appropriate God as a telos and degrade infinite relation with the other to a finite fusion. (RK 23, 30)

Kearney presses him, and after Levinas again 'expresses reservations' about the term eschatology (RK 30), Kearney switches to the term messianism. This term Levinas does not repudiate, but he insists that it be understood in a particular way, namely,

according to the talmudic maxim that 'the doctors of the law will never have peace, neither in this world or the next; they go from meeting to meeting, discussing always -- for there is always more to be discussed.' (RK 31)

Eschatology, a term derived from the Greek, can go, but messianism, a Hebrew term, must be retained and explained. So too with prophecy, a term which has a direct, identifiable Hebrew equivalent. In fact, these two terms -- messianism and prophecy -- come to stand in Levinas' writings for the ideas and structures at the centre of his thought.

He insists, however, that they are to be understood in a certain way. These two terms, and others like them, are wrested away from their theological or institutional significances. As we will see, this process requires them to be 'de-ontologized' and 'de-historicized.' In the next chapter we will begin to look at de-ontologization, as the images from the Bible lose the spaces or locales accorded them by a 'literalist' hermeneutic; in

chapters three and four we will take up de-historicization. What we will find is that the de-ontologized and de-historicized meanings Levinas ascribes to the symbols, patterns and motifs of the sources are drawn from reflection on the content and intent of those sources, and that the hermeneutic that allows him to understand them in the way he does is drawn specifically from the Talmud. Levinas' way of reading the sources texts and what he finds there are the subjects to be taken up.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5: 23-4)

Here I am -- is saying with inspiration, which is not a gift for fine words or songs. There is constraint to give with full hands . . . (OB 142)

CHAPTER TWO: LEVINAS' BIBLE/ LEVINAS' PROPHECY

The many ideas expressed in the final chapter of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* are incited and unified by Levinas' thematization of a single phenomenon: that the word of God appears only in the mouth of the human subject. This phenomenon, which in its basic or paradigmatic form Levinas calls witnessing, is manifest, he argues, in varying degrees in the entire range of human expression, from the saying that underlies all speech through to specific forms of speech such as scepticism, poetry, prophesy, or prayer.

Levinas focuses, for the most part, not on prophesy or prayer per se, but on the more difficult topic of the apparently secular manifestations of witnessing. However, in order to illustrate his theme, he fills the chapter with biblical references, so many that they form a sub-text of midrash almost complete unto itself. This sub-text implicitly addresses the question of how a sacred text, in which human authors ascribe words directly to God, bears witness. In their succession, the biblical references illuminate the line of Levinas' thought; as an aggregate, they suggest that the Bible is one of his sources. But while Levinas has vast regard for the biblical text, his description of the phenomenon of witnessing implies that he does not understand the authority of Scripture in a conventional or static sense. "Authority," he writes, "is not somewhere, where a look could go seek it, like an idol, or assume it, like a logos" (OB 150). On the contrary, the subject's verbally or textually

expressed relation with the divine is one of ‘contestation.’

The first half of this chapter gives an account of much of the content of chapter five of *Otherwise than Being* including the idea of contestation; the ideas described here complete the discussion begun in the preceeding chapter of the Levinasian interplay between totality and infinity. The second half takes up the biblical references that underlie Levinas’ chapter, which is to say, Levinas own contestation in practice; it forms the first of the four accounts of how Levinas reads and reflects which comprise the bulk of this thesis. This latter half will be divided into four short segments: (a) Levinas on theology, (b) the beginning of the midrash, (c) Levinas on prophecy, and (d) the rest of the midrash.

I. Levinas’ saying/ Levinas’ said

Perhaps the most memorable idea presented in the last chapter of *Otherwise than Being* is the withdrawn God, the ungraspable infinite which Levinas calls ‘illeity.’ But this idea is not the point from which the chapter springs. Levinas’ starting point is his phenomenological insight about the relation between our relation to God and God’s relation to us, between the movement up from below and the movement down from above.⁶³ His insight is that the two movements are indistinguishable in human experience. What God does to or for me is present to me only as what I do for God; what God tells me to do is present only in my spoken answer. “The command is stated by the mouth of him it commands” (OB 147). I have “received, one knows not from where, that of which I am the author” (OB 148-9). “I find the order in my response itself.” (OB 150). Levinas repeats again and again the structure of the phenomenon he calls ‘witnessing.’ The phenomenon is

⁶³Jacques Derrida’s essay “Sauf le nom” is overtly a meditation on the Christian mystic Angelus Silesius. But in addition, it can be read as a running commentary on chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*, to which it clearly owes a great deal. One of Derrida’s opening questions concerns the nature of the ‘desire of God:’ “does it come from God in us, from God for us, from us for God?... Who speaks to whom?” Derrida, “Sauf le Nom,” trans. John P. Leavey Jr., chap. in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 35-85, 144-146, 37.

the most central and critical piece of the play with temporal order which we examined in the last chapter. Witnessing is my coming upon and producing or having produced for me what was always already (not) there; it is the infinizing or the becoming infinite of the infinite, in the infinity of the infinitude of others; it is, as Levinas puts it here, the glory and the glorification of the Glory.

The insight that God is present only in the response or the mouth of the subject is lost as soon as God is objectified, or placed in a locus. If this is done -- or rather, *once* this is done, for the objective, located God has become a fundamental tenet of Western theology or the philosophy of the divine -- the single relation which Levinas designates as witnessing must be differentiated into two movements: the "from God" and the "to God." In order to preserve his insight, then, Levinas must correct the idea of God as object in locus. He does so by speaking of a God who is utterly withdrawn, who does not appear in 'the present of representation.' What we have of God is a trace, seen in the face of the other, but that trace is not left by something that is present, or by something that was once present and has moved on; it "comes from a past that has never been represented, has never been present" (OB 144). The trace is -- must be -- the trace of something that is not and never was 'there' spatially or temporally; for it is the trace of something that is not a being. If the something had been there, its trace would merely be a feature of one of my past instants, and thus one of my (past) presents; if it were there now it would become present to me as a feature of a present instant. In neither case could it shake me up, breaking my time-line. But to shake me up is the fundamental function, the identifying mark, of the trace. The trace is a diachrony; it is the sign or the smell of an unbridgeable temporal gap.

Thus God is pushed past the point where he can be made present in speech or thought, and is kept there by Levinas' vigilance on the patterns of his own speech. Levinas takes great pains disassociate the word 'God' from God; moreover, he coins his own term to describe an aspect of this disassociation, namely, 'illeity.' Neither 'illeity' nor 'God' is a

word 'for God' in the sense of a signifier pointing to a signified. Both terms express for Levinas at their best, a 'for God' in the sense of a pledge or a direction, or in other words, a 'for God' in the sense of a *to God*, an *à-Dieu*, indistinguishable from a *from God*, or an upheaval in the subject. But the two terms are somewhat different in nuance or usage. Illeity -- which might perhaps be rendered more clearly in English as 'he-ness'⁶⁴ -- means, literally, the state or event of being a pronoun: pronoun-ness or pronoun-eity. It is, in grammatical form, a noun or a proper name, but one which achieves the function of a pronoun by pointing, not to an object, but to another word -- and the word to which it points, *il*, is itself a pronoun. Insofar as it points at another word, illeity is a placeholder; insofar as the word being pointed at is a pronoun, illeity points at the holding of place. In effect it is an apophasis which points only at apophasis, a placeholder which holds the place of holding place. The term sets God inside a double fence, protecting him from being represented or objectified. God, experienced as illeity, is the absolutely other who cannot be addressed easily in the second person, who cannot be co-opted into a personal present or a philosophic assembly. Now, the word 'God' carries all the nuances of the word 'illeity,' and also has a further function. While the word 'illeity' expresses, not God, but God's withdrawness, the word 'God' expresses, not God, but the enigma by which he enters human consciousness; in other words, the word 'God' expresses God's entry into consciousness while the word illeity expresses the consciousness of God's *non*-entry into consciousness. Thus the word illeity inscribes that aspect of our experience of the infinite which is constituted by the ambiguity between the face of the other and the trace -- the *il* of illeity points to the 'he' of the face because it cannot point to any 'he' of the withdrawn God per se -- while the word 'God' points to the fact that God is and remains otherwise than the other of the face. In effect, 'illeity' points to a blurring between the other and the-otherwise-

⁶⁴Gibbs suggests "him-ness," at *Correlations*, 187.

than-the-other, while 'God' inscribes a greater tension, the tension between this blurring and the impossibility of such a blurring. If illeity means -- and this is the simplest way of defining the term -- that God cannot be pointed to with a word, then the word 'God' itself inscribes a tremendous tension; it is a power-keg of a word; it is, perhaps, a blasphemy.

Illeity or the withdrawn God is the source of a command, a command which, while it is given prior to time, coming from an infinite past, is experienced, in time, as the response to the face of the other. Levinas explains that the nature of one's witness, the response which is all one has of the command, is part of one's address to another human being; it is the saying which lies under a given said. Earlier, in chapter one, I discussed the way the relation between saying and said is another manifestation of the dynamic accruing between infinity and totality, or ethics and politics. The moment of saying, the moment of address at the inception of speech, is, in *Otherwise than Being* much more than in any earlier text, the ethical moment itself, and Levinas' descriptions of that moment are as extraordinary as any of his descriptions of his ethics. In her saying, the subject gives herself, utterly and completely, to the other. She not only announces her openness, her sincerity, her willingness to engage, and her acknowledgment of the other's height. She takes on, moreover, an extreme obedience, an unimpeachable assignation. Her subjectivity emerges as "being subject to everything" (OB 146). She stands in 'proximity' to the other, which is to say that she is entirely 'for-the-other.' She gives herself as hostage to the other. Thus, in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas offers not only -- as he has before -- an account of the morality inherent in human speech, an ethical linguistics, but -- in addition -- a speech-based account of all human thought and action, a linguistic ethics. Here the face largely drops away to be replaced by discourse, and, moreover, the focus is placed particularly on the part of discourse that is *my* saying. No longer does Levinas speak of the other and I looking into one another's eyes and revealing glimpses of our alterity; now he is curious only about what *I* give in *my* subjectivity which arises from *my* response. It is in *Otherwise*

than Being that Levinas designates the saying with the phrase: ‘here I am.’

‘Here I am’ inscribes the structure of witnessing much more obviously in French, where it is *me voici*. Unlike the English, *me voici* does not use the copula verb, the verb of equivalences which is the root of all thematization (OB 167). The French does not imply that the subject *is* something, but simply that she offers herself. Moreover, as Levinas points out, the subject or the ‘I’ of *me voici* appears in the accusative; the speaker of the phrase is therefore, grammatically, the ‘author of an exposure that originates she knows not where’ (see OB 148-9). Insofar as *me voici* implies an ambiguity between the authorial and accusative voices, it expresses, better than the English, the ambiguity or ambivalence of witnessing, in which responsibility is both “a claim laid on the same by the other in the core of myself” and also an “exposure of me to the other” (OB 141): a command and an offering. With the *me voici*, Levinas continues to direct our attention to the always-prior moment in which I am commanded or accused, and in which this command or accusation is indistinguishable from my assumption of responsibility, responsibility for everyone if not for everything. In this moment, as it described in *Otherwise than Being*, I am ‘passive,’ and my passivity is signification; my passivity carries the meaning of responsibility, expressed with the words ‘here I am.’

The term ‘passivity’ is not intended to indicate that the subject is not the agent of her actions. Obviously to maintain the integrity of the witnessing structure it is necessary that Levinas never clarify the agent of the movement, and so he explains that passivity includes an active element and is also beyond activity and inactivity. He expresses this lack of clarification -- the heart of the witnessing structure itself -- by saying that the structure is an ‘enigma,’ or an ‘ambivalence,’ or a diachrony. I suggested in chapter one that diachrony was opposed both to chronology and synchrony; it is not an ordered line of instants, nor is it the occurrence of many instants at once. Rather, it is, as it were, the occurrence of one instant in two or more times; it is the rupture of the instant; it is the meeting of the instant

with what breaks it. To say that the witnessing structure is diachronous is to say that the saying, which refers to the beyond, and the said, which attempts to assemble and synchronize everything in the present, cannot themselves be synchronized on the same temporal plane: diachrony refers specifically to a tension between tension and harmony, that is, to the non-synchronic occurrence ‘together’ of the synchronic element of human thought and the anarchic element of illeity which upsets synchrony. A theologian might try to synchronize synchrony and anarchy -- to bring together on the same plane the substance of the (no longer anarchic) Infinite command and the (always synchronic) expression in a said of the response to that command -- but this, according to Levinas, would be a betrayal of the anarchy of illeity, a betrayal of the tension inherent in the witnessing structure, “the extreme tension of the command exercised by the other in me over me” (OB 141). Such a move immediately results in the degeneration of illeity into a being, the saying into a saying-less said, and the enigma into a dilemma, a contradiction that can and must be ‘thought out.’ To make this move is to betray anarchic illeity and thus to risk a betrayal of responsibility, to risk “the idolatry of worshipping knowledge at the expense of the responsibility toward others.”⁶⁵

What can be done to lessen the risk of such a betrayal? Levinas admits that it is impossible to speak of the witnessing structure without creating a synchrony, and impossible to say the word ‘God’ without betraying anarchy. To say the word ‘God’ is to betray God. It is, in fact, not only the theologian, but any ‘theo-logian’ (i.e. anyone who uses the word ‘God’), who implies, in the word, an attempt at synchrony, an attempt to contain illeity by making it into a theme; all thematization of God betrays God when it “introduces [the word God] into the system of a language, in the order of the said.” But, as Levinas has it, the word ‘God’ is not just a word; it is also an “overwhelming semantic

⁶⁵Gibbs, “The Name of God in Levinas’ Philosophy,” address delivered at McMaster University, November 1996, 1.

event,” in which the betrayal inherent in saying the word is undone, in which the word is rendered ruptured, in which, in fact, the word acquires the meaning: rupture (OB 151). The word itself does not allow the theo-logical idolatry; it breaks the betrayal. Even as the infinite is done up in a said, it undoes itself; even as it is said, it is unsaid. In effect, the word expresses Descartes’ idea of the infinite; it assembles the unassemblable, and thus is both a said (an assembly) and an unsaying (because what is said cannot be assembled).⁶⁶ Thus the word ‘God’ has a double structure: it betrays the beyond and also conveys it. This betraying/ conveying is ‘contestation.’

To witness is to acknowledge a God who is not, or who is not in locus. And to acknowledge this is to admit that I cannot call upon God, for a God who can be supplicated is a God in locus. To witness is to acknowledge that I am responsible to do everything. And to acknowledge this is once again to admit that I cannot call upon God, for to call upon him would compromise my responsibility. In short, my witness or responsibility, stemming from an awareness of God’s withdrawness, is fundamentally “not counting on any God” (OB 154), and this ‘not counting’ is so extreme a movement as to be describable as negating God. But what does the negation negate? It negates only the theological God, God understood as a being or a presence. It negates the statement of the word ‘God’ as if it could be a synchronic event. In a sense, by saying the word ‘God,’ the subject vies with the infinite; she attempts to negate it, to make the withdrawn present and thus to shed her

⁶⁶Descartes’ idea of the infinite is also anarchic; it stirs things up in the same way as Levinas’ trace in the saying does. When Levinas writes of the word God as assembling the unassemblable, he seems to write as a Hebraic Descartes -- rather than thinking more than he can think, the Levinasian subject is saying more than he can say. But while throughout his earlier writing, Levinas seems to hold the two notions -- thinking the unthinkable, and saying the unsayable -- to be equivalent, here he offers a short critique of Descartes’ formulation. Descartes suggests, he writes, that the subject is “thematizing thought;” he does not take into account saying, or signification, which requires corporeality. The “I think” indicates a “unity of apperception or a representation,” which does not admit of responsibility, of “the gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus essendi* in the possibility of giving” (OB 142). Thus, while Descartes’ idea of the infinite continues, for Levinas, to express the moment of passivity or “inspiration itself” (OB 146), it is important to realize that Descartes is not able to understand that this “passivity breaks out in a saying” (OB 147).

responsibility in the very act of calling upon it. But if she also states the word as a semantic event, she acknowledges her own absolute responsibility, her witness to a God who cannot be brought into the present. Contestation appears as a structure of consciousness, or as Levinas puts it a 'psychism,' a tension in the soul or split in the subject, in which the acknowledgment of the higher status of the commander chafes against the fact that the responsibility devolves onto the commanded one. The word God is 'the other in the same' -- moreover, the 'same' which is the word is at the same time a forgetting *and* a remembering of the other in its midst. Contestation preserves the enigma by holding the beyond and the being in tension; it refers to the fact that they can be inscribed in the single word God, and yet not be synchronized or made compatible.

We will return in a moment to the question of how to lessen the risk of betraying illcity or 'reduce the betrayal,' and later in the chapter, to the question of whether the theologian (as opposed to the theo-logian) can engage in such reduction. Before this, we should stress the importance of witnessing in Levinas' thought in general. The fact that, in the witnessing structure, Levinas thematizes and brings together an account of the response to the trace of the withdrawn God and the relation to the human other means that this discussion in *Otherwise than Being* fills several gaps that appeared in our discussion in the last chapter. There we saw that God was only present in the trace of his absence in the face of the other. Here the thought behind that assertion is fleshed out somewhat. The way one knows that the true God is not a phenomenon is also the way one knows God, that is, by witnessing, by the response which sounds in one's own mouth before the commanding other. Levinas can speak of the withdrawness of God, not present to human experience, because that withdrawness follows in human awareness from the witnessing structure, which is present to human experience. Responsibility precedes theo-logy. In addition, the phenomenon of witnessing helps to clarify what I called the question of temporal order, the problem of how the ethical command can be always prior to thought and action, while it is at

the same time encountered, in time, in the face of the other. In the speech-based account of *Otherwise than Being* it is much easier to see that while the “substantial nucleus of the ego that is formed in the same” (OB 141) is always already undone by the assignation that one expresses every time one opens one’s mouth, one must nevertheless encounter a human other in order to express that assignation. The infinite source of the undoing of the ego is not, as one might think, ‘ever-present’ but, in contradistinction, ‘never-present.’ And the command coming from that source is neither ever-present nor never-present; it *becomes* present in the ethical encounter.

That the glory of the Infinite is glorified only by the signification of the-one-for-the-other, as sincerity, that in my sincerity the Infinite passes the finite, that the Infinite comes to pass there, is what makes the plot of ethics primary, and what makes language irreducible to an act among acts. (OB 150)

God is absent, but the trace of his absence is present as the positive movement toward another human being. The positive movement is first in experience; the negative movement -- the passing or going away of God -- is primordial. Ethics, which takes place as sincerity in language, as the here I am of saying, is also the point from which all speculation and action follows.

The discussion of illeity here can also add substantially to our analysis of ethics and politics. For the word illeity is not the only coinage that a pronoun-for-a-pronoun might take. The fact that Levinas does not speak of *tu*-eity or *vous*-eity is significant. The word is in the third person, and suggests therefore a connection of some kind between God and the third. I have spoken up until now as if God appeared only in the ethical relation -- the relation between two -- but I have left open the possibility that there may be a further manifestation of God in the social sphere created by the entry of the third. Levinas speaks in both ways, sometimes emphasizing the trace which can only be produced in the face of the other to whom I stand in proximity, and sometimes speaking of a God who passes in justice. God does not appear with his own face, but he may appear either in *the* face, or in

the aggregate of faces.

The two appearances of illeity are different -- as ethics and politics are different. When illeity passes in the face, it ruptures and destroys my conceptual structures; it is anarchic; it destroys my ability to make demands of the other. When illeity passes in society, it commands the building up of conceptual structures; it is a principle of order; moreover, it commands me to make demands of the other.

The relation with the third is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of the proximity where the face is faced. There is weighing, thought, objectification, and, by that, an order which betrays my anarchic relation to illeity but where my relation is translated before us. *Betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity, but also a new relation with it*: it is only thanks to God that I am a subject incomparable to the other, that I am approached as other among the others, which is to say "for myself." . . . The "passing" of God of whom I speak only by reference to this help or to this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society. (OB 158, italics mine)⁶⁷

We have seen that in the symmetry of justice I myself become an other to the other, that on the level of the three I am commanded to command the other, to call for justice -- justice for the other, justice for all the others, and even justice for myself. We now see in addition that this movement of justice, like the ethical movement, is directed to or from the withdrawn God; it takes place "thanks to God." "The realization of the just society is *ipso facto* an elevation of man to the company of God" (DL 197).

The fact that illeity passes in both the ethical and the political spheres by no means functions to collapse the distinction between ethics and politics. My politics, in which I am commanded to command, must still be subjected to the critique of my ethics, in which my ability to command is called into question. The insecurity that is imposed on me by the trace in the face persists in the social sphere, as what might be called the trace of the trace. And the trace of the trace grounds social action -- grounds my commanding of others -- and at times perhaps, warns me away from certain social actions -- disallowing my commanding of

⁶⁷I have used Gibbs' translation, from *Correlations*, 241, though I have rendered his 'him-ness' as 'illeity.' I am in debt in this discussion to the account of the socially responsible Levinas in Gibbs, *Correlations*, 229-254

others. The ethics/ politics distinction as we have drawn it is maintained. What we add here is the idea that God passes both in the ethical and in the political, which is to say, both in the rupturing encounter with the other, and in the normative laws and rules of social conduct -- including perhaps especially the *halachah*. The *halachah* takes up the pieces of the conceptions broken by the encounter with the trace, and, in the shadow of what I called 'the trace of the trace' builds from them a justice which remains just insofar as it refuses to become a closed system. It is true that, by the ambiguity of the witnessing structure, it is strictly impossible from a Levinasian perspective to say that the *halachah* was 'written by God.' But nor would he or could he say that the *halachah* was merely written by human beings out of some innate ethical impulse. It arises from God as God passes in the social realm, just as ethics arises from God as God passes in the face of the other.

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What does Levinas' linguistic ethics mean for his own language, as it appears in the book at hand, or, as he puts it, 'at this very moment' (OB 155, 170)? Part way through the chapter Levinas turns to the subject of how his own book can be understood in the terms he has been describing, and most of the rest of the chapter consists in essence of an apology for his book, a defense of his philosophic discourse. The lines which the apology follows are recognizably a re-presentation of what we are calling the basic structure of his thought. Levinas raises the question of the status of his book at the same time as he raises the question, which we have already examined, of the status of the state. The two questions are actually one. As asymmetrical proximity is hardened in the symmetrical state (and as the saying is hardened in the said), so

the very discussion which we are at this moment elaborating about signification, diachrony and the transcendence of the approach beyond being, a discussion that means to be philosophy, is a thematizing, a synchronizing of terms, a recourse to systematic language, a constant use of the verb being, a bringing back into the bosom of being all signification allegedly conceived beyond being. (OB 155)

Levinas is a party to a betrayal. He synchronizes the diachronic beyond, thereby sacrificing

its diachrony. He makes a critique of thematization his theme, thereby contradicting himself and, it might be thought, rendering his argument absurd. These are, he writes, “familiar objections” (OB 155). His subsequent apology falls into two parts. First he explains how it is that all speech, and especially philosophy, must betray the saying. Then he explains how philosophy is called upon, in addition, to reduce the betrayal.

The explanation of why philosophy’s betrayal is necessary involves the entry of the third party. We saw in chapter one that the other’s other necessitates universality, univocality, equality, and symmetry, or, in short, totality. We may now add that one of the third’s specific demands is for books in which “the saying is fixed in a said” (OB 159). Thus despite the fact that “the unnarratable other loses his face in narration” (OB 166), Levinas must narrate. Since he cannot speak to each of us as an other, he must cast his discourse in the language of universality; he must make his speech a theme or system. He is called by the third to inscribe his saying in a series of dead saids, thereby sacrificing or betraying the particularity that would mark any discourse he had with the single other who stood before him. A betrayal of particularity or alterity is demanded by the other himself, or by the other’s other in the face of the other, and part of the betrayal that is demanded is philosophy.

But it is possible to alleviate this apparently uncompromising situation, and philosophy, particularly, is called upon to do so: “everything is shown by indeed betraying its meaning, but philosophy is called upon to reduce that betrayal.” (OB 156). Levinas’ account of how the reducing is accomplished has three layers. He begins with a description of ‘abusive’ discourse, which is followed and clarified somewhat by a description of prophetic or poetic or prayerful discourse, and then by a description of scepticism. None of these discussions is very well sketched; obviously Levinas cannot offer systematic instructions for the reduction of systematization. Nevertheless, he manages to point gradually at an answer to the question of how the betrayal might be reduced, and provides, I

think, a sufficient apology for his book.

Abusive discourse is discourse that affirms universality and undercuts that affirmation at the same time; it is broken language. In the case of this book, such language would allow its said, the questioning of universalization, to shine forth without hypocrisy by preserving and laying bare the sincerity of the saying that lies beneath. To explain the nature of abusive speech, Levinas turns back to the idea of contestation, the saying of the word God which encompasses the tension in witnessing. Insofar as signification is contestation, there must be a meaning being contested. Contestation tries to negate, but, in doing so, it first admits the force, or indeed the reality, of what is to be negated. Thus the contestation which is the saying of the word 'God,' admits the beyond being even as it contests it. In this way, contestation is abusive speech. In reflection, the contestation will appear to be a contradiction: to say 'beyond being' will appear to be in contradiction with the conditions for making statements. But before reflection, in the immediacy of the saying of the word God, the contestation is not yet a contradiction but an abuse, holding beyond and being in tension. "God," he explains, is "nothing but an abusive word" (OB 156). As such, it both betrays and conveys the infinite; it both betrays and reduces the betrayal.

The account of prophetic/ poetic⁶⁸/ prayerful discourse is complementary; it extends the account of abusive discourse by suggesting that all language, insofar as it carries within it a saying -- bears the marks of abuse. For prophecy is linked, throughout Levinas' chapter, to saying -- in other words prophecy, for Levinas, is a characteristic of all good

⁶⁸Levinas does not speak at length here about the link between poetry and prophecy, though he makes its existence quite clear. The link is obviously in part biblical -- the prophetic books of the Bible tend also to be works of poetry -- but it is also classical, emerging from Hesiod; see Maurice Bowra, *The Prophetic Element* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959). In and after Hesiod, the poetry/ prophecy duo became one side in the battle between poets and philosophers, which later informs and in part fuels the battle between Jerusalem and Athens. As we have seen, Levinas undercuts this debate, but at times also makes use of it, putting prophecy up against what I have called philosophy-b. In *Otherwise than Being* chapter five, as will emerge presently, Levinas wishes both to undercut and also to utilize the debate; this is one of the things that makes the chapter so confusing. It may be well to keep in mind that the link he employs here to save his own work from the charge of being philosophy-b is Greek in origin as well as Hebrew.

speech. Indeed, not only are prophecy and saying linked to one another, the two are also linked to witnessing and to other terms such as ‘inspiration’ and ‘glorification’ (which is the glorification of the infinite, and also, following the structure of witnessing, the glory of the infinite).⁶⁹ It might be argued that a number of levels should be identified in this concatenation of terms. Saying, which is implicit even in the most mundane sentences, might be thought of as distinct from saying-as-witnessing or saying-as-inspiration, in which the subject is aware of the assignation she acknowledges in her saying; and both might be thought of as distinct from prophesy or prayer or glorification, which suggest a further intensification of the awareness of assignation by giving a single name to its source. However, such distinctions are far from explicit in Levinas’ chapter. It is probable that he blurs the terms because any attempt to distinguish them, even a distinction based on degrees of intensity, would tend to slip towards a distinction between the relation to the human other and the relation to God-as-other. To speak of a relation with God outside of the relation with the trace would precisely put God in locus as an object and undermine the witnessing phenomenon, while to refuse to accord prophecy a status categorically separate from that of quotidian saying prevents this kind of idolatry. Levinas emphasizes that all saying, witnessing, prophecy, inspiration and glorification refers to God precisely insofar as it contains the promise to love the neighbour, to feed him with the bread from one’s own mouth. “Prophecy,” writes Levinas early in the chapter is “the very psyche in the soul, the other in the same, and all of man’s spirituality [is] prophetic” (149).⁷⁰ More particularly, prophecy stands for the fact that the said conveys the saying while betraying it; the continued presence of saying within said, is “the resonance of every language ‘in the name

⁶⁹There is, in fact, a larger concatenation of blurred terms here. Peperzak names as occurring together, “saying, responsibility, goodness, proximity, subjectivity and spirituality;” and Fabio Ciaramelli writes that “language itself is always ethical, prophetic, sceptical, religious, and inspired.” Peperzak, “Presentation,” 63; Ciaramelli, “Levinas’ Ethical Discourse Between Individuation and Universality,” in *Rereading Levinas*, ed. Bernasconi and Critchley, 83-105, 98).

⁷⁰At BTV 110, Levinas writes: “one may wonder whether man, an animal endowed with speech, is not, above all, an animal capable of inspiration, a prophetic animal.”

of God,' the inspiration or prophecy of all language" (OB 152). Thus it is that the account of prophecy can function here to extend the definition of abusive language from the word God to all language. All speech, insofar as it is prophetic, insofar as it is internally broken, inscribes a contestation; all speech both betrays and reduces the betrayal.

This extension allows Levinas to begin his apology. Insofar as discourse, qua prophetic discourse, appears as a said, it appears as information, as a record of something that can be thought. But it is not just a said; it inscribes, in addition, an attempt to preserve the sincerity of the saying by always pointing beyond information, beyond what can be thought, beyond its own said. Levinas is not tremendously concerned about the relation of signifier to signified being; he is not concerned, for instance, that when I say 'table' the word is different from the thing. The problem that concerns him, rather, is that when I say the name of a human being, or describe him, I can only re-present his 'being' -- his locus, time, history, ontology, what he has disclosed or made known -- but I cannot re-present his 'otherwise-than-being,' the trace in his face of the passing of God which arises in our relation and always escapes re-presentation by not being present. When I say the name 'God' -- when I try to encompass the trace itself in a word -- the problem with all naming or describing is there at once, in an intense way. But the name 'God' is, in this respect, paradigmatic for all speech; and more than this, it is a part of all speech, since every human being addressed in speech shows me the trace of the otherwise than being. The trace in the other gives all my words the structure of assembling the unassemblable, that is to say: assembling/ finding unassembled, or constructing/ deconstructing, or saying/ unsaying. Levinas applies this linguistic conception to the writing of his own philosophic works. Prophetic discourse can

exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts. (OB 169-70)

This quality of pointing beyond the said or beyond what can be thought: what is it pointing towards? It is as a response to the pastness and futurity of the trace, and, in addition, a response to the past of books and to the future of interpretation. Levinas makes the call for interpretation ad infinitum explicitly in *Totality and Infinity*, which, as he has it, can break its own thematization into “fragments” because it is incomplete, a philosophy rather than a wisdom, a discourse rather than a teaching, “told to the other, to the reader who appears anew behind my discourse” (TI 295). And he makes it again in *Otherwise than Being* where

I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes. That is true of the discussion I am elaborating at this very moment. (OB 170)

Levinas calls, with his own books, to other books not yet written. He speaks to someone who is ‘not yet.’ The fact that his book is written at all -- for whom, after all? -- points outside of its own system to an unknown, an unpredicted. In this same way, every author compromises her claim to coherence; all books point outside of totality. “In totalizing being, discourse qua discourse thus belies the very claim to totalize” (OB 171). Coherent discourse requires a certain incoherence, and that incoherence is a matter of a diachronous occurrence in two times, in a past and in a future. This, above all, is the quality of the discourse as prophetic.

The final part of Levinas’ apology is the discussion of scepticism and the refutation of scepticism which closes the main body of *Otherwise than Being*. Scepticism, writes Levinas, is “a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said” (OB 167). By refusing to accept the truth in a given assembly of being, scepticism makes a distinction between the speaker’s presentation of herself in truth and her content or theme; in short, scepticism does not allow the saying to be lost or negated in the said. Philosophy refutes scepticism in two ways.

First, it applies the old logic trick: if, as you say, there is no truth then it cannot be true that there is no truth. In this refutation, writes Levinas, philosophy “puts [scepticism’s] thesis into contradiction with the conditions for any thesis” (OB 171). But philosophy also refutes by means of a grander use of logic whereby it absorbs scepticism into its logos or system as an antithesis and thus grows historically and territorially. Both refutations are, in effect, attempts on the part of philosophy to destroy scepticism by absorbing it into the said, by forcing it into coherence or synchrony with itself and with philosophy’s logos. (We should note briefly that ‘philosophy’ is here playing the role of those who pose the ‘familiar objections’ to Levinas’ thought, accusing him of incoherence or self-contradiction, or attempting to subsume him into a larger -- probably Hegelian -- rubric, while the sceptic here is Levinas. We will take this issue up again in chapter four.)

Levinas admits the strength of philosophy’s case, but notes as well that philosophy is never able to destroy scepticism entirely.

Does not the last word belong to philosophy? Yes, in a certain sense, since for Western philosophy the saying is exhausted in things said. But scepticism in fact makes a difference, and puts an interval between saying and said. Scepticism is refutable, but it returns. (OB 168)

In effect, scepticism refuses to be synchronized into philosophy’s impersonal logos, for “to contest the possibility of truth is precisely to contest this uniqueness of order and level” (OB 168). Scepticism contests the very ground of philosophy; it contests coherence.⁷¹

⁷¹Peperzak voices the question that must be foremost in the minds of many who read Levinas on scepticism. Does scepticism -- the position that all theses are false -- really argue from a different ground than that of philosophy, a diachrony opposed to philosophy’s synchrony? Does it really hold the saying distinct from the said? Peperzak thinks not. He argues that philosophy *can* refute scepticism logically, or incorporate it (he illustrates the incorporation that I have called the second, grander refutation with reference to Kant and Hegel) precisely because scepticism does *not* argue from a different ground than that of philosophy. Therefore, Peperzak would prefer that Levinas continued to present his case using the terminology of saying and said without recourse to the weak term scepticism. “Levinas’ great discovery is that he found a way beyond the solidarity of logic and its sceptical denial, in the difference between the said and the saying,” Peperzak, “Presentation,” 58.

Robert Bernasconi, in full understanding of the problems Peperzak discerns, nevertheless defends Levinas’ use of the term scepticism. He points out that Levinas is not supporting the anti-philosophical school of that name as much as he is using the term as a ‘model’ or ‘metaphor.’ Scepticism is useful to Levinas because its contestation of truth stands in ‘proximity’ to Levinas’ “subordination of truth to ethics” -- a proximity which is recognizable in the fact that the refutation of scepticism (that its theses contradict

In explaining scepticism's contestation, Levinas offers the marvelous metaphor of the knots. Philosophy attempts to conceal the incoherencies of reality by tying knots in the thread of its discourse; the knots allow it to claim that its discourse remains always coherent and unbroken. But philosophy does not in this way get rid of the breaks; it only covers them. And covering them makes them apparent.

The interruptions of discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity. (OB 170)

Scepticism is aware that there are things which cannot be synchronized, that do not appear on the common plane of philosophic knowing, that cannot be made intelligible. This awareness is enshrined forever in the knots, and the sceptic always finds them and points to them. With the discussion of knots, Levinas closes the defense of his discourse and the account of how the betrayal inherent in language is reduced. As the infinite is both betrayed and conveyed by the abusive word, and as the saying is both betrayed and conveyed by the prophetic said, (and as ethics is both betrayed and conveyed, albeit with its 'skin hardened,' by the state), so anarchy or incoherence or scepticism is both betrayed and conveyed by philosophy.

But the argument so far has implied that all language betrays and reduces the betrayal, for, as we have seen, all language is abusive and prophetic, and, by the same token, Levinas says explicitly that "[all] language is already scepticism" (OB 170). Why, then, does Levinas insist that it is the role of philosophy in particular to reduce the betrayal?

the ground for holding theses) stands in proximity to the 'familiar objections.' Levinas, himself, is not contesting truth in the manner of a sceptic. Bernasconi, "Scepticism in the Face of Philosophy" in *Rereading Levinas*, ed. Bernasconi and Critchley, 152. Bernasconi opens his article with an epigraph from Holderlin which helps to explain what Levinas may be thinking of in his choice of scepticism as a model: "Believe me, the sceptic finds contradiction and imperfection in all that is thought, because he knows the harmony of the perfect beauty, which is never thought. The dry bread that human reason well-meaningly offers him, he disdains only because he is secretly feasting at the table of the gods." Friedrich Holderlin, *Samtliche Werke*, ed. F. Beissner (Stuttgarter Ausgabe v.3, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1957), 81; trans. W.R. Trask, *Hyperion or the Hermit in Greece* (New York: Ungar, 1965), 93. Other useful discussions of Levinas on scepticism can be found in Jan de Greef, "Scepticism and Reason" in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed., R. Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986) 159-180; and Maurice Blanchot "Our Clandestine Companion," in *Face to Face*, ed. Cohen, 41-50.

Levinas writes that “philosophy is called upon to conceive ambivalence, to conceive it in several times” (OB 162). In this line, the phrase, ‘in several times’ has, I think, at least two meanings. First, Levinas suggests, as he has before, that the philosopher must allow the enigma to remain diachronous, and not attempt to synchronize it. The philosopher is thus being called on to understand that the harmonious said and the tension-full or anarchic saying/unsaying occur at different times, or, to be more precise, take place *in* different times -- the said referring always to an assembly in the present or a re-presentation, the saying referring always to a past that was never present, and the unsaying to a future that will never be present; thus, also, the conveying always prior to *and* after the betraying, the tension or anarchy always prior to *and* after the harmony. Thus, when Levinas says that philosophy must think in ‘several times,’ he means in large part that philosophy can reduce the betrayal of concepts and language by remembering that there is a brokenness or a ‘deconstruction’ inherent in its conceptions, a deconstruction that comes from the other’s rupture of my postulated or ‘constructed’ eternity; in other words, philosophy reduces the betrayal by ensuring that its conceptions are not governed by an attempt to synchronize the tension between the synchronic said and the anarchic saying but rather allowing the diachrony to appear by means of hesitations or stutterings or abuses. But the phrase ‘in several times’ also has another meaning, for this very movement -- the very remembering of brokenness -- takes place on two levels or at two times, a less reflective level or time and a more reflective level or time. To be precise: it is not entirely clear from Levinas’ descriptions of abusive language whether philosophy is commanded to say, less reflectively, the word God -- that is, to pray -- or, in distinction, to recollect, on a more reflective level, the less reflective saying of the word -- that is, to remember that all speech is prayer. The phrase ‘in several times’ suggests both. Pre-philosophical language already betrays as soon as it transforms the call, the cry and the groan into words like ‘God;’ philosophical language betrays further by reifying God as word or concept and therefore

forgetting the call, cry or groan that lies beneath it. Thus the possibility of betrayal is actually the possibility of a double betrayal -- not merely the betrayal that is part of all speech, the endemic totality which is there even in what I have called philosophy-a, but also the further betrayal which forgets, or refuses to admit, that speech is a betrayal. The enemy here is not the one who betrays, but the one who refuses to admit that the betrayal can be reduced; this one is the perpetrator of the second betrayal, the treacherous betrayal, the betrayal of the avoidable totality, or philosophy-b, or, as Levinas says here, "Western philosophy" which has "issued out of proximity" but "nonetheless "refute[s] it in discourse absorbed in the said and in being, in ontology" (OB 169).

This second betrayal cannot be reduced, since it is comprised of the 'refutation of proximity.' But the first betrayal can be reduced, and not only by the abuse or prophecy or scepticism inherent in all language, but also, very simply, by a refusal to commit the second betrayal. This is to say that, in order to reduce the first betrayal, philosophical abusive language must appear not only as what might be called "simple contestation" -- saying God -- but also as a kind of meta-contestation -- a fight against the tendency to forget the contestation when saying God. And if we allow that both contestation and meta-contestation can be called prayer or prophecy, then the many passages in which Levinas castigates or deconstructs the history of Western thought appear as a kind of philosophical prayer or prophecy. The job of philosophy -- the job of Levinas' philosophy in particular -- is to prophesy, which now can be seen to mean: (1) to reduce the first betrayal by preserving the saying in the said, (2) to do this precisely by refusing to commit the second betrayal, which forgets the saying in the said, (3) therefore, to do this by promulgating the fact that first betrayal is a betrayal, i.e. to call out, for all to hear, the fact that language, philosophy, etc. constitute betrayals. To reduce the betrayal is, very simply, to recollect the betrayal.

We see here a recurrence of the problem I defined in chapter one. Totality is

endemic in human existence; indeed, it is commanded by infinity. But it is not necessary for us to slip into the many further degenerations, or degrees of totality, which consist in forgetting the infinity which commanded us to totalize. The structure of contestation, necessary upon the entry of the third, means that speech and philosophy must thematize; paradoxically, before philosophy is called upon to reduce the betrayal, it is called upon to betray. But if it can preserve the memory of what commanded it to betray it will have reduced the betrayal. Economy, war, politics and justice, like philosophy and thematization, appear in various forms -- sometimes as part of the structure of contestation necessary upon the entry of the third, sometimes as a degeneration of the contestation. The denial or atheism inherent in contestation is always a duty of the subject under God, but it is also always possible for it to grow until it swamps the admission which is the other side of contestation; the withdrawal of God can turn to forgetting. The first totalities which the pre-original encounter with infinity calls us to create are already compromises, and must be watched lest they degenerate further.

The tendency toward such degeneration becomes clearest in the way Levinas' description of philosophy changes during the chapter. In segment three of the chapter, in which Levinas describes the entry of the third and the totalization that she demands, he appears extremely hopeful of philosophy's ability to reduce the betrayal. He suggests that while the totality that is the political state cannot reduce the betrayal on its own, it can be advised by philosophy to this effect. Philosophy can do this because, even while it is part of what the third party calls for -- "control, a search for justice, society and the State, comparison and possession, thought and science, commerce and philosophy" -- it is at the same time "this measure brought to the infinity of the being-for-the-other of proximity, and it is like the wisdom of love" (OB 161). Thus

even if [philosophy] is called to thought by justice, it . . . remains the servant of the saying that signifies the difference between the one and the other as the one for the other, as non-indifference to the other. Philosophy is the wisdom of love at the

service of love. (OB 162)

However, in the discussion of scepticism and the refutation of scepticism in segment five of the chapter, philosophy, as we have already seen, takes as its main role the deliberate forgetting of proximity and the absorption of the saying into the said. “Western philosophy,” writes Levinas, “has been . . . the refutation of transcendence” (OB 169), and, in the same vein, towards the end of the chapter, he postulates a Foucauldian alliance between the state, philosophy and medicine which conspire to destroy proximity (OB 170).⁷² At this point, he attributes the abusive language which stands against the alliance not to any form of philosophy, but to scepticism, and also to prophecy and religion (which he carefully distinguishes from faith and theology, and links instead to the witnessing structure). Certainly, the two accounts -- that of segment three and that of segment five -- are ultimately more or less compatible. Levinas calls in both for a resurgence of proximity within totality; he only varies in the degree to which he sees philosophy and the state as able to initiate or accept this resurgence. But this variation is interesting: the word ‘philosophy’ at one moment names an endemic totality and stands for what I have called philosophy-a, and at the next moment names a totality which can and must be avoided, standing for philosophy-b. We have here a fairly clear example of the way a totalization called for by the third can at any moment slip into one or a number of degenerate forms, denying its own origin.

Let me summarize. Before philosophy is called upon to reduce the betrayal, it is called upon to betray. But the trace of the infinite which appears in proximity also calls upon it not to betray too much -- to remember that the other it betrays is also the source of its call to betray. If primal, pre-philosophical language is abusive, then philosophy, which must take that abuse and reflect on it -- making it non-abusive by squeezing its asymmetry

⁷²On this alliance as Foucauldian, see Llewelyn, *Genealogy*, 144-5.

into a 'corrective' symmetry --must at all costs squeeze gently. In taking all the responsibility -- to universalize, and to respect the particular -- philosophy bears witness to the withdrawn God. Bearing witness can only be done by feeding the other with bread from one's mouth. Levinas' book, written as a theme, expressed in universal terms, is at the same time bread for the mouth of one who is not yet. Along the way, others, if they are at all sceptics, can examine the knots in Levinas' discourse and find in them the moments where the diachrony is hinted at without being made intelligible.

II. Levinas' midrash

a. Levinas on theology

Clearly the witnessing phenomenon, with its withdrawn God, points to a critique of Western theology. Such a critique is explicitly alluded to at various points in the chapter, but is never explained in detail. As I understand it, Levinas sees Western theology as the perpetrator of attempts to define God, to objectify and locate him. Following this location, theology distinguishes -- must distinguish -- the movement from below and the movement from above, calling them, among other things, reason and revelation, or, in other aspects, faith and grace, or nature and providence. All of these distinctions collapse in Levinas, and moreover, all of the experiences to which these words refer are found to happen or originate within the face-to-face, understood as taking place under God or 'in God's name,' that is, understood as witnessing. Levinas describes witnessing so often in so many different ways because he understands it to be a radical critique of the way the human relation to God is most often understood. "One is tempted," he writes, "to call this plot [i.e. witnessing] religious; [but] it . . . does not rest on any positive theology" (OB 147). Nor indeed does it rest on a negative theology, for the "unknowing" of negative theology is, for Levinas, essentially equivalent to the knowing of positive theology: "the not-known and the unknowable would still refer to a present, would form a structure in it, would belong to

order" (OB 154), while witnessing, in distinction, is beyond knowing and unknowing, anarchic. In fact, Levinas does not want his philosophy of the divine connected to the negative at all; the subject's 'negation' of God follows from a fundamentally positive movement, the ethical obligation to the other (OB 151).⁷³ But leaving aside the question of whether or to what extent witnessing is positive, or negative, or neither positive nor negative, we can be certain that it is not theology. Levinas writes of the structure: "what a deception for the friends of the truth that thematizes being, and of the subject that effaces itself before Being!" (OB 149) -- referring to the theologians who totalize God by the very movement with which they bow before him.

The problem with theology, more specifically, seems to be that its totalization is never undermined, its betrayal never reduced. Admittedly, theology is like philosophy insofar as it is called to betray meaning by the entry of the third; Levinas implies this by prefacing the discussion of the third's demands in the fifth chapter of *Otherwise than Being* with the question "why have we gone to seek essence in its empyrean?" as well as questions involving philosophy more generally (OB 157). But unlike philosophy, theology never reduces the betrayal; Levinas does not once mention theology in the context of discussions

⁷³Derrida, in "Sauf le Nom," is only slightly more willing to use the term 'negative theology' to describe the ambivalent phenomenon of witnessing: "[in] the way of theology called or so-called negative, [the] voice multiplies itself, dividing within itself: it says one thing and its contrary, God that is without being or God that (is) beyond being" ("Sauf," 35). Derrida is aware of the Levinasian critique of the very idea of a 'negative' theology, explaining later in his meditation that negative theology must involve 'translation,' and thus must be ultimately positive ("Sauf," 47, cf. 41). But although this stops him from using the term negative except "provisionally" ("Sauf," 61), it does not stop him from interpreting what has traditionally been called negative theology in terms that are clearly borrowed from Levinas. According to Derrida, Silesius writes of

the singularity of the unknown God [which] overflows the essence and the divinity, thwarting in this matter the opposition of the negative and the positive, of being and nothingness, of thing and non-thing -- thus transcending all the theological oppositions This excess or this surplus (with regard to language)...leaves some remains on the body of a tongue Some trace remains in right in this corpus, becomes this corpus as *sur-vivance* of apophasis (more than life and more than death), survivance of an internal onto-logico-semantic auto-destruction In effect, this theology [i.e. negative theology] launches or carries negativity as the principle of auto-destruction at the heart of each thesis; in any event, this theology suspends every thesis, all belief, all doxa...in which its *epokhe* has some affinity with the *skepsis* of scepticism. ("Sauf," 55, 67)

In short, Derrida sees an affinity between Silesius (and other apophatic mystics) and Levinas; both seek a language outside of language to describe a God outside of being.

of the reduction. Thus while philosophy may appear sometimes as philosophy-a and sometimes as philosophy-b, theology is always the same; theology is always, as it were, theology-b. A degeneration has taken place within theology rendering it not merely one of the endemic totalities that proceed from the entry of the third, but an avoidable totality, an error. A fixity has set into its categories which precludes the possibility of a theological expression of the witnessing structure.

What then is this theology? What is Levinas referring to with the word? Levinas draws extensively on the Hebrew Bible throughout the chapter; his references are so dense as to form a sub-text of midrash or biblical commentary. Perhaps, then, he is criticizing all post-biblical theology from a biblical perspective. But this cannot quite be the case, for though the witnessing structure and the notion of the withdrawn God are certainly present in Hebrew Scripture -- in the image of God's back and in the passages to which Levinas refers in this chapter -- it must be admitted that Scripture often points to a God in locus; moreover the idea of bearing witness to the withdrawn God is expressed in rabbinic and kabbalistic texts as well as in the Bible. Perhaps, then, he presents a Jewish critique of Christian theology. But this too cannot quite be the case, for though it might be argued that Christianity insists more adamantly on locating God and distinguishing between the movement from above and the movement from below, such tendencies are also undercut in Christian thought, just as they are evident and undercut in Jewish thought.⁷⁴ Probably it can only be said that Levinas believes that the phenomenon of witnessing is somehow preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures -- to the extent that his thought on the matter is illuminated at every turn with biblical reference -- and later lost to theology. Despite the fact that linguistic descriptions of God must thematize him, and despite the more pertinent existence of many Scriptural passages which do not in any obvious way allow for

⁷⁴Derrida speaks of a "New Testament eventness" ("Sauf," 71), meaning a tendency to locate or objectify. But he also undercuts this himself, quoting Silesius: "It is not you in the place, the place is in you! Cast it out, and here is already eternity" ("Sauf," 57).

contestation or the idea of a withdrawn God, the Hebrew Scriptures retain something later forgotten, forgotten by degrees but in the end forgotten to the extent that Levinas, writing in the modern period, feels no need to qualify his dismissals of theology at large. It is, I believe, because he holds the idea of bearing witness to be almost irretrievably lost, that Levinas argues so strongly for it, and for the idea that follows from it and forms its ground, the *withdrawn God*.

While Levinas does not describe the gradual process by which witnessing is forgotten, he does hint at some of the effects of the forgetting on our hermeneutics. I think it likely that Levinas sees himself in almost complete accord with the Scriptural understanding of God, and that at the same time he sees that the nuances of this understanding cannot be thematized today using the same images. As I will explain, Isaiah, as Levinas presents him, manages to express the witnessing structure, the fact that the order is present only in the response, while at the same time speaking metaphorically of a God in locus, a God in being. But in an age when theology is caught either in the stranglehold of ontology with its differentiation of the from-God and the to-God, or in the subsequent stranglehold of a 'psychologism' which reduces all movement to mental operation, it may be impossible to express the witnessing structure without describing God somewhat less metaphorically -- if more vaguely -- as otherwise than being or beyond being. People in our era tend to read all words literally -- that is, as having referents which can be pointed at. These referents, in general, are understood to take two forms, physical or psychological; in short, words are understood to point either at beings or at ideas. For such readers, the word 'God' must refer either to a Something existing Somewhere, or to a function of the human mind, human emotions, human needs, or human social circumstances. When a reader comes to the Bible with the literalist hermeneutic, it will certainly seem to her that its authors understood God in the former sense, but it will also appear that she has a choice; she may adopt what she thinks of as their conception of God as a being, or may 'look through' that

conception towards the state of mind of its authors, a state of mind which represents either psychological truths about the human being, or certain contingent political and social circumstances of the period of authorship, or both. Neither way does the Bible appear meaningless: God-as-being is obviously meaningful, and God (or God-talk) understood as representing ideas may, likewise, provide us with information, or even insight.

Nevertheless, neither of these literalist hermeneutic modes makes room for the way Levinas understands God, or the way he holds the biblical authors to have understood God. For these modes deal exclusively with the two totalizing levels of existence, that is, the level of the one (the locus of ideas) and the level of the three (the locus of the multitude of existing beings) at the expense of the level of the two where infinity is produced. Thought at the level of the one, as an idea, God appears as part of oneself, or as a function of the egology that characterizes that level. Thought at the level of the three, as a being, God becomes part of a whole, the highest component in an ontology but a function of that ontology nevertheless. As a reader, Levinas differs from ontological or third level readers in that although he, like them, holds God to be a reality, he repudiates the treatment of God as a being or thing. He differs from ideational or first-level readers in that although he, like them, is interested in what the biblical words mean about an earthly movement or affectivity, he repudiates the treatment of this movement as a facet of the individual alone, and thus makes a space for passivity, for reception, for teaching -- and for God's reality.⁷⁵

⁷⁵Though Levinas does not adopt either an ontological or a psychological perspective -- and thus neither an ontological nor a psychological hermeneutic -- he is often read in one of these two ways. Language tends in one or the other direction; this is its deficiency. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas' language tended toward ontology or third level images -- he spoke of being and of things, and he personified his others into iconic figures. In *Otherwise than Being*, he attempted -- largely as a result of misunderstanding and subsequent critique -- to correct this tendency. As a result, *Otherwise than Being* tends unfortunately to be somewhat psychological in its language, allowing a new misunderstanding. Levinas' problem with respect to psychological language can be described more specifically. He wishes to retain the phenomenological insight that one cannot know the other, that one knows only what happens to oneself, or, more specifically, that one only knows what happens *within* oneself. However, he does not wish this insight to degenerate into a solipsism or an egology, as he understands most phenomenology to do. Therefore, while he speaks of the encounter with the other as a 'psychism,' or a split in the subject, in

Ultimately, for Levinas, the third-level and first-level readings coincide. Like all totalizing conceptions, they overlap or spill into one another; perhaps it may even be said that they *are* one another seen from different perspectives. Ideas are ideas of things; God as a being can just as easily be called 'God as the idea of a being.' So too ideas themselves take on substance and have effects in the world; God as an idea thus becomes 'the thing which is the idea of God.' Ontology is egology, and vice versa. But though this hybrid of thing and idea has effects, it does not have the effect of shaking up the human subject to the core, of calling her right to exist into question. One can only be shaken up by something which is neither a being nor an idea, something which comes from outside of being and ruptures all ideas. Thus, as Levinas puts it in the chapter under consideration: "Neither realism nor idealism, twin brothers, have the birthright. It is justice signified by signification, by the one-for-the-other that requires phenomenality" (OB 163). The fact that the trace is experienced in relation again appears as critical to Levinas' understanding. What is beyond being cannot appear as a being or an idea without reduction to the point of destruction; it can, however, appear as the movement which is the trace in the face of the other.

It should be said, though, that once God is experienced in the face of the other -- once infinity is produced in the encounter -- it may be possible to speak meaningfully of God as both being and idea. In this case one will not be using ideational speech after the manner of the idealist or being-speech after the manner of the realist; one's speech will not be superscribed by the 'twin brothers' of the literalist hermeneutic and thus the reduction of God-as-idea to *mere* thing and the reduction of God-as-thing to *mere* idea will not take

which the subject 'is divided from himself' or 'cannot return to himself,' he insists (a) that this analysis of levels in the psyche has nothing to do with the distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness and everything to do with the distinction between same and other, and (b) that the movement is not psychological (see OB 147). Critique of *Totality and Infinity's* ontologism has forced him to shift the locus of the movement to within the subject, and thus *Otherwise than Being* has a new problem: it allows us, at times, to forget that the movement within is a movement from or to without.

place. After and from the face-to-face, to speak of God as a Somebody existing Somewhere or as experienced within the soul are both legitimate ways to bear witness; the former is, in fact, the way of speaking of God most common in the Bible, and the latter is relatively common in Levinas, as, for instance, in his discussions of the Cartesian idea of the infinite. Indeed, such ways of speech are unavoidable, since speech always operates at the level of thematization or totalization. Speech is ontological, and is also relatively useful for discussing the psychological, the ontology which appears as egology. This is why the great temptation for those who feel religious stirrings is to think of God at the third level. The first, in which God appears as an idea, can be dismissed; the second can be overlooked since God does not appear before us as a dialogical partner; but the third, where God seems to take on substantial existence is compelling. In short, if God is real but cannot be talked to, it seems that he must be talked about; language itself conspires to treat a non-ideational God as a third level entity. But language can be subverted. The reinscription in language of the call, the cry, the offering, the prayer, the poem -- these and other such abusive speech-acts allow us to express God from within the ethical. This is how Levinas 'thinks' God, and how he thinks the authors of the Bible thought God. The key, once again, is broken speech, speech which uses the categories of being without being a slave to those categories, speech which says 'God is here' without locating God in a particular place. The literalist error is not simply a function of language, but a function of avoidable totality, a forgetting of the ground of language in non-spatial ethics. While, for the authors of the Bible, being-talk was a necessity of linguistic communication, a betrayal committed in awareness of its status as betrayal, for us it is simply ontology, a betrayal without awareness. The problem originates in the theological location of God, since a located God is a being, and if he is not a being he is an idea. At least, this is how it appears to us today, when we have forgotten that these images stand as the only linguistic possibilities of describing the witnessing structure in language, and, instead, have taken the words literally as reality. Levinas, I

believe, assumes that his readers are generally not capable of reading biblical images of a God in locus metaphorically, as the Bible's intended audience perhaps was. Idolatrous reading, always a possibility, has become the prevailing hermeneutic. And this idolatry -- the basis of his critique of theology -- obviously did not become widespread with a primal entry of the third. What Levinas calls theology is the witnessing structure destroyed by the second betrayal at some point long after the writing of the Hebrew Scriptures. He does not define that point.

b. *The beginning of the midrash*

I count twelve Scriptural references in the chapter in question, most of which are from segment two of that chapter. In succession they are: Song of Songs 5:8, *hineni* (from many passages including Genesis 22:1 and 11, and Exodus 3:4), Genesis 3:12, Isaiah 50:6, *hineni* (from Isaiah 6:8-10), Isaiah 57:18-19, Ezekiel 8:3, 1 Samuel 17:45, Job 4:12, Exodus 24:7, Isaiah 65:24, and Genesis 1:2.

The first two biblical references appear together, as they must.⁷⁶ The command can only be answered, writes Levinas, with a 'here I am' "where the pronoun I is in the accusative, declined before any declension, possessed by the other, sick . . ." (OB 142). The word 'sick' is footnoted to Song of Songs 5:8, "I am sick with love."⁷⁷ In the biblical context, the speaker has opened herself to her lover. She reaches for him, but he is gone. She cannot feel his embrace; she is sick for him; she desires him; what she has of him is precisely a reaching, a sickness, a desire. Thus, though he is withdrawn, he is present in the trace which is her sickness and is also the trace of his absence. It is *her* sickness, but it comes from without; it is hers but hers in passivity; hers but imposed on her. Just as in the

⁷⁶Handelman also treats the first two references, and discusses Levinas' debt, in his use of these passages, to Rosenzweig; Handelman, *Fragments*, 265-8.

⁷⁷Biblical quotations not cited directly from Levinas' text are taken from the JPS, though some I have modified.

witnessing structure where ‘I have received, I know not whence, that of which I am the author’ (OB 148-9), she has received, she knows not whence, a sickness which is in her, belonging to her, made by her. Two Levinasian experiences are illustrated here: first, the trace understood as the presence of an absence, and second, the ‘I’ of the “here I am” understood as inscribing a confusion between what is within me or mine and what is imposed on me from without, the ‘I’ of the approach as a sick ‘I,’ an ‘I’ formed not only *in* the absence of the one desired, but *constituted out of* the absence of the one desired.

Just before the image of the withdrawn God, but in the same breath, Levinas gives us the word of witness, the ‘here I am.’ ‘Here I am’ is the common English translation of the Hebrew *hineni*, but there is no doubt that a better translation could be desired. The Hebrew word *hineni* shares the two grammatical characteristics we noted in its common French translation *me voici*. First, it is not a form of the copula verb, but rather a form of the verb meaning “to behold,” and second, the speaker of the word refers to herself in the accusative (which in Hebrew appears in the form of a verb-suffix), rather than with the nominative of the English.⁷⁸ *Hineni* appears a number of times in the Bible, but since later in the chapter Levinas cites a specific biblical passage in connection with the term, we will reserve any extended discussion of it for a moment. Now, though, we should note something about its context in Levinas’ midrash, namely, that ‘here I am’ occurs *before* the sickness which illustrates the withdrawn God. We may recall here the discussion of temporal order in chapter one. The ethical structure of witnessing in all its immediacy is a phenomenological insight, and as such it must always precede, in consciousness, any determinations which may follow from it about the nature of God, even if those determinations ultimately ‘place’ God as temporally prior. Levinas has been accused, most notably by Derrida, of disguising a theology as an ethics, of beginning with a religious story

⁷⁸Any nuances implied in these grammatical characteristics are lost the English, ‘here I am.’ However, like Levinas’ translators, we retain ‘here I am’ for the sake of its resonance with English Bibles, eschewing more grammatically accurate forms such as ‘behold me.’

or scheme and cooking up an ethics to fit.⁷⁹ Levinas insists, however, that his thought is “a transcendentalism that begins with ethics” (GCM 90), that while determinations about God may be his destination, they are not his starting point. Ultimately it is true that the withdrawn God makes way for responsibility by the fact of his withdrawness, but Levinas, and indeed human beings in general according to Levinas, do not begin with a knowledge of God’s withdrawness and then act ethically; they discover God’s withdrawness through their own ethical action. Thus in his ordering of these first two biblical references, Levinas re-presents the order of his own thinking. He also suggests that the Hebrew Bible is based on similar existential phenomena. The scriptural re-presentation of God, re-re-presented by Levinas, is undogmatic. It allows one to understand that the *hineni* is all that we have, and that only in saying *hineni* does it become clear that one is sick with love for something that is not there.

Let us take up the next reference. It comes in Levinas’ description of the phrase “as-for-me,” with which a speaker asserts her ego in a denial of alterity or proximity. Levinas describes the as-for-me as

like the thickets of paradise in which Adam hid himself upon hearing the voice of the eternal God traversing the garden from the side from which the day comes, [thickets which] offered a hiding place from the assignation. (OB 144)

Adam’s is the paradigmatic expression of the deliberate avoidance of responsibility.⁸⁰ “The woman You put at my side -- she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12) --with these words Adam throws the blame for his sin onto the woman and onto God, that is, onto everybody present besides himself, indeed everybody *presently existing* besides himself. The assignation is upon Adam, as it is upon all of us, but Adam refuses, in the most

⁷⁹Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 150-3.

⁸⁰Levinas’ debt to Rosenzweig is always great, but perhaps especially so in the midrash in this chapter. The Levinasian Adam’s ‘as-for-me’ is drawn from the ‘He-She-It’ of the Rosezweigian Adam. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 175. In addition, Levinas’ surrounding midrash may be compared to Rosenzweig’s midrashic accounts of revelation: *Star*, 173-178, 199-204 and 151-155.

complete way possible, to bear witness; he is not present in his speech; he is not sincere; there is no saying in his said. The correction of that refusal, the saying in the said, the *hineni* occurs first in the mouth of Abraham, expressing his unshakable commitment to God at the time of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1, 11), and then in the mouth of Moses, expressing his openness before the burning bush (Exodus 3:4).⁸¹ But as I mentioned, Levinas will footnote it more specifically in a later use, where he reads it as emerging from the mouth of Isaiah.

This later use is foreshadowed by the next reference in the sequence, where Levinas is already thinking of Isaiah as the quintessential sayer of the saying, the sayer of 'here I am.' "The exposure," he writes, "without anything held back, . . . a cheek already offered to the smiter, is sincerity as saying, witnessing to the glory of the Infinite" (OB 145). This is a reference to Isaiah 50:6, "I offered my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who tore out my hair. I did not hide my face from insult and spittle." Here the sayer of here I am, Isaiah, comes up against someone who refuses the saying, someone like Adam or worse. Now the word of witness is put to the test. If one cannot say here I am to the smiter, one cannot say it, with complete frankness, to anyone. If one approaches the other with questions about the other's intentions, one can hardly allow the other to call one's own intentions into question. One is compelled, therefore, to give even to the one who does not give back, the one who has already raised his hand to hit. Levinasian responsibility, like

⁸¹With reference to Moses, we may add two biblical references which do not appear in this chapter of *Otherwise than Being* but are common in Levinas' work. In Exodus 33, a problem of interpretation arises. We are told that "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another" (v.11) and also that "He said, 'you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live. . . . See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My presence passes by, I will . . . shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen'" (vv. 20-3). How may the two passages may be reconciled? Read the first passage with emphasis on its second half, and its 'as' (*ke-*) as 'while' rather than 'like.' Moses sees God, as it were, face-to-face, as or *while* he sees *the other* face-to-face. God, in himself, can only be seen in the trace, which is, as it were, his back or his passage. The image of the face-to-face does not occur quite as often in *Otherwise than Being*, where Levinas tends instead to speak of the 'one-for-the-other,' an expression which more obviously suggests responsibility and is less spatial or ontological. Clearly, though, the trace in the face, common in other works, arises in some measure from reflection on Exodus 33. See BTV 144, 213.

Isaianic responsibility, does not pick and choose its others. The subject is responsible for -- hostage to -- any other she comes across.

It is shortly after this that *hineni* is footnoted for the first and only time (OB 146). Levinas writes that he refers to Isaiah 6:8, "here I am, send me," and he also explains that in that text, "'here I am' means 'send me'" (199n.11). So *hineni* is not only a record of Abrahamic faith or Mosaic sincerity; it is also a record of Isaiah's acceptance of a mission, and thus the expression of the connection, in the saying, between the response to a divine command and the ethical movement toward a fellow human being. And in addition, I think, it is something else: a part of Levinas' self-understanding. The longer passage from which the quotation is drawn reads:

Then I heard the voice of my Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And I said, "Here I am, send me." And he said, "Go, say to that people: 'Hear and hear but do not understand; see and see but do not perceive.' Make the heart of that people fat, stop its ears and shut its eyes -- lest seeing with its eyes and hearing with its ears and understanding with its heart it repent and heal itself." (Isa. 6:8-10)

Levinas takes the role of Isaiah, confusing us, not allowing us to see, hear and understand. I suspect that the meaning of these three words is very specific for Levinas; they mean that, like Isaiah, Levinas is not allowing us to understand in the objective or ontological terms connected to sense perception, to seeing and hearing.⁸² For to do that would be to take up the literalist understanding in which God is located and thus appears as a being, and to lose the insight that obedience to the assignation is the way the divine comes to pass, to lose the understanding expressed in this passage from Isaiah, where precisely the command sounds in the mouth of the commanded one. Isaiah, who writes down the words "God said" and then writes down the words that God spoke -- Isaiah, who engages in his own contestation,

⁸²Actually this conjunction of images is not quite Levinasian. Levinas connects seeing to ontology but hearing to the approach to the other. Indeed, to be able to 'hear the seeing,' or to use "the eye that listens" (OB 30) is already to see (as it were) through seeing, to move beyond space into time, beyond location into diachrony. However, since hearing seems to function for Isaiah in the same way seeing functions, as a sense which absorbs data, Isaiah and Levinas appear to be in philosophical agreement and to differ only in their use of images.

saying the word God, being broken open by it, and nevertheless conveying the ethical truths that he has received he knows not whence -- attempts here to prevent the kind of misunderstanding which would sap the movement of his experience, rendering it a theme devoid of a saying.

In order to preserve his understanding and prevent misunderstanding, Isaiah hides or veils God from the eyes and ears of the people; he develops, evidently, a kind of negative theology. But since Isaiah's time, reading has changed and, so therefore must writing. Veiling is not enough for Levinas: "the refusal that infinity opposes to assembling . . . does not come to pass in the form of a veiling and does not exhaust its meaning in terms of consciousness, clarity or obscurity, or distinctness and confusion, known or unknown" (OB 154). Negative theology now functions merely as the flip-side of a positive construction, the postulation of non-being which is the counterpart to being, a postulation that speaks, despite its negativity, of an "ideal essence" (TI 66) which has nothing to do with signification. As scepticism is continuously absorbed into the discourse of philosophy, so 'veiling' or negative theology has been absorbed, much more definitively, into theological ontology. Isaiah's insight -- expressed in the statement about making heavy and fat, and expressed again in the very fact that God's words are relayed entirely through Isaiah's response, the text at hand -- must now be expressed with an even more figurative and shocking image. Levinas' new 'negative theology' involves speaking of a God who never was. This kind of God cannot be understood as a being, and, in addition, cannot be understood as an idea. Levinas attempts, as best he can, to subvert the tendency inherent in language to ontologize or literalize experience. The Bible as a whole, read without the kind of interpretive help offered by Isaiah and offered in an intensified form by Levinas will appear to be a fundamentally ontological document. Levinas intensifies Isaiah's hermeneutic in an attempt to preclude a reading of the text which ignores the ethical turn to the other that underlies the images of a located divine.

A reader may leave this quotation from Isaiah somewhat depressed. "Make the heart of this people fat," says God, sounding in the mouth of Isaiah, "lest . . . it repent and heal itself." But are we never to repent and heal ourselves, and/ or -- by the ambivalence of the witnessing structure -- repent and heal one another? Levinas' next reference, once again to Isaiah, takes up this concern. He writes, "Glorification is saying, that is, a sign given to the other, peace announced to the other, responsibility for the other, to the extent of substitution" (OB 148), and cites in a footnote, Isaiah 57:19:

Peace, peace to the far and to the near, says the Lord; and I will heal him. (OB 199n.15, see OB 157)⁸³

We return here to the themes of my first chapter, for we looked there at this quotation in the context of the discussion of justice and ethics. In the just society, there is no distinction between the one near and the one far off, although it remains impossible to pass by the one near. There *is* healing; in fact, there are two healings, the healing of the ethical encounter with the one near and the healing of social justice in which there is no distinction between the one near and the one far off. Healing is not to come from words about God which give us the sense that we might hear God or see God -- our hearts must be made fat to prevent this false kind of 'healing.' But it does come from the interactions between human beings, both on the level of the two and on the level of the three. Moreover, this healing is connected to peace, which, in turn, was connected in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* with what he then called 'prophetic eschatology' and by the time of the writing of *Otherwise than Being* would simply call prophecy. In the understanding referred to as prophetic eschatology or prophecy, peace is another word for the infinite, or for God-as-experienced. Peace is outside history, which is always the history of war, ensuring that war is not the explanation of all human doings; peace is prior to the war which is totality, and conditions it. But peace is also attainable in history, not in the form of the provisional cease-fire that

⁸³Levinas cites this passage relatively often; see GCM 75, OB 148, ITN 174.

emerges out of war, but as proximity. This peace, the peace within history which is the trace of the peace outside of history, is the responsibility of the subject. Levinas stresses that God's "I will heal him" appears only in the mouth of the prophet by prefacing his quotation of Isaiah 57:19 with the final line of 57:18: "*producing as an utterance of the lips*, 'Peace, peace . . .'" (OB 199n.15, italics mine). Later in the body of the text he writes: "Peace is incumbent on me in proximity, the neighbour cannot relieve me of it. Peace then is my responsibility" (OB 166-7). Peace is my responsibility -- which is to say that I already have peace, for the sentence is an invertable equation: my responsibility *is* peace.

c. *Levinas on prophecy*

Before we look at the remaining references, we must take an extended look at what Levinas means by prophecy. I have suggested above that a number of the terms thematized in *Otherwise than Being* chapter five, cannot easily be distinguished one from the other: saying, witness, inspiration, glorification and prophecy tend to blend together, all referring to the exposure of the subject in discourse, to her acknowledgment of the other's alterity and to her obedience to the other's command. But while the terms are not distinct, it may nevertheless be the case that prophecy takes on casts of meaning which do not *usually* accrue to saying. Prophecy comes to stand not only for the acknowledgment that I am commanded which constitutes the saying, but also for the command itself; and, from this neutral position, it comes then to refer to the aspect of ethics which allows ethics to appear on the level of the third as the ground of social critique, the aspect of ethics which commands me to command the other.

The shift in prophecy's role comes in the form of a shift in focus from what I do to what the other does to me. Thus in the description of prophecy offered in the final segment of "God and Philosophy," Levinas begins by writing:

Prophecy as pure witnessing, pure because prior to all disclosure; this is a

subjection to an order prior to understanding the order.

In these lines, saying could be substituted for prophecy without any alteration of meaning, but with one qualification: it would be clear that Levinas was speaking of *my* 'pure testimony,' *my* offering or exposure, *my* subjection to the other's order. As the account continues, however, the focus shifts to prophecy itself:

It is in prophecy that the Infinite passes -- and awakens -- and, as transcendence refusing objectification and dialogue, signifies in an ethical way.

And finally to the command imposed upon the other:

The Infinite signifies in the sense in which one says, *to signify an order*; it orders [*il ordonne*]. (GCM 76)

Thus prophecy, while retaining its links to the saying, is not only the offering which acknowledges the command, but also the command itself, and also my saying as command, or my saying *meaning* command. Moreover, it is a command which cannot be questioned, a command which '*refuses dialogue*'! Possibly, then, it is a command which falls equally on me and the other. (I should mention that such transformations also take place within definitions of the saying. At several points, Levinas refers to the saying as "the imperative word," as opposed to the "indicative word" which is the said (cf. CPP 21, 162). I do not wish to claim that there is great significance in any saying/ prophecy distinction that might be drawn, but only to explore the experiences inscribed in the term prophecy. My point so far, then, is only that prophecy is more than openness to the other; prophecy commands.)

John Llewelyn also argues that prophecy, as Levinas uses the term, refers to a turning point. He begins with what I have called the question of temporal order, that the command from the other grounds everything I do and so precedes, and also ruptures everything I do and so follows; he refers to the command as an "apriori aposteriority." This he links (as I have done as well) to the witnessing structure, in which the command appears in my response. He then recomplicates the issue by adding to the temporal structures above, a quasi-spatial structure: the business of "minding the other before having him or

her in mind” is taking place “both inside and outside my mind” since it comes to me from exteriority. Finally, he argues that prophecy occurs as an aspect of these links or between; it is the point where the prior command becomes the response in the now, and the outside is internalized.⁸⁴ His argument is supported by the fact that Levinas at one point defines prophecy as “the turnaround in which the perception of the *order* coincides with the signifying of the order performed [*faire*] by the one who obeys it” (OB 149). Llewelyn does not, however, take up at any length the idea that the internalization of the command means that a further turnaround may be produced whereby the commanded subject commands.

Indeed most commentators on Levinas tend to emphasize prophecy’s relation to the saying, to exposure and to obedience.⁸⁵ It is Robert Gibbs, again overwhelmingly concerned with the socially responsible Levinas, who insists on a distinction between saying and prophecy, emphasizing prophecy’s role as command rather than obedience, and thus drawing a link between prophecy and social justice. According to Gibbs, prophecy for Levinas is the said of the saying, or the command to make the saying a said. He writes:

If we reason [i.e. assemble, compare, think in symmetries or categories] for the sake of justice, we can also discern a responsibility to reason about responsibility. That is, reasoning produces a said, and there is a *said* about *saying*, a thematics that is ethics itself. . . . Levinas’ most important use of the term *prophecy* is as the speech that discusses my own responsibility. But discuss is not the right word. For prophecy commands my responsibility, most of all for justice; . . . prophecy is the commanding of myself to judge, to judge matters of justice; to command a responsibility for general justice.⁸⁶

For Gibbs, then, prophecy is linked to the ‘thirdness’ of God, to the fact that illeity occurs not only in the ethical sphere, but also in the social sphere or sphere of justice. Prophecy is the saying as a said, the fact that the saying’s command must be verbalized as a said; it is

⁸⁴Llewelyn, *Genealogy*, 185.

⁸⁵See for instance C. Chaliel, “Levinas and the Hebraic Tradition,” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. Peperzak, 3-12, 4; Handelman, *Fragments*, 180.

⁸⁶Gibbs, *Why Ethics?*

the 'two' in the 'three.' I said in chapter one that one of the reasons Levinas rejects the idea of a present God is so that we do not appear as equals under the presence of this Absolutely Other, thereby losing sight of the otherness of the others who stand before us. Later, in this chapter, I qualified that statement, arguing that although it remains true that Levinas' absent God functions, by his absence, to allow a space for differences among individuals, his absence is still the absence of an Absolutely Other -- and thus, even in his absence, *after* he makes a space for difference in the ethical, he also makes a space for symmetry in the social. This latter aspect or movement of God -- his thirdness, God in the third, God commanding me to make my saying a said, 'God, thanks to whom I am an other for others' -- this aspect or movement of God is part of what Levinas refers to when he speaks of prophecy.⁸⁷ "The prophetic word" is "sermon [and] exhortation," because

by essence the prophetic word responds to the epiphany of the face . . . inasmuch as [the face] attests the presence of a third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me. Like a shunt every social relation leads back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face. . . . Monotheism signifies . . . human kinship, [i.e., the] idea of a human race that refers back to the approach of the other in the face, in a dimension of height, in responsibility for oneself and for the other. (TI 213-4)

The prophetic word refers back to the epiphanic encounter with the other, but is itself a word spoken in the presence of the entire human race; indeed, it is *addressed to* the entire human race in kinship, for the purpose of instituting justice.

⁸⁷But lest we get too carried away glorifying the third level, we should note that Levinas warns us away from a direct association of illeity, as a kind of thirdness, and the 'third man.' Prophecy ruptures all the thematization demanded by the third man.

It is in prophecy that the Infinite escapes the objectification of thematization and of dialogue, and signifies as illeity, in the third person. This 'thirdness' is different from that of the third man; it is the third man that interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other man, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbour, it is the third man with which justice begins. (OB 150)

There are at least three different 'thirds' in Levinas: (a) the third man or third party, with which we are most familiar, (b) the thirdness of God, which is mentioned only very seldom, and (c) the 'third term' which is the rubric under which a totality is constructed. All of these are thirds because they come after the primary experience of relation between the subject and the other (one and two), but none of them is synonymous with another. The third *man* demands the imposition of the same under a third *term* ("a neutral term which is not itself a being" TI 42) and it all happens under and in the name of God. The problem of thirdness is immensely sticky; prophecy, as associated with the third, is also difficult to work through. My analyses here remain provisional.

The link between prophecy and the third emerges most clearly in the fact that Levinas almost always employs the term prophecy to criticize social institutions. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, for instance, theological eschatology -- a historically based monism which Levinas explicitly compares with Hegelian conceptions -- is called 'speechless,' and the prophetic eschatology which is placed up against it as its opposite becomes the source of speech: "the [prophetic] eschatological vision breaks with the totality of war and empires in which one does not speak" (TI 23). Prophecy thus remains linked to the saying; it is the saying's source and meaning insofar as the saying is directed to the individual outside the totality. But prophecy's function here is distinct from the function of the saying per se; it is the critique of religious structures; it is the saying as critique on the third level. A similar dynamic can be discerned in the final section of "God and Philosophy," where prophecy is what allows us to criticize philosophy.

In our time -- is this its very modernity? -- a presumption of ideology weighs upon philosophy. This presumption cannot appeal to philosophy, where the critical spirit would not rest content with suspicions, but owes it to itself to provide proofs. Yet the presumption, irrecusable, draws its force from elsewhere. It begins in a cry of ethical revolt, a bearing witness to responsibility. The presumption begins in prophecy. (GCM 77)

Prophecy reveals philosophy to be ideology; in other words, prophecy functions as scepticism on the third level.

I will refer only to one more example. In the final paragraphs of "Freedom of Speech" (DF 205-7), Levinas employs prophecy against the ontologies of psychoanalysis and sociology which, again, are destroying our ability to speak:

We can no longer speak. . . . Psychoanalysis and sociology lie in wait for the speaker. Words are symptoms or superstructures. . . . We are powerless to break out of [the] infinity of falsehood. Political totalitarianism rests on an ontological totalitarianism. Being is all, a Being in which nothing finishes and nothing begins. Nothing stands opposed to it and no one judges it. . . . We can no longer speak, for how can we guarantee the value of a proposition, if not by offering another proposition which, however, no one can answer for?

The only believable word is the one that can lift itself out of its eternal contest . . . the word of a discourse that begins *absolutely* in the person in possession of it, and moves toward another who is *absolutely* separate. It is a masterful word that

Europe can no longer hear. . . .

And in a precise sense, one that contains not a whiff of saintliness, it is a prophetic word. (DF 206-7).

Here prophecy stands, very simply, against everything Levinas stands against. The belief that everything is an idea (here 'psychoanalysis') and the belief that everything is contingent (here 'sociology') come together under the rubric of ontology. The whole gamut of errors Levinas blames on theology and philosophy -- not only the twins mentioned here, psychoanalysis and sociology, but also that other similar set of twins, idealism and realism -- all these "swarming insinuations" (DF 254) or "multiplicity of allergic egoisms" (OB 4) are corrected or undone in the prophetic word. Levinas' critique of the dominant understandings of our society is his prophecy. Prophecy is the epiphany of the encounter with the other, given to the third as command.

Prophecy becomes social critique because it is constituted of the command to command others. But as the command to command, prophecy is also exegesis. In the giving of commands, one steps (carefully, hesitantly) into the shoes of the withdrawn God, one responds to the command from the Most High not just by saying 'here I am' to the Most High, but by relaying one's response to others in the form of a new command, by inscribing one's 'here I am' in a new said, a said which, if it is to remain an open address, must necessarily now pay heed to the particular circumstances of the ones being newly addressed. This requires interpretation; indeed, this is, according to Levinas, the work of interpretation. In the forward to *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas describes the finite and infinite qualities of the word. The Hebrew Scripture lends itself to infinite interpretation; the word itself, through the history of interpretation, represents the infinite. But the Talmud says eighteen times that "the Torah speaks with the language of men." To be sure, this is usually taken to imply simply that one should not allow oneself to be carried away with abstruse interpretations. But it also means what it literally says, that the word of God exists only in human language. The word is the infinite within the finite; each word inscribes the

structure of Descartes' idea of the infinite, except that instead of thinking more than one can think, the word of interpretation says more than it can say. Levinas calls Scripture's ability to say more than it says "the prophetic dignity of language" (BTV x). Prophecy is *dignified*; human words and divine words do not meet each other in an ecstasy of inspiration; on the contrary, the words of God, including the commands, have to be sought carefully and soberly by human beings through interpretation of the saying in the said.

And here, perhaps, for the first time, we begin to see a firmer distinction between prophecy and saying, for Levinas speaks here not of an aspect of the speech act, but particularly of writing. Scripture is not, according to Levinas, the written record of thoughts or of speech; it is quintessentially, or primally writing. It was, he explains, writing even before it was written down; it was "a literature before the letter" (BTV xi). It is because it is writing -- and not speaking -- that it allows for infinite interpretation. Writing makes more room for interpretation, for however many times I may *say* to the other 'interrupt me,' the other is constrained by my presence, while if I walk away and leave my word in text, he is no longer constrained. This is a twist in the basic structure we have not as yet come across. The level of the third, the level of writing, the level in which I do not address an other directly but address all the others -- this level is in certain ways more liberating than the level of the second. The same can be said of the other manifestations of the third: justice may be understood as more liberating than ethics, since in justice I am not pressuring the other with my constant gifts -- to put the matter colloquially, I am not constantly shoving towards him my already-chewed bread. There is a real freedom to be found in being left alone, in being touched only as a part of collective, in being called upon only when one becomes relevant to the needs of the all. And we may take a further step. It is possible that a command -- coming from the other to me or me to the other -- can likewise be liberating. With a command one knows where one stands; one can dispute it or debate it or refuse it or interpret it. The symmetries of social justice, like writing, form a prophetic

realm in which the freedom under God takes shape.

d. *The rest of the midrash*

In the next reference, Levinas writes that, in my saying, I am “taken up by the hair” (OB 149),⁸⁸ referring to Ezekiel 8:3, in which the prophet is called to prophesy. In part his meaning is evident on the surface: Catherine Chaliel explains that Levinas uses the passage to illustrate that “man is invested with responsibility even when he does not want to be. . . . Passivity lies at the core of [responsibility]; yet passivity does not mean inertia or apathy but man’s ability to be moved by what happens to his neighbour.”⁸⁹ But an understanding of Levinas’ meaning is deepened by an examination of the biblical context. Ezekiel is called to responsibility, yes, but to do what exactly? How does Levinas understand Ezekiel’s mission? Two of the five epigraphs to *Otherwise than Being* are drawn from Ezekiel. They are as follows:

Or if a righteous man turn from his righteousness and do what is wrong, and I make that the occasion for bringing about his downfall, he shall die; because you did not warn him he shall die for his sin, and the righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood will I require at your hand. (Ez 3:20)

Then he . . . said to him, “Pass through the city -- through Jerusalem -- and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry for all the abominations that are done in the midst of it.” And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and slay without mercy or pity. Old men, young men, maidens, little children and women -- strike them all dead! But touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary. (Ez 9:4-6)

In the second passage, the prophet is called upon to witness the judgment of God, and a dreadful bloody judgment it is. In the first passage he himself is called upon to judge, or at least to execute judgment. He is to warn others away from wrong-doing, but if he does not do so, or does not succeed in turning them from evil, he is to kill them. The harshness of the passages is emphasized or intensified by Levinas’ third epigraph, Rashi’s comment on

⁸⁸Levinas cites the passage again in “Demanding Judaism,” BTV, 3-10, 9.

⁸⁹Chaliel, “Levinas and the Hebraic Tradition,” 8.

Ezekiel 9:6:

The sages have said, "Do not read 'begin at my sanctuary,' but 'begin with those that sanctify me,' . . . as teaches the talmudic treatise Sabbath, 55a.

It is the pious who are to be put to death by the prophet.

And yet, it is Ezekiel of all the prophets who understands responsibility in the extreme way Levinas does; Levinas writes in another text that "we are all familiar with the admirable passages from Ezekiel in which man's responsibility extends to the actions of his neighbour" (DF 21). How can one condemn or kill those for whom one is responsible, those whose very responsibility one bears? The placement in Levinas' discourse of the reference to 'being pulled up by the hair' illuminates the issue somewhat; it occurs within one of Levinas' descriptions of prophecy as the movement from saying to the said.

We call prophecy this reverting in which the perception of an order coincides with the signification of this order given to him that obeys it. Prophecy would thus be the very psyche in the soul: the other in the same, and all of man's spirituality would be prophetic. Infinity is not announced in the witness given as a theme. In the sign given to the other, by which I find myself torn up from the secrecy of Gyges, 'taken up by the hair' from the bottom of my obscurity in the saying without the said of sincerity, in my 'here I am,' from the first present in the accusative, I bear witness to the infinite. (OB 149)

The passage (at some parts of which we have already looked) is dense, but it emerges relatively clearly that prophecy is linked here with ordering as well as obeying, with the other in the same (which may be understood to mean the ethical in the realm of the third), with thematization or the said of the saying, and with visibility. And all these third-level things are present already in the saying, as the other's other is present in the eyes of the other, or as justice is present in the ethical. This dynamic, translated into the terms Levinas draws from Ezekiel, means that killing the other (sometimes) is present in the command 'thou shalt not kill.'

Shortly below this, we have another reference. "The 'here I am,'" Levinas writes, "signifies me in the name of God, at the service of men that look at me," citing, in a footnote Isaiah 6:8 again -- "here I am, send me" -- and also 1 Samuel 17:45 -- "in the name of God"

(OB 149, 199n.17). The citation from 1 Samuel is drawn from a passage in which David seems to be wielding the name of God as a weapon, suggesting that because he comes in God's name, he will be able to destroy his enemies the Philistines. And yet Levinas takes David's 'in the name of God' to mean that he is '*at the service of the men that look at him.*' Again the superficial point is clear. The saying of 'here I am' is directed to God only through the other; it is said under God or in God's name. We thus return here to the idea of the withdrawn God which has lain under all of these analyses. One is sick with love for the God who is absent but one cannot approach him; rather, one approaches the other in his name, which is to say, service of the other is concretely in the name, inscribed by the name, the meaning of the name. But again there is another implication suggested by the biblical context: serving men (men plural = 'others,' the third, the social unit, the world) may at times mean putting the particular others to death. To say not only 'here I am' but also -- within the 'here I am' -- 'send me,' is to shoulder of the burden of executing judgment.

Such judgment is, to be sure, perilous. One of the places where *hineni* occurs in the biblical text is as Abraham's response to the God who will immediately afterwards tell him that he must sacrifice his son. If Derrida's analysis of this text is correct, then Abraham is the subject, God the other, and Isaac the other's other or all-the-others.⁹⁰ This means that 'here I am' inscribes a willingness to sacrifice all-the-others for the one other, to sacrifice justice for ethics. If, however, Derrida is incorrect, and we can read Abraham as the subject, Isaac as the other, and God as the third or all-the-others, then the text, like the one from 1 Samuel, suggests a sacrifice of the other for all-the-others, ethics for justice. The latter, I think, is a more Levinasian reading, for God cannot be an other from Levinas' point of view. But either way, the text undercuts its own initial meaning when Isaac is redeemed. No one is to be sacrificed; no judgment is to be executed. One of the points of the story, as

⁹⁰Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1995, 53-115.

Kierkegaard and others have seen, is that one must be careful about listening to the voice of God when the voice is suggesting execution. But, as Kierkegaard also points out, this care is secondary to the demand for obedience, an obedience that may involve the relaying, the interpretation, the giving anew, of the command.⁹¹

Some paragraphs after this, Levinas writes that the non-phenomenality of illeity comes “slipping into me like a thief,” and cites in a footnote Job 4:12, a verse from the speech of Job’s friend Eliphaz (OB 150, 199n.19). In fact, Levinas has quoted Job 4:12 twice before -- without, however, citing the source -- both times in connection with the trauma which the command causes in the subject, a trauma caused by the surprise of the sudden occurrence, in her mouth, of that to which she has always been exposed (OB 145, 148). Again the biblical context is illuminating. The ‘word’ which has slipped into Eliphaz’s ear like a thief is, “Can mortals be acquitted by God? Can man be cleared by his Maker?” (4:17). Being commanded from one’s own mouth is traumatic enough; being commanded to convey that command to others, or enforce it on others is far more traumatic. Levinas alludes to the pre-original accusation, the accusation by which the subject is always accused, the accusation from which, in this world at least, he is never acquitted. Responsibility persists infinitely; it commands one to command, but also places a control on the command to command, forcing one continuously to recall that he who commands is included in the general description of humanity which follows in the biblical text: “those who dwell in houses of clay, whose origin is dust . . . [are] shattered between daybreak and evening. . . . Their cord is pulled up and they die, and not with wisdom” (Job 4:19-21). We are shifting back into more familiar territory, in which justice is kept in check by the accusation which takes its place or occurs in the ethical encounter, in the subject’s discourse with the other, like the discourse of Job and Eliphaz.

⁹¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). For a discussion of Kierkegaard and Derrida on this point and others, see John Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 188-222.

The next two references are a pair. Levinas writes:

An obedience preceding the hearing of the order, the anachronism of inspiration or of prophecy is, for the recouperable time of reminiscence, more paradoxical than the prediction of the future by an oracle. "Before they call I will answer," the formula is to be understood literally. In approaching the other I am always late for the meeting. But this singular obedience to the order to go, without understanding the order, this obedience prior to all representation, this allegiance before any oath, this responsibility prior to commitment, is precisely the other in the same, inspiration and prophecy, the *passing itself* of the infinite. (OB 150)

"An obedience preceding the hearing of the order" is a reference to Exodus 24:7, in which the people of Israel say they will 'obey and hear' God's commandments, suggesting to some commentators that they pledge themselves to obey *before* they hear.⁹² "Before they call, I will answer" is Isaiah 65:24. Obedience before hearing; answering before calling. Obedience (ours) and answering (God's/ the other's) are prior; hearing (ours) and calling/ speaking (ours) follow. What is primal is a certain relation between the world and God, a relation of obedience to an answer. The answer and the obedience are there before I approach the other; moreover they are there *in the other* before I approach him; thus I 'come late to the meeting.' Here, of a certainty, we return to the familiar ground of the earlier references. Prophecy is no longer a matter of commanding as much as it is a matter of obeying, a matter of approaching the other in humility, ready to give him anything he asks. The 'other in the same' here seems to have nothing to do with the third, but to refer instead to the shake-up of my egology, a shake-up imposed upon me in the ethical encounter.

Still, there is something about this pair of references that should give us pause. The first of them refers to the beginning of Judaism, the giving of the law. The second refers not only to the end of Judaism, but to the end of the world; it is drawn from Isaiah's description of the messianic era, an era in which (in the verse that follows the one cited) the 'wolf and the lamb graze together' (Isa 65:25). The two references can be understood,

⁹²This is the interpretation Levinas gives the passage in his talmudic reading "The Temptation of Temptation" in NTR, 30-50, 42.

therefore, to evoke infinity and prophecy in a pure form, a form which does not occur in the in-between from which the rest of the references are drawn -- or rather, a form which does occur, but is not pure. The obedience at the beginning, equivalent to the answer at the end -- both of which are at the beginning as motivation and at the end as an eternal breaking of categories -- are compromised in the middle by the command that the commanded one command the other. The middle is a broken middle, broken by the beginning and the end; still it requires structures of judgment and punishment which, while kept in check by our awareness that we all will die, remain nonetheless the prophetic work of the moment.

This brings us almost to the end of Levinas' midrash; we turn now to the final reference. "The-one-for-the-other of responsibility" he writes, can "float above the waters' of ontology in its irreducible diachrony" (OB 167). As it happens, this same idea, expressed in almost the same words, occurs also much earlier (OB 141), though only in the later passage are the biblical words enclosed in quotation marks; the idea thus opens the chapter's string of biblical references as well as closing it (and thus it is revealed that Levinas is following the traditional form for homiletical midrash). Levinas refers to Genesis 1:2, in which the *ruach* -- wind, breath or spirit -- of God floats above the waters of the unformed earth. The point is clear and rich. As God, beyond or 'over' being, persists despite or because of being, so responsibility, beyond or over ontology, persists despite or because of ontology. The God, who remains beyond being, nevertheless enters being in two forms: first, as a trace, an anarchic wind taking one out of oneself and directing one to the other in responsibility, and second as the non-anarchic organizing principle which governs the division of things into types which marks Genesis 1 -- God enters as difference and as the categorization of difference, as ethics and as justice. Responsibility, likewise, is both ethical and just, both a rupture and a structure, both an anarchy and a symmetry -- and in both forms, it is the aspect of the world which points to the beyond. Infinity, having called for the creation of totality, cannot be negated by it, but floats over it; it is not non-

being but otherwise than being.

*

Let us say, in conclusion, a few general words about Levinas' method. First, he uses an enormous number of different terms to describe what is essentially the same movement, over and over. None of the many terms is superfluous. Each has its own meaning, or at least its own nuances. But they do not form a network of connected meanings, a 'system' in which it would be necessary to grasp the precise meanings of and links between all the terms in order to understand the content of the argument. The proliferation of terms describing a single structure has as its purpose, I think, to point out how common that structure is in human experience, and also to appeal to readers of various different stamps. Some of Levinas' descriptions may not mean anything to some readers; some do not mean anything to me. They need not. Levinas defines each term with reference to the others in order to bring any and all readers into the awareness of the structure he is describing, not to create a magic circle of truth which must be understood as a whole comprised of a myriad of delicate connections. From any starting point, from the stand-point of any experience, one is invited to see the nature and effects of relation.

Not only is Levinas' writing repetitive, it is also provisional. Distressingly, but perhaps necessarily, one of the ways he breaks down his readers' preconceptions is by using his terms in ways that do not fit together in any obvious way. For instance, while consciousness is introduced in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* as a route to infinity (TI 27) it is later linked with totality (TI 204). To be sure, this particular problem, like many others, is resolved when Levinas reveals that he is using the term in two different ways -- thus we eventually read that: "the consciousness of obligation [the consciousness of the preface] is no longer a consciousness [qua totality], since it tears consciousness up from its centre, submitting it to the Other" (TI 207). Nevertheless, it can be confusing to find words shifting in meaning as one reads. All of the occurrences of terminological displacement are

examples of a single device: they are a way of preventing a systematizer from laying the work out in a flow chart, of preventing the work's insights from degenerating into a set of technical terms to be memorized in the correct order or pattern -- for this way the works could be read as empty abstraction, void of contact with the engendering insight. Levinas writes at one point: "the apparent confusion is deliberate and constitutes one of the theses of this book" (TI 29) -- and while he is speaking here specifically about the relation between politics and philosophy, the statement might well be applied to his corpus as a whole.

We have already discussed provisionality with reference to the lines that close of the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, but those lines are worth looking at in full.

The word by way of preface which seeks to break through the screen stretched between the author and the reader by the book itself does not give itself out as a word of honour. But it belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the forward or exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights. (TI 30)

Levinas reaches out to us with this book. But his book is not his word of honour, his word not his last word. Like all speech, his word unsays itself, and it accomplishes this unsaying by means of what comes before -- the preface -- and by what comes after -- the exegesis or reading. In unsaying he attempts to say again without rhetoric, but he does not entirely succeed, for the unsaying is also a said and the said delights in ceremony. No single word, or passage, is a word of honour. Unsayings must be a continuous process.

Derrida's describes Levinas' writing as proceeding "with the insistence of waves on a beach, return and repetition of the same wave against the same shore."⁹³ Handelman takes this up and argues that its repetition, in combination with what I have called its provisionality, renders the writing "less 'art' than a kind of 'prophetic appeal' His prose embodies [a] sense of otherness . . . as a grave call . . . as the summons to inescapable responsibility . . . [His] circling around . . . [his] repetitive prose style is . . .

⁹³Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 312 n.7.

not 'disclosure' but the constant 'exposure' and reexposure of philosophical language to the intrusions of the other." Because the form changes slightly with each repetition, the repetitive form stands as a kind of openness, as well as a kind of obsession. In these respects, Handelman concludes, the style is comparable to that of the biblical prophets.⁹⁴

Levinas plays a prophetic role in several senses. First, he preserves contestation in his speech, persistently using language which is deliberately confusing. Despite his necessarily ontological critique of ontology and his thematization of the idea that the otherwise than being cannot be thematized, he tries insofar as is possible to ensure by means of repetitions, hesitations and deviations -- by means, even of contradictions or logical impossibilities -- that his saying is not swamped by his said. Second, his work calls for infinite interpretation. His writing, directed to a not yet, calls for responses which themselves will call for other responses, and this call too is there in the repetitive style which allows him to break down the monolithic block of his readership and to address various others in various ways. Third, he calls for others also to use abusive language and write to a not yet. Or rather, he conveys a call; in this book, he is precisely the author of a call that comes he knows not whence. Thus when he tells us that philosophy, at large, is called upon to reduce the betrayal of language and when he tells us that we have always already offered our cheeks to the smiter, he is not only responding to the withdrawn God -- as he says we all do -- but reporting what he understands of that God's commands so that others may follow them; he is expressing the saying in a said or the two in a third level structure. Fourth, he extends and interprets the command he is conveying and in this sense is a commander in his own right (though a commander whose command is constantly undermined by the command imposed upon him). When he 'updates' or 'corrects' the passages in Scripture which would give way too easily to ontological interpretation, that is,

⁹⁴Handelman, *Fragments*, 180. She cites Annette Aronowicz as the source of this idea, offered in personal conversation.

when he calls Isaiah's God 'illeity,' the God who is not 'there,' he is following a prophetic call to address himself to those around him 'at this very moment,' to play a commanding role before his others, in short, to teach. The prophet breaks down ontological thought; the prophet draws from the past the words and images which can be used to address the future; the prophet conveys a command; the prophet obeys a command to command, and, in obeying it, himself commands. In a late interview Levinas says that "in liberal society the free press, poets, and writers fulfill the function of the prophets in the Bible" (RM 19). Certainly this expresses part of his self-understanding.

The worlds change each and every hour, and there is no hour which is similar to another. And whoever contemplates the movement of the planets and stars, and the changes of their position and constellation and how their stand changes in a moment, and [how] whoever is born in this moment will undergo different things from those which happen to one who was born in the preceding moment . . . will understand the changes of the constellation and the position of the worlds which are the garments of *En Sof*; these changes are taking place at each and every moment, and in accordance with these changes are the aspects of the sayings of the book of the Zohar changing, and all are words of the living God.⁹⁵

CHAPTER THREE: LEVINAS' KABBALAH/ LEVINAS' *TIKKUN*

The last chapter's consideration of the ambivalence or contestation in his relation to Scripture and God provides an introduction to the question of whether Levinas' thought bears any affinity to Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah.⁹⁶ Kabbalistic writers tend, like Levinas, to position themselves in an ambivalent or contesting relation to Scripture and perhaps to God; moreover, many take up what Levinas calls the sceptical attitude towards ontology. But before embarking on any search for proximity between Levinas' thought and mysticism, one must ask whether the possibility of such a thing should be ruled out on the basis of Levinas' critique of the idea of mystical union.

In the first section of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas distinguishes his own thought about transcendence from the "transcendence of religions" which grounds "all ecstatic

⁹⁵Isaac Luria, quoted by Hayim Vital in *Etz Hayim* I,1,5, fol.15a; translated and quoted in Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 248. I have rendered transliterations of Hebrew terms consistent in this thesis. Thus, for instance, *En Sof*, which is sometimes rendered *En-Sof* or *Ein Sof* or *Eyn Sof* appears here always in the same form, even in quotations from those writers who transliterate differently.

⁹⁶Technically, the terms Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah should not be used synonymously. Jewish mysticism includes certain ancient mystical works, Kabbalah, Ashkenazi Hasidism, modern Hasidism, and perhaps other movements or trends. I use both terms here in the understanding that I am examining only a small part of Jewish mysticism, and indeed, only a small part of the kabbalistic tradition.

behaviour,” claiming that the latter involves a desire for the *unio mystica* which ignores the radical separation between human and divine. One of Plato’s great insights, he explains, was his refusal of “the false spiritualism of the pure and simple and immediate union with the divine [which he] characterized as desertion.” In the wake of Plato’s insight, he continues, it is possible to speak of a “philosophical transcendence” which

differs from the transcendence of religions (in the current thaumaturgic and generally lived sense of this term), . . . the transcendence that is already (or still) participation, submergence in the being toward which it goes, which holds the transcending being in its invisible meshes, as to do it violence. (TI 48)

Later in Section I, the “invisible meshes” appear again. Levinas explains that the Infinite, as it presents itself to the mature, autonomous human being

does not have the mythical format that . . . would hold the I in its invisible meshes. [The Infinite] is not the numinous: the I who approaches him is neither *annihilated on contact* nor *transported outside of itself*, but remains separated and keeps its *as-for-me*. (TI 77, italics mine)

Levinas’ objection to the numinous God and the attempt to reach it in a participatory union begins in the concern shared by other critics of mysticism: such a desire cannot ground an ethics for it takes the mystic away from her fellows in an attempt at lone ascent. But Levinas also fits the criticism into his broader understanding: the desire for mystical union is a desire for violence, an attempt to make a totality encompassing God or to throw oneself into a totality made by God. In addition to amounting to desertion, then, the desire implies a understanding disposed or habituated to totalization; the mystic will focus always on what is common or participatory and ignore difference. In a critique of Heidegger, Levinas writes: “the mystery of things is the source of every cruelty in relation to humanity” (NTR 00).

Does this position rule out the possibility of an affinity with mysticism? It might seem possible to answer by citing an opinion commonly held about Jewish mysticism, originating with Gershom Scholem. Scholem has stressed in all his work that what distinguishes Jewish mysticism from that of other traditions is that the Jewish mystic

seldom strives after mystical union.

If the term [mysticism] is restricted to the profound yearning for direct human communion with God through annihilation of individuality . . . then only a few manifestations of Kabbalah can be designated as such, because few kabbalists sought this goal. . . . However, Kabbalah may be considered mysticism insofar as it seeks an apprehension of God and creation whose intrinsic elements are beyond the grasp of the intellect.⁹⁷

The debate about whether or not there is mystical union in Jewish thought is complex and revolves around the meaning of two words: *devekut* (usually translated ‘cleaving’) and *yichud* (usually translated ‘identity’ or ‘union’). The first of these terms is common in kabbalistic texts; the second is common only in Hasidic texts -- where it certainly seems to mean ‘direct human communion with God through annihilation of individuality’ -- but much less common in pre-Hasidic Kabbalah. The existence of two words implies the existence of a distinction; thus, according to Scholem, *devekut* is not quite or not always *yichud*, and in general pre-Hasidic Jewish mystics try to follow, know or cleave to God, but not to become one with God. In this light, Levinas’ critique of the mysticism of unity begins to appear not only compatible with a Jewish mystical outlook, but possibly the direct result of a familiarity with the kabbalistic position, and his objection to mysticism is all but fully explained by Edward Caird’s words: “The Jew was always defended against the extreme of Mysticism by his strong sense of the separate personality of God and man, and, as a consequence, his vivid consciousness of moral obligation as involved in the worship of God.”⁹⁸

Some support for this idea as an answer to our question can be drawn from a cursory analysis of one of the oldest Jewish mystical stories, that of the four who entered the *pardes*, or orchard. Four sages, the story tells, entered the *pardes*: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Avuya and R Akiva. Ben Azzai looked and died; Ben Zoma looked and was harmed [i.e. lost his mind]; Elisha ben Avuya cut the shoots. Only R Akiva went in in

⁹⁷Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 3.

⁹⁸Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers* (Glasgow, 1904), 2:214; quoted in Idel, *Kabbalah*, 59.

peace and came out in peace.⁹⁹ This story -- one of many texts on which Scholem's theory is based -- is close in meaning to the second passage cited from Levinas above. The talmudic tradition is evidently critical of an approach to the Infinite in which the I is, in Levinas' words, "annihilated on contact," like Ben Azzai, or "transported outside of itself," like Ben Zoma. Rabbi Akiva, the hero of the story, is the only one of the four who leaves in the same way he came in; clearly he "remains separated and keeps [his] as-for-me." Moreover, Akiva is iconic within the rabbinic tradition for his fierce devotion to ethics. If he can be understood as a mystic -- and the story of the *pardes* suggests that he can -- his mystical experience in no way reduces his concern for social justice nor does it amount to desertion. Levinas' critique of the mysticism of union appears, then, to be compatible with the 'non-annihilative' Akivan style of mysticism lauded in the Talmud and the many subsequent texts which retell the story of the four who entered the *pardes*.

Still, without entirely dismissing such considerations, I think it necessary, for two reasons, to take a different approach to the question under consideration. First, in the past two decades, Moshe Idel has produced much evidence, contra Scholem, that the desire for mystical union is a fundamental element of kabbalistic thought, that "far from being absent, unitive descriptions recur in kabbalistic literature no less frequently than in non-Jewish mystical writings and the images used by the kabbalists do not fall short of the most extreme forms of other types of mysticism."¹⁰⁰ Once such an argument has been made, it is

⁹⁹This is as much as we need of the story. The full version from the Babylonian Talmud (quoted from the Soncino edition with slight modifications) is as follows:

Our rabbis taught: Four men entered the 'Garden,' namely, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher [the 'Outsider' or 'Other,' i.e. Elisha Ben Avuya] and R. Akiva. Akiva said to them: When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not 'water, water!' For it is said: He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes. Ben Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of one of his saints. Ben Zoma looked and was stricken. Of him Scripture says: Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith and vomit it. Aher cut the shoots. R. Akiva departed unhurt. (Hagigah 14b)

For a short history of the story's interpretation, see Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 21-25.

¹⁰⁰Idel, *Kabbalah*, 60.

impossible to maintain without qualification that a distaste for union is compatible with an affinity with Jewish mysticism. Second, the insistence on the necessity of the 'as-for-me' which grounds Levinas' critique of mysticism is hardly his last word on ethical behaviour. In the section of *Totality and Infinity* where the passage about the 'as-for-me' cited above is found, Levinas is overwhelmingly concerned to establish *separation* as the ground of relation; he is concerned to 'fix the first term,'¹⁰¹ that is, to fix the subject as something apart from the participation with the world that is 'enjoyment' and thus as a being ready for non-participatory relation with other beings -- and therefore, in this section and others like it, his rhetoric is bent to the support of autonomy even to the point of atheism. It is not until later in *Totality and Infinity*, and then again in and throughout *Otherwise than Being*, that it becomes quite clear that autonomy, for Levinas, is a good thing only if it exists as the ground for relation with others, atheism a good thing only as the ground for relation with illeity, and, most pertinently, 'as-for-me' a good thing only as the ground for *hineni*. And *hineni*, far from 'as-for-me,' is 'I am you:' at one point Levinas describes the *hineni* with the extraordinary line from Paul Celan, "I am you if I am I."¹⁰² All of this seems to open the possibility that Levinasian relation might stand in some proximity to what poets like Celan, if not mystics, mean when they speak of a certain kind of union.¹⁰³ In short, the flux of experience as Levinas sees it is complex, involving an 'I am you' which retains within it a prior as-for-me -- and the mystical pattern may be equally complex: Akiva's

¹⁰¹This expression I owe to conversations with Robert Gibbs.

¹⁰²To pull a relational meaning out of the line is, however, to read against the grain. When Levinas uses the line as the epigraph to "Substitution," the central chapter of *Otherwise than Being*, he reads it relationally. But Celan seems, at least on the surface, to be writing about the invisible meshes. The poem, called "Praise of Distance," is short enough to cite in its entirety: "In the springs of your eyes live the nets of the fishers of Wildsea . . . / Blacker in black, I am more naked. Only faithless I am true./ I am you if I am I . . . / A net trapped in a net: embracing we sever./ In the springs of your eyes a hanged man strangles the rope." Translated (though I have modified the translation at one point) and quoted in John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 52-3.

¹⁰³It is worth noting that in one of the essays on Rosenzweig, Levinas says, speaking partly in Rosenzweig's name and partly in his own, that "in the general economy of being a union can take place between irreducible and absolutely heterogeneous elements, a union of what could not be united, because of life and time" (DF 189).

retention of his 'as-for-me' -- i.e. that fact that he 'goes out as he came in' -- may not preclude his having experienced union of some kind.

These two points should direct our attention to the nature of the desire for union itself. What, after all, *is* it? Levinas links it to desertion, and above all to the craving for totality or sameness evinced in the attempt to define a single ontology encompassing the mystic and God, equivalent, for him, to a desire for self-annihilation or the annihilation of the other. Since, as he holds, there is no contact with God except through the other, unitive mysticism must involve the postulation of a second reality, a reality in which there *is* direct contact and in which, perhaps, the mystic is able to believe himself a god or invested with God's powers. One may ask whether this is an entirely adequate description of mystical union as it is understood by any Western tradition. We noted earlier that a number of commentators, including Bernasconi, have cast some doubt on whether the description of Western philosophy which Levinas erects for the purposes of critique is anything but a straw man.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps Levinas' general critique of mysticism is equally weak, and, like the critique of philosophy and philosophers, would not withstand even his own closer examination. Adriaan Peperzak writes that

a careful reading of Plotinus, St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius [and] Bonaventure . . . -- to name only a few pillars of our spirituality -- shows that the Transcendent has never been seen by them as the highest of all beings. If the name 'ontotheology' is applicable at all to their thoughts, it should not be forgotten nor left unsaid that they dedicated the utmost of their thinking energy to the attempt to show that the '*theon*' could not be seized by the patterns of ontology and that there was infinitely more difference between God and phenomenal being than between a highest being and the rest.¹⁰⁵

Christian mystics who speak of a mystical union do not, according to Peperzak, attempt to totalize humankind and God, but on the contrary agree with Levinas that such totalization is

¹⁰⁴See Bernasconi, "Scepticism," 152; see also my introduction.

¹⁰⁵Peperzak, "Presentation," 53. Bernasconi treats the philosophic straw-man in Levinas; Peperzak treats the theological or mystical straw-man. It is left to Robert Eaglestone to treat the aesthetic straw-man. He writes that there is "a profound tension in [Levinas'] work between his claims against the aesthetic access to transcendence and his use of the aesthetic." Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 125.

impossible. It appears, then, that the mystic Levinas criticizes in *Totality and Infinity* may not actually have a counterpart in reality. On the contrary, as Peperzak begins to suggest, actual mystics may be closer to expressing what Levinas calls “philosophical transcendence” (TI 48) -- that is, the encounter with the Height of the other and, in that height, the Most High or the Good Beyond Being -- than they are to expressing what Levinas terms ‘religious’ or ‘ecstatic’ or ‘thaumaturgic’ or ‘mythical’ transcendence (TI 48,77), that is, the postulation of the invisible mesh. In other words, it may be that mystical union as described in mystical texts is in many ways comparable to Levinasian relation.

But does Levinas not know this? Does he not at least know that it is possible? Has he read no mystical texts? Has he read them thoughtlessly? David Tracy argues that if Levinas is familiar with any mystical writings, he has not given them careful consideration. Tracy writes:

I am unpersuaded by Levinas’ consistent polemic against the religious phenomena he variously names mysticism, the violence of the sacred, and paganism. I realize that the latter are difficult, subtle, and often anagogical categories in Levinas’ thought. Nevertheless, if I may presume to say so, Levinas nowhere, to my knowledge, phenomenologically studies these categories with the care and subtlety he accords other phenomena in his rich thought.¹⁰⁶

But I believe that Tracy is mistaken and that Levinas does study the mystical categories, or at any rate certain mystical texts, ‘phenomenologically’ and ‘with care and subtlety.’ Just as his abuse of philosophy and theology does not imply an unfamiliarity with philosophy and theology, so any abuse he heaps on mysticism does not rule out a profound familiarity with mystical writings. As we will see, a large number of the images and ideas most central to Levinas echo kabbalistic images and ideas. If he is critical of the Kabbalah or mysticism in general, it is, I think, because he is aware of how easily and frequently mystical images may be misused or misunderstood. There are reasons for the fact that the Kabbalah is an esoteric

¹⁰⁶David Tracy, “Response to Adriaan Peperzak” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. A. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 193-8, 197. Tracy proceeds to cite the work of Eliade, Scholem, Idel, Ricoeur and Marion as exemplary for the phenomenological study of mysticism. All of these thinkers, he suggests, conceive of mysticism as non-totalizing and ethical.

tradition; these reasons also guide Levinas to occult the kabbalistic images in his own text and to protect them under a layer of anti-mystical argument.

Let us try out a preliminary sketch of the parallels between Levinasian relation and mystical union using the widest possible conception of union, the conception generally known as 'shamanism.' In the introduction to his seminal study, *Shamanism*, Eliade dismisses the theories of structuralists and diffusionists, offering instead an existential or phenomenological account of mystical union as the basic structure of speech, poetry or ritual by which human beings express their craving for what is not in the world.¹⁰⁷ He describes a simple pattern: (1) an ascent, which brings one into contact with something higher than oneself, (2) an epiphany, in which the multitude of considerations which infect one in one's day to day life are wiped away and things come clear, and (3) a descent back from the height into the mundane world. The point of the experience, as he understands it, is to enable the mystic to lead and to heal the community; because of her experience on the 'vertical' she becomes a wise woman, a doctor, a prophet, or a ruler -- invested with knowledge of how justice is to be meted out on the 'horizontal.'¹⁰⁸ By this understanding, Levinasian relation is unquestionably an example of unitive mysticism. Impelled by a desire for what is not in

¹⁰⁷I am aware of the fact that to use Eliade's work in this context is to raise a host of questions about the nature and status of his understanding of mysticism and his political leanings. It has recently come to light that Eliade supported the Romanian Iron Guard during the 1930s; in addition George Steiner and others have argued that Eliade's journals from that period reflect xenophobia and antisemitism, and, moreover, that he never abandoned the fascistic understanding which provided the underpinning for these attitudes. If all of this is placed alongside Eliade's commitment to the project of comparative mysticism, which may (or may not) rest on the idea of universal hermeneutical and spiritual participation in various manifestations of The One -- then Eliade emerges as a notable spokesman for the invisible meshes, and an exemplar par excellence of the deformed fruits they bear, or, in short, as a figure rather like Levinas' Heidegger. If this is so, then my comparison of Levinas and Eliade -- which certainly shows Levinas using symbols that can be called shamanistic -- should suggest, at least, that there are two ways of using those symbols, an Eliadean participatory way and a Levinasian relational way. But then it becomes possible to ask whether Eliade himself was not using the symbols relationally, and indeed to reassess the idea that his mysticism is fundamentally fascistic. See George Steiner, "Ecstasies, not arguments," *Times Literary Supplement* (September 28-October 4, 1990) 1015-1016; and see especially the discussion of some of the evidence, Steiner, and several other scholars by John R. Mason, *Reading and Responding to Mircea Eliade's History of Religious Ideas: The Lure of the Late Eliade* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1993) 60-75.

¹⁰⁸M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Tasks of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Bollingen, 1964).

the world (see TI 33), the Levinasian subject (1) seeks out and encounters a 'height,' (2) experiences an epiphany in which the structures of her mundane thinking are ruptured, and then (3) reenters or reerects those ruptured structures on the social and political level -- a level of symmetry or horizontal equality -- in ways which inscribe and recall the experience of height for the purpose of bringing communal justice. Levinas' description of the ethical relation with the other and the subsequent imposition of ruptured justice on the level of the three stands parallel to unitive mysticism -- at least at the 'primitive' or pre-dogmatic levels which Eliade's research treats.

If, however, we are to push the parallel further, we must make certain assertions that are more difficult to defend. If Levinasian relation is precisely parallel with mystical union, then mystical union must be ethical in a precisely Levinasian sense, which is to say, (1) that in its epiphany it must provide access not to an ultimate coherence but to an ultimate incoherence, i.e. that it must not merely wipe away mundane considerations but exist as an anarchy destroying all categories or samenesses; (2) that the difference or incoherence or anarchy implied in the epiphany must be understood not as violent or arbitrary but as ethical; and (3) that the ontological or historical elements of the experience must be understood as secondary to its existential import; in other words, the 'vertical' must be understood as happening in the world, in the 'horizontal,' in the face or the speech of the other. If we can find these three marks -- ultimate rupture, ethical rupture, and an a-ontological conception in which mystical images refer not to other places or times but to human experience in relation -- if we can find these in the traditional mystical texts of Judaism, then we are closer to being able to claim that Levinas has absorbed the insights of these texts.¹⁰⁹

Little has been written on the subject of whether Levinas' thought bears affinities to Jewish mysticism. In what is perhaps the most widely circulated article on the subject,

¹⁰⁹I narrow our focus here from Levinas' proximity with the Western mystical tradition (as suggested by Peperzak) to Jewish mysticism in particular. The beginning of a case for proximity between Levinas and Christian mysticism is made by Derrida in "Sauf le nom."

Charles Mopsik argues that while Levinas culled the writings of the Lurianic kabbalists for some of his central terms, images and ideas -- “the infinite, the trace, the *il y a*, shame, the feminine, the masculine, the enigma” -- he used them improperly, without due regard for the Kabbalistic understanding of the human relation to God and the human mission on earth.¹¹⁰ Others, however, have begun to lay the ground for a counter-case. Shira Wolosky, in an article devoted mainly to Derrida, mentions that “Levinas adheres to rabbinical and kabbalistic traditions,” basing this claim on the fact that he speaks of a God who is “nothing” but is nevertheless represented as a positive force.¹¹¹ In addition, Richard Cohen and Susan Handelman both describe a limited proximity between Levinas and mysticism, though both are tentative in their argumentation.¹¹² Before beginning his argument for a ‘resonance’ between Levinas and Kabbalah (and also Rosenzweig and Kabbalah) Cohen hesitates and then hesitates about his hesitations, offering, first, four disclaimers -- that he is not revealing Levinas’ or Rosenzweig’s hidden intentions; that he does not know how much Kabbalah they knew; that he is not attempting to prove that they drew on Jewish mysticism; and that he is not calling them mystics¹¹³ -- and, on top of this and in contradistinction to it, two qualifying statements -- that “their written words show beyond a shadow of a doubt that both Rosenzweig and Levinas are not merely aware in some vague way of a Jewish mystical tradition, but diversely refer and allude to Jewish mystical sources,”¹¹⁴ and that although “both thinkers explicitly deny the label ‘mystic’ . . . in these matters, affirmative or negative avowals are of little account. Such is the freedom

¹¹⁰C. Mopsik, “La Pensée d’Emmanuel Lévinas et la Cabbale” in *Cahier de l’herne*, ed. C. Chaliel and M. Abensour (Editions de l’Herne, 1991), 428-441, 428.

¹¹¹Shira Wolosky, “Derrida, Jabès, Levinas: Sign-Theory as Ethical Discourse,” *Prooftexts* 2, (1982): 283-302.

¹¹²Cohen, “The Face of Truth and Jewish Mysticism” chap. in *Elevations*, 241-273. Handelman, *Fragments*, throughout.

¹¹³Cohen, *Elevations*, 251-2.

¹¹⁴Cohen, *Elevations*, 252.

or mystery of mystical thought.”¹¹⁵ Mopsik’s critique, Wolosky’s and Handelman’s reticence, and Cohen’s qualified set of disclaimers remind us of the slippery status of the endeavour on which we are embarking. We will keep this in mind in the comparison that follows. The proximities we will find between Levinas and the kabbalists are limited; as we will see, he may reject as many elements of their thought as he takes up.

In the first half of this chapter, I shall argue for an affinity between the ideas Levinas expresses in the last chapter of *Otherwise than Being* and certain statements made by Abraham Abulafia, a 13th century mystic. In the second half, I shall move from *Otherwise than Being* back to *Totality and Infinity* and from Abulafia in the 13th century forward to Isaac Luria in the 16th, and look at Levinas’ proximity to the more ‘mainstream’ Lurianic ideas. I use Abulafia -- and, I should add, almost exclusively Moshe Idel’s Abulafia -- because Abulafia, as interpreted by Idel, is the first great kabbalist of rupture. It is Abulafia, more than any other kabbalist who holds that the route to God is the breaking of the divine name rather than its reconstitution; and insofar as such breakings are found in the writings of later kabbalists, they are, according to Idel, very often signs of Abulafian influence. My argument, however, is not intended to lend support to a certain interpretation of Kabbalah, nor even to present an analysis of Abulafia’s thought. In distinction, it is best understood as a speculative exercise in what might be called ‘Comparative Judaism,’ an exercise which uses several Abulafian motifs playfully to flesh out the Levinasian understanding of Judaism as the religion of rupture. What we will find in Abulafia are two of the three ‘marks’ we are seeking. Not only is union, for him, profoundly a matter of rupture, but in addition, it happens on the horizontal plane as an infusion of desire for a height. However, his interest in ethics (the ‘second’ mark as I have defined them above, but also a critical part of all three) is an ambiguous matter. Hints of an ethics appear in

¹¹⁵Cohen, *Elevations*, 252n.11.

Abulafia, but they are inchoate. For ethical Kabbalah, one must turn, as we will see, to Luria. And while my argument treating Abulafia -- my exercise in comparative Judaism -- does not depend on Levinas' having read Abulafia or having heard his ideas from Chouchani, my argument treating Luria depends on the unquestionable fact that Levinas is familiar with Luria's teachings and has considered them closely.

I. Levinas and Abulafia

Moshe Idel has been most influential in recent decades in raising the work of Abraham Abulafia out of relative obscurity.¹¹⁶ In several studies, Idel promotes and extends a distinction made by the kabbalists themselves between, on the one hand, the theoretical, magical tradition represented primarily by the Zohar and the many Zoharic commentaries, and, on the other hand, Abulafia's school of 'prophetic' or 'ecstatic' Kabbalah. Abulafia (1240-1292) was, above all, a practical mystic, the author of a large number of manuals explaining how mystical illumination could be achieved. He was influenced most profoundly by Maimonides, whom he understood to be a kabbalist. Among other concepts, he adopted from Maimonides a psychology centred on the relation between the intellect and the imagination and an explanation of mystical experience as involving the relation of the intellect to the Active Intellect; in addition, he learned from Maimonides to regard prophecy as the highest form of mystical experience. He exercised, moreover, some influence on later kabbalistic strains or trends, including those of the Lurianic school.

Levinas and Abulafia coincide both in certain ideas, and in the images which they use to express them. We will look at these ideas and images in three sections. In the first

¹¹⁶Idel, *The Mystical Experience of Abraham Abulafia*, trans. Jonathon Chipman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, trans. Menahem Kallal (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989). See also the seminal *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*.

section (which corresponds to the first mark, absolute rupture) we will describe Abulafia on the breaking of the name of God and the brokenness inherent in Scriptural language or language in general; we will compare these Abulafian ideas to the corresponding Levinasian ones discussed in the last chapter and will also look briefly at the attempts of Abulafia and Levinas to make their own discourse broken or abusive. We find on these matters great proximity between the two thinkers. The second section (which corresponds to the second and third marks, ethics and the locus of the vertical in the horizontal) treats Abulafia's blend of 'inside' and 'outside' comparable to the ambiguity of the exterior and interior in Levinas' witnessing structure. Here we begin almost to find hints of an Abulafian *face*, and certainly here we find Abulafia the mystical phenomenologist, reaching out to the divine with an internal, immanent, or horizontal ascent. The third section treats Abulafia more generally on the question of union, and re-asks the question with which we began, whether there might not be an affinity between Levinas' relation and some conceptions of mystical union.

a. Deconstruction and knots: rupture from the height

Abulafia uses two phrases to refer to his mystical approach: *Kabbalat ha-Shemot*, the Kabbalah of the [Divine] Names, and *Kabbalah Nevu'it*, Prophetic Kabbalah. His mystical practice consists, for the most part, in meditating upon and reciting the divine names, the letters in those names, and those letters in various new combinations.¹¹⁷ In a representative manuscript, he first instructs the disciple to study the Torah and the Oral Torah with understanding while keeping himself "far from all sin and transgression and clean from all guilt, iniquity and wickedness"; then he begins to speak of the letters.

Now the time has come to elevate you in the stages of love so that you become beloved on high and delightful here on earth. First begin by combining the letters of the name YHVH. Gaze at all its combinations. Elevate it. Turn it over like a wheel

¹¹⁷Abulafia was influenced in his development of this practice by the ancient *Sefer Yetzirah*, with its strange speculations about the power of the Hebrew letters, and in addition by the writings of Eleazar of Worms. For a short history of the practice of letter re-combination, see Idel, *Kabbalah*, 97-103.

which goes round and round, backwards and forwards like a scroll. . . . For the initial letters and the final letters . . . the combinations of letters and their permutations, their accents and the forms they assume, the knowledge of their names and the grasping of their ideas, the changing of many words into one and one into many, all these belong to the authentic tradition of the prophets. . . . We know by a prophetic tradition of the Torah that when the sage who is an adept combines [the letters of the Divine Name] one with the other, the holy spirit flows into him.¹¹⁸

In other manuscripts, Abulafia lists at great length the precise letter-patterns to be used, and includes instructions for movements of the head and breathing patterns to be performed during the exercise. All the exercises of “combination” are to be understood as stemming from “a prophetic tradition of the Torah”; they represent, according to Abulafia, the true technique of breaking names and recombining letters as received from the biblical prophets. Moreover, Abulafia applies the practice of letter recombination to Scripture, breaking down and recombining the letters of various words or verses. Applied to Scripture, the practice becomes a hermeneutic which “enables the mystic to penetrate the most recondite strata” of the text.¹¹⁹ Abulafia interprets Scripture allegorically, but

what is . . . characteristic of Abulafian hermeneutics is not only this allegorical drift . . . but rather the superimposition of the combination of letters upon the allegorical method. . . . Abulafia points the way to a method of returning the text to its hylic form as a conglomerate of letters to be combined and new meanings being infused in the new ‘text.’¹²⁰

Admittedly, examples of Abulafia’s hermeneutic in practice tend to be abstruse and unpolished; nevertheless he certainly seems to hold that the beginning of the deepest understanding of the Bible is the linguistic deconstruction of the scriptural text.

It is difficult to determine the intentions or self-understanding behind Abulafia’s meditative practice, but it is fairly easy to discern several superficial affinities with Levinas’ understanding of language. In Abulafia’s exercise, the unbroken form of the name exists as

¹¹⁸This manuscript was published by A. Jellinek along with Abulafia’s *Sefer ha-Ot* as “Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia” in Graetz-Jubelschrift (1887) 65-88. This English version is that of Louis Jacobs, in *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, 57-62, 60-61.

¹¹⁹Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, ix.

¹²⁰Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, x.

a vessel for the broken name within it, a vessel which is unable to contain that powerful anarchy and is ruptured by it again and again. This stands in proximity to Levinas' understanding of the word God, the 'abusive word' in which "the glory of the Infinite shuts itself up in a word . . . [b]ut already undoes its dwelling and unsays itself without vanishing into nothingness" (OB 151). For Levinas, the word God, as an unbroken said, betrays the meaning of the infinite, sapping its power, but at the same as it is said it also stands as the 'overwhelming semantic event,' unsaying its own said-ness, rupturing or deconstructing its own form -- and this unsaying or brokenness or deconstruction is what conveys the power of the infinite. The word's "signification has let itself be betrayed in the logos, only to convey itself before us" in the brokenness behind the said (OB 151): this statement expresses Abulafia's understanding of the divine name as well as it expresses that of Levinas. For both, the powerful form of the name is the broken form. For both, the unbroken name pushes toward or conveys this brokenness; the unbroken name inscribes a momentum towards its own rupture.

The fact that Abulafia extends his exercise from the divine name to scriptural language in general presents another parallel, for in the final pages of *Otherwise than Being* we find a similar extension. As we saw in the last chapter, Levinas moves from his discussion of abusive language, which is the saying of the word God, into a discussion of the prophetic or poetic nature of all language. Ultimately, all language -- insofar as it has any spiritual content at all, which is to say, insofar as it has a saying/ said structure -- shares the nature of the abusive word as said and unsaid, because every said conveys a saying which "always seeks to unsay that dissimulation" (OB 152). The saying behind any said vies with that said for the reason that the meaning pointed at by the saying -- 'here I am in the name of God' -- is the same as the meaning pointed at by the abusive word, 'God.' Thus Levinas can speak of "the resonance of every language 'in the name of God,' the inspiration or prophecy of all language" (OB 152), or say elsewhere, that "every sign is a

trace” (TrO 357). The link between the name of God and language in general -- or their identity -- is an ancient idea. Nachmanides mentions “a mystic tradition that the whole Torah is comprised of Names of the Holy One,” and the Zohar goes further, describing not just the whole Torah but the whole of creation as “graven with forty two letters, all of which are the ornamentation of the Holy Name.”¹²¹ Abulafia stands in the tradition mentioned by Nachmanides; he understands that if his model word/ broken word applies to the divine name it applies likewise to all Scripture, all prophetic language. Levinas, like the Zohar, goes further; for him “all language” is prophetic, all language is broken, in short, all language “resonates in the name of God” (OB 152).

This parallel can be taken one step further. Neither Abulafia nor Levinas can stop at word/ broken word; both are forced into a three-fold exercise -- word/ broken word/ word, or text/ deconstruction/ reconstruction -- in which they reassert the coherence of the unbroken form, allowing totality, in a sense, to triumph. Levinas writes books, which while they deal with incoherence, are themselves coherent (or relatively so). And Abulafia ultimately offers a coherent interpretation of Scripture expressed, in fact, in the logical formulations of Maimonidean philosophy.¹²² But the important point is that both retain, even in their reconstruction, the desire to stop in deconstruction. Levinas’ desire not to reconstruct the word but to remain in rupture is manifest most strongly in the discussion of philosophy and scepticism which closes the fifth chapter of *Otherwise than Being*. There he says, we recall, that there exist in reality incoherencies, differences, othernesses, uniquenesses and that these things break the coherent thread of philosophy. The philosophers ignore them, knotting up the thread of their discourse and then averting their eyes from the knots. But the sceptic points to the knots and in so doing reasserts the incoherencies. Philosophy tries to refute scepticism, and in its own terms succeeds, but it

¹²¹Both passages are cited in Wolosky, “Derrida, Jabès, Levinas,” 292, 293.

¹²²Idel, *Kabbalah*, 215.

cannot keep scepticism down since scepticism contests the very imposition of coherence by means of which it is refuted. The sceptic always rises again, and points again to the knots. What is more, this pointing and pointing again is, for Levinas, already ethical behaviour. There is no way to mitigate philosophy's betrayal of reality except to proclaim that it is a betrayal. One cannot come up with a new non-philosophical philosophy; this would merely be a new coherence. One only points to the breaks, notes the incoherencies, preserves the differences; one finds the points where the discourse stutters and then one stutters them out. Thus Levinas, as sceptic, wants to stop at the broken word, or at broken discourse. Abulafia's analogous desire to stop in brokenness is equally clear. One of his students relates that his teacher told him:

it is not the intention that you come to a halt with some finite or fixed form, even though it be of the highest order. . . . And he produced books for me made up of [combinations of] letters and names and mystic numbers of which nobody will ever be able to understand anything, for they are not composed in a manner meant to be understood. He said to me: This is the [undefiled] path of the names.¹²³

Though in the end Abulafia does not only produce 'undefiled' unintelligible texts, but rather (relatively) coherent interpretations of Scriptural passages, he would, if it were possible, follow the undefiled path exclusively.

It should be clear on the basis of discussions in the preceding chapters that this three-fold structure of text/ deconstruction/ reconstruction is nothing other than a pattern of totality/ infinity/ totality. It is the third who demands the said in the first place, and despite the fact that that said is ruptured in its saying, the third demands it again, demands it in the form of the presentation of coherent texts, of works of interpretation or philosophy directed not just to a single other, but to the other's other or all the others. Abusive language, for Levinas, is the second in the realm of the third or 'the other in the same'; it is the saying called forth by the other once that saying has taken on the form of the said, or the ethics

¹²³Idel, *Kabbalah*, 235.

commanded by the other once that ethics has ‘hardened its skin’ and taken on the form of a politics or a philosophy. There is, thus, from a Levinasian perspective, a political motive for the construction of textual coherencies; they exist for the purpose of social justice. And the same can be said of the *re*-construction of textual coherencies. The work of the sceptic is to point to the knots, and perhaps also to untie them, bringing some incoherence back into the false coherence perpetrated by philosophy -- but it is not to descend entirely into gibberish or silence. Far from reveling in nonsense, he reveals to us the ‘non-sense’ that underlies philosophic sense. Sceptical coherencies, coherencies which understand themselves or are understood as imposed on incoherencies, coherencies which are the making coherent of incoherence itself -- these are necessary in the world of the three, the world in which we live. Sceptical philosophy is necessary for justice.

For Abulafia too, it may be that deconstruction, taught and presented in the reconstructed forms necessary to teaching, is to be performed in a part for the purpose of a kind of justice. This idea cannot easily be drawn directly from his writings, but Moshe Idel does speculate at one point that

at least as [Abulafia’s] later writings testify, it seems that the return of the focus to the inherent forces of [deconstructed] language in themselves, in comparison to their function in the traditional texts, bears evidence of a certain alienation to the ordered linguistic, social and religious universes of medieval Judaism.¹²⁴

Seen this way, Abulafia appears as a medieval sceptic, cutting the threads of the dominant discourse -- an image equally true of Levinas with reference to our own times. For both, then, deconstruction may well lay the ground for a social critique -- or at least a fertile social alienation -- which, insofar as it is presented must be coherent, but which arises from the incoherence of the deconstruction of the divine name and language in general. But in any case, whether the purpose of their enterprises is social justice or not, it remains clear that, for both, any discourse presented coherently would have to be open itself to the critique

¹²⁴Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, xvi.

inherent in the deconstructed form. The important thing, in Levinas' terms, is to retain the saying in the said or the ethical in the politics of the said, or, in Abulafia's terms, to continue to subject the word to the turning and breaking of the undefiled path.

*

Levinas describes a part of the movement in question with the metaphor of the knots, and Abulafia does so too, using the phrase a 'loosening of the knots' or 'an untying of the knots' to describe a critical step in his mystical praxis. Scholem's explanation of the Abulafian concept is sensitive, since it assumes that when Abulafia speaks of untying oneself from the things in the world he is not expressing a crude rejection of nature or a body-hatred, nor does he wish to float off into the ether never to return. Rather, Scholem writes, with the image of untying the knots, Abulafia expresses the idea that as the mind perceives the "sensible world," it creates for itself "a certain mode of existence which bears the stamp of finiteness" and that this "natural" understanding must, according to Abulafia, be "transformed in such a way as to render it transparent for the inner spiritual reality, whose contours will then become perceptible through the customary shell of natural things."¹²⁵ This interpretation, in which the loosening or untying of the knots is a metaphor for the movement of the mind away from the search for finitude towards the search for spirit, provides a good ground from which to look at one of the passage in which Abulafia describes the concept. In *Ozar Eden Ganuz* he writes:

And the cosmic axis is none other than the knot of the spheres, and there is no doubt that this [knot] is the subject of their existence, like . . . the connections of the limbs within man . . . which are suspended in the bones at the beginning are also called the axis in man as well. And [the axis's] secret is that a magician bring this knot of desire and renew it in order to preserve the existence of this compound for a certain amount of time. And when the knot is undone, the matter of the testimony of the knot becomes clear, and one who cleaves to these knots cleaves to falsehoods, for as they are going in the future to be undone . . . nothing will remain with him anymore. [A]nd therefore, before he loosens these, he must tie and cleave [with] ropes of love those who have not loosened the knots of his love and the cleaving of his desire; and

¹²⁵Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941), 131-2.

that is God, may He be exalted, and no other in any sense.¹²⁶

The parallels with Levinas are remarkable (at least until the Abulafian mystic begins to tie up his second set of knots). The knots to be untied are those that form the 'cosmic axis' or order of being, and those that form the microcosmic axis of the 'limbs within man,' the microcosmic axis which connects the human being to the order of being. The Abulafian knots, then, comprise or hold together the thread of what Levinas would call ontology, the postulated cosmic and microcosmic order in which beings are bound and by which their behaviour is dictated or determined. Abulafia's suggestion that the adept must untie the threads of the cosmos is certainly radical; like Levinas he rejects entirely the finality of any ontological order. In fact, ontological order proves to be a fiction in Abulafia quite as much as in Levinas. The Abulafian knots are protected or preserved by a 'magician' and, once untied by the mystic, their meaning becomes apparent, revealing the sayings of the magician as spells which perpetuate 'falsehoods.' The description of untying in Levinas is precisely analogous: the Levinasian knots are protected or preserved by a philosopher and, once untied by the sceptic, their meaning becomes apparent, revealing the sayings of the philosopher as false totalities.

For both men, the loosening of or pointing to the knots performed by the mystical or sceptical practitioner is accomplished through meditation on the broken divine name. Abulafia explains that the mystic "must *link and change a name with a name* and renew a matter to *tie the loosened and to loosen the tied*."¹²⁷ Similarly, the Levinasian sceptic is able to loosen the knots of philosophic discourse because she grasps the incoherence which enters into coherence from infinity, the incoherence which underlies the assembly that constitutes the word God, or the said of all speech. Thus the loosening/ pointing is, for both thinkers, the same movement as linguistic deconstruction, the movement of the

¹²⁶Quoted in Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 136, see also 174n.305.

¹²⁷Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 136-7, italics mine.

revelation of the in-finite, or the differences between things, or the brokenness of things which are no longer bound together by magical, philosophical ropes. The image of the knots, then, deepens the parallel between Abulafian rupture and Levinasian rupture. Although, for both, rupture may stand ultimately as the ground of a kind of social critique, it can only do so because it represents the true incoherent nature of things -- linguistic things and being-things -- an incoherence discovered in an ascent or an encounter with a height in which all coherencies come undone.

But we must now confront a possible difference between the two thinkers. In the passage from *Ozar Eden Ganuz* cited above, Abulafia writes that when the knots are undone “nothing will remain with [the mystic] anymore. [A]nd therefore, before he loosens these, he must tie and cleave [with] ropes of love . . . God, may He be exalted, and no other in any sense.” In other words, before untying the knots of the cosmic axis, Abulafia’s practitioner ties or tightens the knots which connect him to God. The issue here can be treated in two parts. First, there is the question of the number of movements necessary for the ascent, or the number of knots to be dealt with: in Abulafia, there seem to be two movements, an untying of one set of knots and a tying of another, while in Levinas the two movements occur as one. Second, there is the question of whether Abulafia’s second set of knots takes the mystic out of the horizontal or phenomenological world in an a-ethical ascent.

For Levinas, the discovery of an ontology’s incoherencies is already the discovery that one is hostage to the other; to ‘otherwise than be’ is immediately to be for-the-other. Or, to turn the matter around, one only discovers ontology’s incoherencies in the face-to-face; to be for-the-other is immediately to ‘otherwise than be.’ The Levinasian sceptic connects herself to illeity *by* untying the knots of the philosophic discourse; she stands in relation to illeity *by* standing in a relation, understood to be a relation of difference or rupture, to her fellow human beings; in short, the *untying* of the knot of ontology is, for

Levinas, a feature of the *tying* of the knot to the other, and vice versa. However, Levinas does speak, at one point, of a second knot.

The knot tied in subjectivity -- which, when subjectivity becomes a consciousness of being, is still attested to in questioning -- signifies an allegiance of the same to the other, imposed before any exhibition of the other, preliminary to all consciousness -- or a being affected by another whom I do not know and who could not justify himself with any identity, who as other will not identify himself with anything. This allegiance will be described as a responsibility of the same for the other, as a response to his proximity before any question. (OB 25-6)

Here we find a knot which is never to be untied, a knot which “signifies an allegiance of the same to the other”: in short, a knot which connects the subject to illeity. Moreover, this knot, like Abulafia’s second set of knots, is prior to the first set: Levinas writes that this knot is “*preliminary to all consciousness*” and Abulafia that “*before he loosens the knots*” of ontology, he must “*tie and cleave*” the ropes of love (italics mine). There is room, therefore, to read Abulafia in Levinasian terms once again. It is possible that the tying of Abulafia’s second set of knots is not tremendously distinct from the untying of the first set, and that for Abulafia, as for Levinas, the untying of the one and tying of the other are the same experience. But the second question remains and sheds some doubt on our answer to the first question. Are the tying and untying connected in the same way for the two thinkers? Levinas can conflate the rupture of ontology and the meeting with illeity because, for him, illeity is met in the world in the face of the other. Is this true for Abulafia as well? Or is it rather the case that his second set of knots cannot precisely be conflated with the first set because the second set implies a lone ascent, a departure from the world, a movement beyond rupture into a new kind of wholeness and oneness with God? Is there a vertical in Abulafia which is distinct from the horizontal and which would direct the attention of the Abulafian practitioner away from ethics? Does Abulafia’s second set of knots carry him away from his fellows and erect a new totality, an ontology on a cosmic or supra-cosmic scale?

Unless the Abulafian knots-to-God can possibly be understood as an ethical

phenomenon, we have here a profound difference between the two thinkers, to the point where Abulafia represents everything that Levinas scorns about mysticism. But some hints of an Abulafian ethics are indeed to be found in his description of prophecy. And, in connection with these ethical hints, we find in the description of prophecy, in a fully articulated form, the third mark, the horizontal in the vertical.

b. Prophecy, witness and glory: union on the horizontal

The fact that one of the two names by which he refers to his mystical approach is *Kabbalah Nevu'it*, or Prophetic Kabbalah, underlines the fact that Abulafia understands his entire oeuvre to comprise in some way a prophetic mission. When he comes to speak directly of prophecy his descriptions are complex, including several types and levels; they can, however, be presented fairly accurately by applying four distinctions. First, the lower prophetic levels involve light or seeing, while the higher levels involve speech.¹²⁸ Second, the lower levels can be reached by those seeking personal experience, while the higher levels are reached only by the prophet-messenger whose endeavour has a social as well as a personal element. Third, the lower levels are active and are reached by striving, while the mystic who has risen spiritually is the passive recipient of something he could not anticipate or strive toward. Finally, the fourth distinction involves an Abulafian polemic which I shall discuss later in the second half of this chapter: the lower forms of prophecy are connected to the Kabbalah of the *sefirot*, the Kabbalah of the divine emanations, while the higher

¹²⁸See Ben Zion Bokser, *The Jewish Mystical Tradition* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 99. Bokser cites at length the passage in which Abulafia describes the movement from light to speech. We may note that the distinction derives from Maimonides, who speaks of eleven levels of prophecy. The first two levels are not yet true prophecy, and can be left aside. Levels three to eleven fall into two groups: (A) 3. seeing in a dream, 4. hearing in a dream, 5. being addressed in a dream, 6. being addressed by an angel in a dream, and 7. being addressed by God in a dream. (B) 8. seeing a vision, 9. hearing in a vision, 10. being addressed in a vision, and 11. being addressed by an angel in a vision. The obvious twelfth level does not arise, explains Maimonides, for the human imagination could not bear it. In any case, the once-repeated pattern is a movement from sight to speech (*Guide* II 45-6).

forms are connected to the *Kabbalat ha-Shemot*, the Kabbalah of the names.

The first two distinctions are linked in Abulafia's thought: while light may provide personal illumination, "true prophecy -- that is prophecy which is directed both to the prophet himself and to his fellow man" must derive from speech.¹²⁹ The proximity with Levinas could not be clearer, for not only does he too regard the sensory modes of conception or interpretation -- and particularly the visual mode -- as 'lower' than discourse, he also links the ontological perspective which sensory evidence supports to personal knowledge, or egology. Abulafia, in *his* link, seems to take up a very Levinasian position, suggesting that all forms of thought based on disclosure are the tools of a solipsistic consciousness bent on knowing, and thus possessing or consuming, the world and others. The higher form for both thinkers is speech -- at least, Abulafia calls it the higher form of prophecy or 'true prophecy,' and Levinas would simply call it prophecy, as opposed to the other non-prophetic modes of consciousness or existence. Speech is higher because it implies a relation with human beings under God, a relation in which the word of God is communicated, a relation of gift. Prophecy, for both thinkers, then, must involve a relation with one's fellows, and we begin to find a hint of an Abulafian ethics.

The third distinction is semantically tricky, since what Abulafia means by passivity is not what Levinas means by passivity. When Abulafia speaks of passivity, he refers to the reluctance of the true prophet, seized by divine inspiration and forced to speak or to write.

Know you that every one of the early prophets was forced to speak what they spoke and to write what they wrote, so that one finds many of them who say that their intention is not to speak at all before the multitude of the people of the earth, who are lost in the darkness of temporality, but that the divine influx which flowed upon them forces them to speak, and that they are even subjected to shame, as in the saying of the prophet, "I gave my back to the smiters and my cheek to those that plucked; I hid not my face from shame and spitting."¹³⁰

¹²⁹Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 83, cf. 139.

¹³⁰Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 139. Abulafia cites Isaiah 50:6 which we saw Levinas cite in the previous chapter. This is not the only time that Abulafia cites a biblical passage of which Levinas is also fond. Abulafia describes his call to prophecy as beginning in *hineni*: "A spirit came and made me stand on my legs, and called me twice by my name, 'Abraham, Abraham,' and I answered 'here I am.'" Abulafia

When Levinas speaks of passivity, in distinction, he means an assignation prior to thought or deed, prior even to freedom and non-freedom. However, the experiences Abulafia expresses with the word passivity -- reluctance, succeeded by inspiration, succeeded by shame -- do appear in Levinas, in the temporal sphere which follows upon the Levinasian assignation and in which the assignation makes its appearance. In the order of the events in the book of Genesis, which Levinas uses to illustrate his meaning in the final chapter of *Otherwise than Being*, the first free speech after the assignation is Adam's reluctant as-for-me, and the second is the *hineni* -- a structure which parallels the experience of many biblical prophets, for instance Jonah, whose unwillingness to go to Ninevah is followed by his eventual compliance. As we have seen, Adam's as-for-me is not merely the mark of reluctance but also of essential autonomy; certainly, then, it remains the first impulse for human beings in time, and Levinasian prophesy appears as fundamentally reluctant. There is still, however, a difference between Abulafian passivity and Levinasian reluctance/inspiration/shame, namely that the Levinasian movement is experienced by all human beings. Levinas would say of the human being in general what Abulafia says above about the few chosen to be prophets: each of us, for Levinas, is "lost in the darkness of temporality"; each of us is seized by inspiration or assignation and forced reluctantly to speak, breaking the hold of that temporality; each of us is exposed or exposes herself thenceforth to shame and spitting. For Levinas, everyone is a prophet.

So Abulafian passivity has a parallel in Levinas' description of the human experiences connected to the encounter with the other: reluctance, inspiration and shame. What about Levinasian passivity? Does it have a parallel in Abulafia? Levinasian passivity, we recall, is also described as 'before passivity' and is the witnessing structure, in which before all choice the subject is surprised by the occurrence of the word of God in her mouth.

refers here to Genesis 22:1 and 11 -- the first appearances of *hineni* in the Scriptures. He goes on to explain that directly after the call and response, he is taught by a voice the way of justice, knowledge and understanding. Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 140.

It is called 'passive' because it is not a matter of choice -- and it is 'before passivity,' as that term is usually used, because, though not a matter of choice it is also not simply suffered passively but in addition is assumed or taken on; it is already -- in-itself and thus in-us -- an acceptance of the command and a welcoming of the other. In short, the witnessing structure is called a passivity before passivity because it refers to a time before the distinction between that which comes from without and is received passively and that which comes from within and constitutes action. Levinasian passivity is a blending of the from-without-to-within and the from-within-to-without, a blending of the exterior command and the interior command, a blending which has nothing to do with the categories of active and passive as they are usually understood, but which is constituted, rather, by an action in-the-subject-done-to-the-subject, a desire that is hers and comes she knows not whence. All of this I have called the phenomenological insight motivating *Otherwise than Being*, chapter five.

A similar structure emerges in Abulafia beginning with the fact that he gives the same name -- prophecy -- to the lower levels, which are driven by human striving, and the higher levels, in which the human being is seized from without. For Abulafia, as for Levinas, it is evidently difficult to distinguish the movements of God from those of men; they are separated, in the meditative exercise, by level or degree but not by kind. Awareness of the existence of this difficulty -- the difficulty of separating the to-God and the from-God -- arises not only in Abulafia but also in the kabbalistic writers who preceded him. The issue crystallizes, as Idel points out, in consideration of the nature or source of the words of God, and particularly in rabbinic and mystical interpretations of the biblical verse: "Moses spoke, and God answered him with a voice" (Ex 19:19b). "With the emergence of Jewish philosophy, which developed the doctrine of the incorporeality of the Divine, those thinkers who saw God as a spiritual entity found it difficult to interpret this

verse literally.”¹³¹ Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra was one of the first to reinterpret the verse, writing: “The one speaking is man, and the one hearing is man.” Many other mystics subsequently adopted this way of thinking, Abulafia being one. He writes: “And behold, the voice of the living God speaks from within the fire, and it dwells within the heart, and thus is the speech there.”¹³² Moreover, Abulafia applies this understanding of the way God’s speech is heard not only to Moses, but to himself and his own disciples. In the instructions for an exercise in which the mystic says a letter and listens for it to be repeated back to him, Abulafia writes: “and consider his reply, answering as though you yourself had answered,” and elsewhere: “go back as if the one standing opposite you is answering you, and you yourself answer, changing your voice so that the answer will not be similar to the question.”¹³³ The conversation is between the prophet or mystic and an aspect of the divine, but the words are the words of the prophet. For Abulafia, as for Levinas, we have only our own mouths or pens; God’s command, though its source is the infinite, takes its form in the response expressed with these worldly instruments. There is, then, a version of the witnessing structure in Abulafia.

In order to clarify the problem we are describing, the problem of the connection between what is inside the human being and what is outside, Abulafia develops the symbol of the glory or *kavod* as a dialogic partner. The glory exists within the human heart, but it is also worshipped. Though a correlative for the symbol is difficult to determine -- it may be angelic, or the human intellect linked, after Maimonides, to the Active Intellect -- its function in Abulafia’s thought is relatively clear. As Idel explains, its purpose “is to give witness that the source of the speech is not inside man but outside of him.”¹³⁴ Levinas uses the

¹³¹Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 84.

¹³²Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 84. Idel gathers the testimony of many mystics in whose thought “the idea of the human speech as an expression of the reception of prophecy” occurs, among them R. Hayim Vital, see *Mystical Experience*, 85.

¹³³Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 86-7.

¹³⁴Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 88-89. The symbol of the *kavod* as a mediator is common in

concept of the glory of God, or “the glory of infinity,” in a similar way; it appears early in the last chapter of *Otherwise than Being* as a way of connecting the infinite to the passivity of the subject. Glory, he writes, is “the infinity of infinity.” It does not become a phenomenon; it remains outside the totality and ruptures it; and yet it is “but the other face of the passivity of the subject.” “Glory is glorified in . . . responsibility.” It “is the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the other to whom and before whom I am responsible, that is, of this responsibility: ‘here I am’” (OB 144-5).

In addition to the glory, other symbols occur in the writings of both thinkers to express the blending of inside and outside. Abulafia speaks at times, of an angel. “We . . . know in truth,” he writes, “that God, may he be praised, is neither a body nor will he ever be corporealized. But at the time when the prophet prophesies, his abundance creates a corporeal intermediary, which is the angel.”¹³⁵ Here, prophetic speech reaches out and without pretending to compromise God’s unreachability, makes the human being more than he was. This moreness --superfluity, abundance, overflow -- represented in Abulafia sometimes as the glory but here as an angel -- brings the outside and inside together; it is the outside on the inside exploding again to the outside. It appears, in Levinas’ thought, as the sickness of the lover in the Song of Songs, the word of God in the mouth of the prophet, the word God which unsays its assembly and the idea of the infinite which similarly undoes itself and which strikes us whenever we meet another human being. In all these relations, for Levinas as well as for Abulafia, God remains at an infinite distance; he is not made like us or totalized; he is “neither a body nor will he ever be corporealized,” neither a thing nor will he ever be ontologized. However, he is met in the corporeal realm in the angel in the prophet, or the glory in the saying, or the sickness in the lover, or the idea

Kabbalah. See J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 49. Dan describes the centrality of the image for the Ashkenazi Hasidim. See also Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 152n.82.

¹³⁵Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 90.

of the infinite.

With this blend of inside and outside we begin to see our third mark in Abulafia. Abulafian union, while it expresses a desire for what is not in the world, takes place in the world, in a 'more' that inscribes the beyond in the mundane. In order to complete our understanding of the Abulafian desire in the world -- or God-in-the-subject, or the other-in-the-same, or the vertical-in-the-horizontal -- we will have to look at the fourth distinction he applies to the levels of the prophecy, that the lower levels involve the Kabbalah of the *sefirot* while the higher levels involve the name. We will, however, leave this matter to the second half of the chapter, where a fuller discussion of *sefirotic* Kabbalah can be provided.

c. Mystical Union

If . . . he has felt the divine touch and perceived its nature, it seems right and proper to me and to every perfected man that he should be called 'Master,' because his name is like the Name of his Master, be it only in one, or in many, or in all of His names. For now he is no longer separated from his Master, and behold he is his Master and his Master is he; for he is so intimately adhering to Him that he cannot by any means be separated from him, for he is He.¹³⁶

Here, one would certainly think, we have mystical union. And yet this passage is the source of a debate between Scholem and Idel on this very question. At one point in his most extensive description of Abulafia's thought, Scholem suggests that Abulafia does speak of union with an aspect of God or with a guide, but that it is a controlled, rational union, rather than a passive ecstasy.¹³⁷ Later, he clarifies this opinion somewhat, saying with reference to the very passage cited above that although "to a certain extent, as we have seen, the visionary identifies with his Master, complete identification is neither achieved nor intended."¹³⁸ Idel argues, in distinction, that Scholem's interpretation is untenable, that the passage describes complete union achieved and intended, and that, indeed, "the passage

¹³⁶Abulafia *Sifre Torah*, quoted in Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 126.

¹³⁷Scholem, *Major Trends*, 138.

¹³⁸Scholem, *Major Trends*, 141.

even in Scholem's rendering is sufficient to refute [Scholem's] interpretation."¹³⁹

I think it fairly obvious that Idel is correct: "he is He" surely expresses union definitively. But it may be that Scholem is also correct, given that he, like Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, understands union to be self-annihilation. For "he is He" does not necessarily mean that the two are destroyed in one another, or that they merge ontologically, or even that they form together a whole or a totality. On the contrary, it may imply a different kind of union, one in which the knot in 'rope of love' is made fast and the mystic is finally free of the hindrances to a relation with illeity which appear in the forms of the ontological structures of the cosmic axis and the conceptual structures of unbroken words and texts -- and this kind of union would not preclude an ethics, but on the contrary, would be the ground of the for-the-other. I believe that Scholem maintains that no complete unity is intended here because of the existence, in Abulafia's work, of other passages which seem to speak of a relation with God quite different from union understood as self-annihilation, other passages in the light of which the passage above can be interpreted and the meaning of its "he is He" clarified. Take, for instance, this passage from *Oẓar Eden Ganuz*:

For all things which exist are intermediaries between God, may He be blessed, and man. And if you say: how can this be, for if so it would require that man be at the greatest distance from God, I say to you that you certainly speak the truth, for thus it is. For he and the reality of Torah are witnesses to this . . . and the abundance of *mitsvot* which exist exist in order to bring near he that was distant, in the utmost distance from God, to bring him near in the epitome of closeness to Him. And all this [is] to remove all the intermediaries which are tied in the knots of falseness and to free him from beneath them.¹⁴⁰

If this is another description of mystical union, then Abulafia's union begins to look less like the construction of an invisible mesh or totality and much more like Levinasian relation. God, in this passage, as in the passage about the angel cited above, remains beyond; moreover in this passage he is related to by means of ethics or "the abundance of

¹³⁹Idel, *Kabbalah*, 302n.21.

¹⁴⁰Quoted in Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 135.

mitsvot.”¹⁴¹ Passages like this one may lead Scholem to understand the previous passage as referring to an experience somewhat different from self-annihilation, and he expresses this discovery by claiming that there is no complete union intended there. This is not incompatible with Idel’s claim that the passage does refer to union. It refers to union if union is understood *not* to rule out ethics; it does not refer to union if union *is* understood to rule out ethics.

In fact, this second passage bears remarkable affinity to Levinas. The infinite separation of the prophet and God is expressed by Abulafia in the image of the whole world standing between them. The world, Abulafia suggests, is at times a hindrance to the mystic. But Abulafia is no ascetic or world-despiser. We may perhaps then put his meaning in Levinasian terms, following Scholem’s interpretation of the loosening of the knots cited above. The world is a hindrance to the relation with infinity when it is seen as a finitude, as a self-supporting totality. It is a mark of the radicality of Levinas’ ethics that, for him, anything that breaks totality is a trace of God and anything that is not a trace of God is totality; in other words, anything that breaks totality is ethical and anything that is not ethical is totality. If Abulafia is interpreted with this Levinasian principle in mind, his rupture of text and ontology is his experience of the trace of God, his ethics.

It must be said however that there are very few passages in Abulafia which speak of the infinitely separated God and quite a number which, despite the attractive train of thought which I have just attributed to Scholem, seem to speak of a union which comes close to

¹⁴¹There is no doubt that *halachah* (or *mitsvot*) are not synonymous with ethics in most of the several ways in which ethics is usually understood. For instance: (a) It may be that ethics is understood as ‘more’ than the *halachah*, or the ‘spirit’ of the *halachah*, or the reasons for the *halachah* -- but here the two are already blended. (b) It may be that ethics is understood as indeterminate, and indeed, can come to refer to any logical or quasi-logical justification of one’s actions, while *halachah* is fixed and unwavering. Levinas disputes both sides of this argument. (c) It may be that ethics is understood as something like a natural law which arises from human beings and is linked to their rationality, while the *halachah* is comprised of rules given by God and quite difficult to account for by reason. Again, Levinas disputes both sides, replacing the distinction with the witnessing structure. Levinas does not conflate ethics and *halachah*, as I explained in section three of chapter one, but neither does he maintain the distinction on any of the usual bases. *Halachah* is ethics with “a hardened skin.”

annihilating the individual. Moreover, we do not often find attention to the ‘abundance of *mitsvot*’ or to any sort of ethical action in Abulafia’s corpus. From a Levinasian perspective, Abulafia is a mixed bag. I have stressed his Levinasian elements, but even in my analysis there have been times when the two have been at odds. Abulafia seems at times to speak of rupture as the most profound truth and at other times to tie knots which connect him to God and perhaps take him away from his fellow human beings. He seems at times to laud a speech-based prophetic mysticism which is directed outward at others, and at other times, to wrap himself up in himself, playing, in his mystical discourse, both the part of the subject and the part of the other. Without doubt, he understands ascent to be a movement which takes place in the world and the divine word to appear in the mouth of the subject, but his world is not Levinas’ world, populated by other human beings, but rather the world of his own heart, and his divine word is not spoken in response to a face, but rather arises in a solo communion. Idel is, I think, in large measure correct to suggest that Abulafia’s overwhelming concern is an “escapist” groping for personal illumination (despite Abulafia’s own placement of personal illumination on the lower level), a concern which comes at the cost of reflection on the *halachah* and brings about a “retreat from collective worship as the central and highest form of religious experience.”¹⁴² We will have a little more to say about Abulafia in the second half of the chapter, but now let us turn to the hyper-ethical Lurianists.

II. Levinas and Luria

Charles Mopsik is not wrong to address the question of Levinas and the Kabbalah in general as the question of Levinas and Lurianic thought. The teachings of Isaac Luria (1534-1572) have been enormously influential on subsequent developments in Judaism. His Kabbalah can be understood today, for practical purposes, to be synonymous with

¹⁴²Idel, *Kabbalah*, xvi.

Jewish mysticism, and indeed, his ideas are often taught to Reform and Conservative children in Sunday Schools as an introduction to the study of Jewish life properly lived. Luria's thought is influenced by the school of Abulafia as well as the larger tradition of theosophical Kabbalah; his teachings bring together a large number of previous strands of the Kabbalah. Moreover, a concern for ethics is at the heart of his thinking. The centrality of ethics to Luria makes a comparison with Levinas immediately attractive, and, to Mopsik's list of motifs which Levinas borrows from the Lurianic Kabbalah -- of which I would like to emphasize here only the infinite and the trace -- there must be added the ethical face-to-face which we missed to some extent in Abulafia.¹⁴³

Lurianic mysticism is of a different order than Abulafian mysticism. Its scope is grander: it is presented mainly in the form of a cosmogony rather than a praxis. Therefore, in this half of the chapter, we will not focus on the three marks we sought in Abulafia, but will discuss more general parallels in structure. We can, however, say a few words about the three marks here. With reference to the first and second marks, we should note that there is less emphasis in Luria than in Abulafia on rupture. As I will argue, the basic 'breaking' critical to Luria (*shevirah*) is *not* the anarchy of the epiphanic encounter with the divine trace but rather, a *reverse-breaking*, a breaking of difference, or, in short, a same-making. The thrust of Luria's cosmogony stands against this 'breaking,' and in favour of difference, and in this sense Luria is compatible with Levinas. Still, it seems to be that case that Luria stands in favour of an ordered division of difference rather than an anarchic one, and, moreover, that his ethics is connected to this ordered particularity rather than to an absolute rupture. The questions surrounding the third mark are more complex and a discussion of them requires a distinction between the Lurianic imagery and the experience that imagery expresses and is intended to evoke. As I have just suggested, the thrust of

¹⁴³I cited this list at the beginning of this chapter; see C. Mopsik, "La Pensée," 428.

Luria's cosmogony points toward an order of being; it is likewise the case that his cosmogonical imagery is strongly ontological. In his account of reality, the vertical seems to be utterly distinct from the horizontal, the transcendent distinct from the immanent. While the Lurianic epiphany does, in a sense, take place in a face, the face is not in the world but in the supernal realm; moreover, the desire for what is not in the world seems, in Luria's account, to be a desire to blend with this supernal realm or to bring it down to earth, effecting a new ontological dispensation, a transformation of nature in history. All of this imagery is outside the scope of Levinasian thought. If it is definitive for Luria's meaning, then it follows that, from a Levinasian perspective, Luria's understanding is less radical and less true than Abulafia's praxis. For where Abulafia tries to describe the affections of *each* human being -- to reveal the truth of the human experiences of language, of the divine voice, and of the aspiration for the divine -- Luria encompasses *all* human beings in a grand vision similar in scope to other cosmogonies, cosmologies and, indeed, ontologies. However, it may be the case that Luria's images are intended to be read a-ontologically, as mythologized expressions of the face-to-face. Insofar as Levinas uses them -- and use them he does -- this is the way he reads them. He interprets the symbols of the Lurianic cosmogony as expressive of the experience of their authors and the experience of each of us. He ignores, for the most part, any escapist tendency toward a movement out of the world or a replacement of the world -- or he transforms it, de-ontologizing (and de-historicizing) it until it stands as the mythic expression of phenomenological insights. De-ontologization and de-historicization will be discussed further in the next chapter where, as we will see, Levinas suggests that his de-ontological hermeneutic is borrowed from the Talmud. For the purposes of this chapter, though, it is sufficient to draw some justification for the hermeneutic from Abulafia. We will lay these matters out more gradually and clearly in what follows.

Luria borrows from earlier theosophical kabbalistic cosmogonies a certain

understanding of God and a vision of creation involving ten supernal emanations, or *sefirot*, which emerge from God in succession at the beginning of time and contain the archetypes for all existing beings.¹⁴⁴ But on this foundation he builds a great new cosmogony which in some ways contradicts the spirit of the earlier *sefirotic* theory. We must begin with a few words about the pre-Lurianic cosmogony.

All kabbalistic cosmogonies begin with the *En Sof*, literally the “without end,” the infinite. Scholem explains that “in the popular Kabbalah which finds expression in ethical writings and Hasidic literature, *En Sof* is merely a synonym for the traditional God of religion,” however, in the classical Kabbalah the term has special connotations. He quotes the explanation offered by the kabbalist Baruch Kosover:

En Sof is not His proper name, but a word which signifies His complete concealment, and our sacred tongue has no word like these two to signify His concealment. And it is not right to say ‘*En Sof*, blessed be He’ or ‘may He be blessed’ because He cannot be blessed by our lips.¹⁴⁵

Thus, in its technical meaning, the term *En Sof* points not to God but to God’s concealment. The pre-Lurianic Kabbalah affirms a God who is like Levinas’ illeity: infinite, and also so holy or withdrawn that he cannot be caught in a word or even pointed to with a word, and must be referred to with a word that points to his absence.

As this short examination of the meaning of *En Sof* attests, the central concern of the entire Kabbalah is, in Richard Cohen’s words, to solve “on the symbolic plane . . . a religious-metaphysical problem -- namely, the problem of making sense, in a finite world, of God’s absolute transcendence.”¹⁴⁶ The problem can also be phrased as that of

¹⁴⁴At *Kabbalah*, 106, Scholem writes: “The common order of the *sefirot* and the names most generally used for them are: (1) *Keter Elyon* (“supreme crown”) or simply *Keter*; (2) *Hochmah* (“wisdom”); (3) *Binah* (“intelligence”); (4) *Gedullah* (“greatness”) or *Hesed* (“love”); (5) *Gevurah* (“power”) or *Din* (“judgment,” or “rigour”); (6) *Tiferet* (“beauty”) or *Rachamim* (“compassion”); (7) *Nezah* (“lasting endurance”); (8) *Hod* (“majesty”); (9) *Zaddik* (“righteous one”); (10) *Malchut* (“kingdom”) or *Atarah* (“diadem”).”

¹⁴⁵Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 90. Kosover is late (c.1770) but Scholem notes that this understanding of the *En Sof* dates from the 13th century or before.

¹⁴⁶Cohen, *Elevations*, 254.

determining the extent to which and ways in which human beings are separate from and connected to God. The codification and exposition of the ancient theory of the *sefirot*, which was the great work of Luria's teacher Cordovero, was in large measure an attempt to resolve this question. By his account, the *sefirot* stand between God and the world; thus the separation between God and world is firm and unblurred. But the status of the *sefirot* themselves is unclear; they are not exactly consubstantial with God, but in some way either God's substance or God's light is contained within them. In effect, Cordovero wants to have his connection and his separation too; he "wants to preserve, on the one hand, the concept of the simple and immutable God, and on the other hand to maintain God's providence in the world."¹⁴⁷ He thus resolves the long-standing question of connection and separation by contracting the question until it is contained in the *sefirot*, the nature of which becomes ambiguous. One of the ways Cordovero preserves the ambiguity of his *sefirot* is by describing a paradoxical relation between revealing and concealing: "Revealing is the cause of concealing and concealing is the cause of revealing." Scholem explains these words: "The process of emanation of the *sefirot* is described by Cordovero as dialectical. In order to be revealed, God has to conceal himself. This concealment is in itself the coming into being of the *sefirot*."¹⁴⁸ Cordovero's God is thus in the *sefirot* by a process involving a dialectical reversal. Mysteriously, he is manifest in them because he is concealed from them; one could perhaps even say that he was in them because he was not in them. This idea, which bears obvious affinities to Levinas' notion of the God who is only manifest in the world insofar as he is withdrawn from it, appears significantly at beginning of the Lurianic cosmogony.

Luria's cosmogony has three main movements: *tsimtsum*, *shevirah* and *tikkun*.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 402.

¹⁴⁸Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 402.

¹⁴⁹Luria wrote little; he explained this, but it is unclear whether his explanation implies that his thoughts could not be committed to paper because they are unsystematic and should remain so, or because

Tsimtsum ('contraction' or 'withdrawal') begins the cosmic drama. Since the *En Sof* fills the entire cosmos, it must contract or withdraw itself in order to make the *tehiru*, an 'empty space' or hole in the midst of *En Sof* in which finite creation can take place. This idea, in which a negative movement or limitation precedes any positive movement or growth, seems to stand in opposition to a theory of emanation in which the first movement is positive, and is usually understood to be Luria's main break with previous Kabbalistic cosmogonies. Clearly, though, Luria's notion was in some way prepared for by Cordovero's notion of a dialectic of concealment and revelation, of which it is a more extreme version. Luria's idea that there can be no creation unless the Infinite withdraws is the narrative correlative of Cordovero's idea that there can be no revelation of God unless he is hidden: concealment is mythologized or made narrative as contraction.

The *En Sof* effects *tsimtsum* by means of the power of *din* ('judgment' or 'severity'), for judgment is the power of limitation or boundary. Prior to *tsimtsum*, *din*, like all of what we call aspects or powers of God, is part of the undifferentiated harmony which makes up the *En Sof*. But in *tsimtsum*, *din* is separated out and becomes a quasi-independent power; moreover, some of its power, or 'fires' seem to take up residence in the *tehiru*. And this is not all that is left in the empty space; when the *En Sof* pulls back, it leaves some residue of divine light, like drops left in a jar of oil. These drops are the *reshimu* (the 'trace'). Scholem notes that the ideas of *tsimtsum* and *reshimu* together form a denial of pantheism, suggesting instead that particularity or differentiation are inherently

his system was too complicated, or simply because he wished his ideas to remain esoteric (see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 254). We have four main versions of his cosmogony written by his disciples or their disciples: that of Moses Jonah of Safed in *Kanfei Yonah*, that of Joseph ibn Tabul, that of Hayim Vital in *Etz Hayim*, and the less reliable account of Israel Sarug in *Limunde'i Azilut*. The best English descriptions of the Lurianic cosmogony can be found in Scholem's works: *Major Trends*, 260-278, *Kabbalah*, 128-144, and *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 109-117. These three accounts contain different details and complement one another. In the first, Scholem describes the relation of the cosmogony to earlier kabbalistic ideas. In the second, he is primarily interested to explain Luria's cosmogony as a myth of exile, a cosmic account of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. In the third, he compares elements of the Lurianic cosmogony to philosophical concepts such as the *anima mundi*, and certain Platonic and neoplatonic themes.

good: “there is a residue of divine manifestation in every being, [and yet] under the aspect of *tsimtsum* it also acquires a reality of its own which guards it against the danger of dissolution into the non-individual being of the divine all-in-all.”¹⁵⁰

Once *tsimtsum* is established (though it is never completed, and is maintained only by a constant effort on the part of the *En Sof*), there follow certain direct emanations into the *tehiru*: the *yod*, which is the first letter of the Tetragrammaton, and with it, or in its form, a divine ray of light. From the ray is formed the primal man, the *Adam Kadmon*, and from his eyes then streams the light which will effect the creation of everything else. Vessels form from the *reshimu* to catch the new light; vessels of light to contain light. These vessels, animated by the new light, will be the *sefirot*, the archetypes of all beings to come; they will ensure that the particularity which is characteristic of the realm of finitude is effected correctly, that the proper divisions are made. But the structure is in some way inherently unstable. Perhaps the new lights conflict with the trace; perhaps the direct emanations from the *En Sof* are in tension with the continuous process of contraction; or perhaps, as Tishby and Scholem suggest, the powers of *din*, existing in the *tehiru*, imply the existence of evil there, causing instability.¹⁵¹ In any case, it is certain that the vessels formed of the trace are not strong enough to hold the light of the new ray. They break, and this break, or *shevirah*, is the cosmic disaster which begins the second movement of Luria’s account. Shards of the vessels fall. With them fall sparks of the holy light or the powers of *din*. The sparks give life to the shards, which become the *kelipot* (the ‘shells,’ i.e. the husks of the sparks), the demonic powers which exist in the *Sitra Ahra* (‘Other Side’) and try continuously to tear down the world. Good things are intermingled, and mingled with evil things. What should have been differentiated merges.

Once the *kelipot* have fallen away, *tikkun* or ‘restoration,’ the third movement, can

¹⁵⁰Scholem, *Major Trends*, 262.

¹⁵¹Scholem, *Major Trends*, 267.

begin. New gentle lights are issued forth from the forehead of *Adam Kadmon* and the world as we know it takes shape. But whatever would have been its purpose in the original plan, it now has as its mission the correction of the chaotic state which followed from the breaking of the vessels. The *kelipot* must be held at bay, or better, disempowered. The sparks which animate them must be transformed from sparks of judgment into sparks of mercy, at which point they will be liberated and the *kelipot* will no longer be alive. In the writings of the Lurianists, the traditional *halachah* in its entirety is reinterpreted, or given theological justification, as intending *tikkun*; all *mitsvot* are directed towards the goal of finishing the process of creation correctly. And human beings are fully responsible for this act; the messiah appears only after *tikkun* is completed. Indeed, the amount of responsibility given to human beings in the Lurianic scheme is extraordinary, for their task -- to finish creation and thus effect redemption -- is also described as the task of making God God or perfecting God.¹⁵²

The main symbols which express the way *tikkun* is effected are the five *partsufim*, or faces. The *partsufim* are a new way of describing the ten *sefirot*. In pre-Lurianic Kabbalah each of the ten *sefirotic* archetypes represents a different quality or virtue, for instance wisdom or kindness. The Lurianic account speaks instead of five personalities: 'Arich ('long suffering'); Abba ('father'); Imma ('mother'); their son, Ze'ir anpin ('impatient'); and Nukba who is the female corresponding to Ze'ir anpin. What happens in the world of the *partsufim* also happens below, and what happens below can affect the doings of the *partsufim*. There are many narrative descriptions of the way human beings can bring about *tikkun* through the *partsufim*. One of the most common says that when the sparks re-ascend, they go up to the *sefirah* of Binah ('intelligence') who has become, in the symbolism of the *partsufim*, Imma. The sparks render her fertile and allow her to couple

¹⁵²See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 273-4.

with the *sefirah Hochma* ('wisdom'), symbolized as the *partsuf Abba*. This coupling, which is the whole symbolic function of these two *partsufim*, is called 'looking face-to-face' (*histakkelut panim-ve-fanim*). Scholem describes their turning towards one another as "metaphorically . . . the common root of all intellectual and erotic unions."¹⁵³

The story continues; the cosmogony moves into history; Luria describes the failures and successes of various biblical figures in bringing about *tikkun*. But what we have sketched so far is sufficient to begin a comparison to Levinas. There can be no doubt that Levinas has borrowed certain motifs from the Lurianic cosmogony; it may be recalled that even Mopsik, who denies any similarity between kabbalistic and Levinasian conceptions, allows that Levinas makes frequent and free use of the Lurianic symbols. Even without reference to any specific passage in Levinas, we can recall that Levinas' God withdraws from the world; that he must do so in order to leave room for separate beings; that he leaves a trace of himself in the world, a trace which it is humankind's mission to see or realize; and that this realization is accomplished by means of ethical action, which is also describable as a meeting of faces or a setting face-to-face. In addition, though it is perhaps coincidental, it is worth noting that there are five archetypal *partsufim* in the Lurianic cosmogony, and also five primary archetypal others encountered in *Totality and Infinity*; moreover in both accounts the first figure is male and higher than the other four, the other four comprising two female figures and two male figures.¹⁵⁴ It might be possible to compare at some length the various Levinasian couples -- the father and the lover of *Totality and Infinity*, the ego and the homemaker of the same text, or the father of *Totality and Infinity* and the mother of *Otherwise than Being* -- with the various Kabbalistic couples -- *Tiferet* and *Malchut* ('beauty' and 'kingdom') of the *Zohar*, *Hochmah* and *Binah* ('wisdom')

¹⁵³Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 141.

¹⁵⁴In the narrative line of *Totality and Infinity*, the subject comes across (1) in Section I, the teacher, (2) in Section II, the home-maker or 'woman,' (3) In Section III, the fellow citizen or 'brother,' (4) In Section IV the lover, and (5) also the son.

and ‘understanding’) of the same text, or *Abba* and *Imma* (‘father’ and ‘mother’) in the Lurianic version. But I shall not make this a focus here. Instead, I shall turn to the larger parallels between Levinas and Luria in image and meaning.

Let us begin by looking at an extended passage from *Totality and Infinity*, Section I. Mopsik also cites this passage, pointing out that it appears strongly Lurianic.

Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for separated being. Thus are delineated relationships that open up a way outside being. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a place for separated being exists divinely. Over and beyond totality it inaugurates a society. The relations that are established between the separated being and infinity redeem what diminution there was in the contraction creative of Infinity. Man redeems creation. Society with God is not an addition to God nor an interval that separates God from the creature. By contrast with totalization we have called it religion. Multiplicity and the limitation of the creative Infinite are compatible with the perfection of the Infinite; they articulate the meaning of this perfection. (TI 104)

A number of Lurianic themes here emerge: (1) Infinity contracts to leave place for separated being. This is Luria’s *tsimtsum*. (2) Cryptically or paradoxically, only by means of this contraction is infinity produced, that is, only an infinity which stands in relation to separated beings, ‘exists divinely.’ This is the Lurianic understanding which Mopsik describes by saying: “Man is the way in which the Infinite achieves its constitution as God. It is by the act of man that the Infinite is made God.”¹⁵⁵ (3) Separated beings relate to the divine, and these relations constitute a redemption of the diminution of contraction, and a redemption of creation. This is the Lurianic *tikkun*. (4) Finally, we may note in the Levinasian passage a kind of interplay -- almost a blending -- of divine and human realms, cosmos and society. This interplay is characteristic of Levinas and lends many of his works rich ambiguities. The fact that one often cannot tell whether the word ‘other’ in a given passage in Levinas refers to God or some human being is precisely an expression of the witnessing structure, in literary form (or lack of it). Levinas’ point in all such passages is to suggest that it is

¹⁵⁵Mopsik, “La Pensée,” 432.

precisely in society that the cosmic drama is continuously played out, a point which can be understood, with reference to the passage above, to be an interpretation of the meaning of Luria's cosmic account, a de-ontologization or a pulling of the Lurianic vertical onto the horizontal.

This quick sketch of parallels in image and meaning allows us to begin to map Levinas' understanding onto the Lurianic scheme in more detail. We must, however, begin with a slight discrepancy. There is no parallel in Levinas to the fact that Luria's *En Sof* exists before creation and fills all; such speculations, vaguely totalizing in tone, are in any case outside the borders of his phenomenology. But once *tsimtsum* takes place, we are on shared ground. *Tsimtsum*, as we have noted, is precisely paralleled by Levinas' idea of the withdrawn God,¹⁵⁶ and the residue left by *tsimtsum*, the *reshimu*, is equivalent to the Levinasian trace. Now, *tsimtsum* creates the *tehiru*. But though the *tehiru* is the realm of finite creation, it is not yet what Levinas would call totality. For, although finitude is the pre-condition for totality, totality is not merely finitude. Totality is the imposition, in and on

¹⁵⁶Handelman makes a different connection between a Levinasian motif and *tsimtsum*, one which I find, in itself, breathtaking, but cannot yet place in my own analysis. She links *tsimtsum* to Levinasian passivity.

Passivity in [Levinas'] work means that the access to the 'other than being' requires a kind of "holding back . . . breathlessness of the spirit" because being as essence is the principle of self and same as egoism -- a self-expansion and filling up of everything (OB 5). Although Levinas is by no means a mystic, nor does he draw his inspiration from Jewish mystical sources, there is an interesting analogy here to the kabbalistic idea of God's . . . self-contraction. . . . [F]or Levinas, the emptying out or contraction of the subject is what opens it to the positivity of the ethical relation . . . the subject is . . . opened, hollowed out, traumatized, wounded, deposed, and subject to the other. (*Fragments*, 259)

Handelman goes on to link her analysis of *tsimtsum* as breathlessness (and in fact, the root word of *tsimtsum* does mean a contraction or drawing in of breath) to Levinas' use of the metaphor of the 'lung' to describe the subject (260). As I have used the Levinasian categories so far in this thesis, God has been the only lung -- he breathed over the spirit of the waters at the end of chapter two. But it is possible that a kind of human breathlessness or passivity might correlate with a divine breathing over the waters, just as a divine contraction of breath might correlate to humanity as lung, as subjectivity, as separated essence, or in short, as life. In this case the human drawing in of the breath of life, her 'in-spiration' would be a reference to the in-drawn breath of the withdrawn God, or, by the ambiguity of the witness structure (which Levinas precisely describes as inspiration), a breathing for-God or to-God or even in-the-place-of-God. Handelman goes on to write of 'in-spiration' as a breathing-like movement of "'oscillation' . . . between withholding and assertion, withdrawal and expulsion, philosophy and nonphilosophy, soul and body, language and what is beyond representation and speech" (261).

the finite realm, of sameness; moreover, avoidable totality -- the kind of totality Levinas criticizes -- is the misunderstanding of this sameness as encompassing everything, that is, the misunderstanding of the same as infinite rather than finite. Totality is, in fact, closer in concept to the second movement of the Lurianic cosmogony: *shevirah*.

There is an old kabbalistic dictum which says that there are two kinds of evils: the separation of what should have been joined and the joining of what should have been separate. The former is the nature of all everyday crime -- a murder or a theft separates what should have been joined. The latter is the crime of magic, and the more serious matter. The disaster of *shevirah* involves both sorts of evils to a degree, but primarily the latter sort: the particularity intended in the division of the *sefirotic* lights into vessels is violated and the interior of the *tehiru* becomes characterized by a chaotic blend. This joining of what should have been separate is precisely the character of Levinasian totality. When totality appears as philosophy, it appears most often in the form of a monism, a way of placing everything under a single rubric. When it appears as a characteristic of everyday life, it is once again a blending, a (sometimes necessary) attempt to impose a uni-directional coherence on speech, thought and action. Levinasian totalities link together everything in the world or *tehiru*, blending them and imposing a false order onto them. They even attempt to blend the divine into the mix, for just as the word God is betrayed in the said, so the word infinity is taken to mean, in common parlance, totality or 'the all.' *Shevirah*, then, is not Levinasian breaking, but its opposite, Levinasian merging or participation. The definitive condition of life in the world, for both Luria and Levinas, is not an anarchy that tears things apart and reveals them in all their difference, but a blending that pushes things together under mistaken categories, obscuring their proper differences.

Shevirah or totality manages to engulf or subsume the *reshimu* or trace. But it does not destroy it. And it is the job of individuals, both in the Levinasian and the Lurianic scheme, to seek out the trace and liberate it from the position to which the *shevirah* or

totality has relegated it. This process, the process of *tikkun*, is described in both schemes as having as its goal the establishment of proper differentiation and proper relation, i.e. as redeeming or finishing creation. The goal can also be described in a way which makes it appear two-fold, first as ethics or *halachah*, and second, as the making of God, or, as Levinas has it, “the production of infinity.”

Let us take up the latter of these two first. Infinity, Levinas often explains, is produced in the encroachment, breaking or correction of totality. In other words, infinity is produced by separating things out of the totality and seeing them in their particularity; it is fundamentally linked, or equivalent, to diversity, multiplicity, and individuality. This manner of speaking is somewhat different than the Lurianic manner. While Levinas tends to say that *God* withdrew and that *Infinity* is produced by a realization of individuality in totality, the Lurianists are more likely to say that *Infinity* withdrew and that *God* is produced by a realization of individuality in totality (or in the state which follows *shevirah*). This, I believe, is a case of Levinas reinterpreting or ‘correcting’ the kabbalistic imagery. While he is, I think, no more interested than the Lurianists are in preserving the differences between created beings, he is more focused on this as a central goal, and thus more careful about the kind of language which describes difference as a phenomenon of human existence in the world, preserving the word infinity to describe illeity as it is encountered *here*. This discrepancy may call for further exploration, but for us it is sufficient to note that kabbalists and other Jewish thinkers do not generally regard infinity as an undifferentiated entity; the link between infinity and difference or individuality is well established. One of the critical premises of *halachah* which Kabbalah justifies or gives reason for is its attention to things in their particularity, to the small as well as the great, each in its uniqueness. The exaltation of the particular is the point of a philosophy based on the infinite, for only in the realm of finitude is the worth of things quantifiable. If each particular contains or refers to an infinity, there is no more calculation or gradation -- each particular must be respected

infinitely.¹⁵⁷ This is precisely the position for which Levinas stands, against ontology or totality regarded as the all. In both the Lurianic and the Levinasian understanding, the being that withdraws (which the kabbalists call infinity and Levinas calls God) withdraws to make a space for separated or 'different' being, the only kind of being which can be treated ethically, and the entity which is produced (which the kabbalists call God and Levinas calls infinity) can be produced only out of that separation and difference, in the extraordinary or infinite ethical concern separated being shows for beings different from itself.

With respect to the former point, the goal of *tikkun* understood as ethics, the parallels are more straightforward. Luria's ethics, like that of Levinas, is extraordinary. Since the ethical actions of each human being help to bring about redemption, each of us is responsible for every other; in Levinasian terms, the fate of every other rests on 'my' actions. And because each is tied to each other, each bears an extreme responsibility.

Joseph Dan describes Lurianic ethics in which

there is no neutral ground, there are no thoughts and deeds which do not contribute to one side or another in this mythological strife. If a man is idle for an hour, he has missed an opportunity to uplift a spark. Idleness and idle thoughts certainly strengthen evil. . . . A person who accepts . . . the ethical and religious consequences of the idea of the *tikkun* must always be under enormous pressure. Every mundane or apparently unimportant deed may carry endless cosmic meaning.¹⁵⁸

Lurianic ethics is based, then, on an idea similar to the one Levinas is so fond of in Dostoyevsky: 'we are all responsible for everyone else -- but I am more responsible than all the others.' So much, then, for an initial comparison of the three Lurianic movements with the conceptions of Levinas. We can now move on to the broader issue, broached at the beginning of this section, of the hermeneutic with which Levinas approaches the Lurianic motifs.

¹⁵⁷See Jonathan Sacks, "Practical Implications of Infinity" chap. in *To Touch the Divine: A Jewish Mysticism Primer* (Brooklyn: Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, 1989), 59-90.

¹⁵⁸Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 100.

The Lurianic notion that, in Dan's words, actions have "cosmic meaning" does not seem entirely to fit Levinas, unless it is understood in a certain way. For Levinas, as we have said and stressed, there is no special or 'other' sphere in which the cosmic drama is played out; it is played out, rather, in the relation between human beings on earth, thus deeds can be said to carry 'cosmic meaning' only as long as it is clear that cosmic meaning takes its place here. This brings to the fore the question of the de-ontologization of the Lurianic scheme. In order to explore the question further, let us turn back for a moment to Abulafia.

Prior to Luria, the great symbolization by which the central question of Kabbalah -- that of separation and connection -- is expressed and partly resolved is the symbolization of the *sefirot*. As we have seen, Cordovero attempts to resolve the question of separation and connection by defining a dialectical status for the *sefirot*; in addition, he makes use of a complex scheme of *behinot* or figures by which each of the ten *sefirot* contains an internal dialectic of separation and connection such that the ambiguity characteristic of the *sefirot* as a whole reappears within each *sefirah*.¹⁵⁹ But in the centuries before Cordovero's exposition, there are other attempts to deal with the question of the status of the *sefirot*. One school sees them as consubstantial with God, another as God's instruments, and a third as an immanent manifestation of God's ten attributes in the world.¹⁶⁰ A fourth school, however, that of Abulafia and his followers, does something categorically different: Abulafia simply places the *sefirotic* Kabbalah lower than the Kabbalah of names in his prophetic hierarchy, in a place shared by the visual, the personal, and the active -- or, in Levinas' terms, the ontological and the egological. Abulafia has distaste for the symbolization because he rejects "the esoteric aura surrounding the *sefirot* viewed as

¹⁵⁹This scheme is ably expounded by Harold Bloom in *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 36-7. Also see Bloom's comparison between Cordovero's *behinot*, Proclus' emanations, and the epistemology of C.S. Peirce (53-8), which is impressionistic but thought-provoking.

¹⁶⁰Idel, *Kabbalah*, 136-146. See Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, 81.

pointing to a mysterious divine structure”¹⁶¹ -- in other words, he rejects the symbolization insofar as it is understood as an ontology, one which can become, as we see in Cordovero, a supernal *deus ex machina*, solving the problem of connection and separation logically without necessarily bearing reference to human experience. However, he accepts it as long as it is ‘properly’ understood; as Idel has shown, Abulafia is content with the *sefirotic* symbols understood as expressions of the actions and experiences of the human psyche.¹⁶² Handelman calls this interpretation an ‘internalization’ and suggests that it is because Abulafia has internalized the *sefirot* that he can bridge the human-divine gap by means of mystical union understood as a movement within.¹⁶³

Like Abulafia, Levinas has little use for the *sefirotic* symbolization so prone to being (mis-)understood as an ontology. But his rejection can *also* be described as a reinterpretation, such that if the *sefirot* appear at all in his work it is in their form as *partsufim*, the face of the *partsuf* appearing as the phenomenological the face of the other, and the face-to-face of *Abba* and *Imma* appearing as the face-to-face of the subject and the other. This is quite not an internalization, since it involves another human being, but it can perhaps be described as an immanentization, and Levinas does, at one point, come close to describing the witnessing structure as an interiorization:

Interiority . . . is that reverting in which the eminently exterior, precisely in virtue of this eminent exteriority, this impossibility of being contained and consequently entering into a theme, infinite exception to essence, concerns me and circumscribes me and orders me by my own voice. The commandment is stated by the mouth of him it commands, the infinitely exterior becomes an interior voice, but a voice testifying to the fission of the interior secrecy, signaling to the other. (OB 147, italics mine)

Levinas bridges the human-divine gap by a movement within which is also a movement to the other; this may be understood as a kind of ethical or relational mystical union analogous

¹⁶¹Idel, *Kabbalah*, 254.

¹⁶²Idel, *Kabbalah*, 146-153.

¹⁶³Handelman, *Fragments*, 96.

to the one Abulafia experiences within himself, and, concomitantly, as implying an Abulafian-type reinterpretation of the *sefirot*.

Levinas generally seems to hold that to regard a symbolization as an ontology is to take it literally and to assume it describes beings or ideas, that is, fixed things. But although this is certainly the danger Abulafia was responding to by refusing to use the *sefirotic* symbols, there is little doubt that the greatest kabbalists neither took their symbols literally nor understood them to point at eternal unwavering verities. How, then, did they understand them? Joseph Dan, in an examination of the loose play with which the kabbalists manipulate their symbols argues not only that the kabbalist “does not know the truth behind these symbols,” but also goes so far as to suggest that there was, for them, no truth behind their symbols at all.¹⁶⁴ Handelman, however, draws a conflicting argument from Idel: “the plurality of meaning . . . comes not from any inherent fragmentary nature of language [though it may be expressed as one] nor from its ultimate emptiness, nor from its symbolic nature, but from the infinitely changing dynamic process of the divine life and the human active relation to it.”¹⁶⁵ Whether or not Handelman is right about the majority of kabbalists, she is certainly expressing an opinion shared by Abulafia and Levinas. It is precisely the fact that there is no single static truth signified by the kabbalistic symbols that enables them to point to the truth/s of existence in reality. In this light, Joseph Dan’s argument appears as a small but perfect example of why Levinas cannot use the symbolization of the *sefirot*. We live in an age in which symbols are most frequently understood either to have an objective literal referent, or no referent at all: the *sefirot* must be seen either as (the idea of) a primitive series of God’s aspects, or as a symbol-structure with no meaning. To avoid the former, Dan feels he must choose the latter. Clearly, anyone who wishes to convey the experiential meaning of a medieval symbolization must abandon the symbol entirely and describe its

¹⁶⁴Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 90-91.

¹⁶⁵Handelman, *Fragments*, 97.

meaning in other terms, terms like the witnessing structure which translates the ambiguity in the status of the *sefirot* into an existential ambiguity in which the immanent speaks always of a beyond.¹⁶⁶ Thus Levinas, like Abulafia, abandons the symbolization of the *sefirot* and immanentizes its meaning.

But what he does with the Lurianic symbolization is more complex. We will look at the question in three aspects. In one, the symbolization is relatively easy to read a-ontologically and Levinas can do so without radical reinterpretation; in a second, the symbolization presents difficulties beyond any we have so far looked at in this thesis, difficulties which nevertheless may be overcome; in a third, the symbolization is simply recalcitrant to an a-ontological Levinasian reading.

The first aspect is the *partsufim*. These are already in themselves more amenable to a non-ontological interpretation than are the *sefirot*. Cordovero's *sefirot*, as he makes clear in his major ethical work, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, are to be *imitated*. This argument accords the *sefirot* a kind of ontological being; it reifies them as supernal existents. In distinction, Luria's *partsufim* imitate human behaviour. Thus they lend themselves more obviously to being understood as representations or expressions of human ethical experiences. I contend that Levinas sees the *partsufim* as de-ontologized *sefirot* -- as revelations of the ethical or phenomenological meaning behind the old symbolization -- and that this is why he makes use of the *partsufim* rather than the *sefirot*.

The second aspect appears in the fact that the motifs are presented as part of a historical plan, a plan that seems to reveal the meaning of history. Before embarking on a discussion of the historicism of Luria's thought, we should sketch the outlines of Levinas' understanding of history, outlines which I will not, however, fill in until chapter four. In

¹⁶⁶An argument similar to Handelman's is made by Richard Cohen who notes that the Jewish prohibition against idolatry ensures that the symbols of supernal entities will not be understood literally. The symbols, he says, are not reified angels or divinities but 'openings.' The difference between Abulafia or Levinas, in these terms, is whether the portal to God is within, or in the human other. Cohen, *Elevations*, 256.

Levinas' understanding, history or historicism is one of the fundamental forms of ontology. Things that are accorded a place in history or time take up a kind of ontological reality greater even than that of ever-present supernal entities and more difficult to reinscribe in a phenomenology. The problem of reification is compounded in historical schemes, since those schemes form the most effective sacred groves, allowing for an abdication of responsibility in the understanding that history will take care of justice, or, in short, that all will 'come out right in the end.' Levinasian responsibility requires the repudiation of historical schemes, for

when I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me; I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me. . . . Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion. (TI 79)

The repudiation of historical schemes requires a reinterpretation of a conception basic to Judaism, that human existence is governed by the historical, exterior, objective pattern of creation, revelation and redemption. In the introduction to this thesis, I described briefly how Levinas reinterprets these ideas as movements or expressions of experience, denying them the kind of event-ness which would allow them to be misunderstood as merely 'what happened' or 'what will happen,' and thus as irrelevant to ethics in the here and now. Bracketing the questions of what happened and what will happen -- questions about which Levinas cannot speak, and perhaps finds too removed from existence to be interesting -- Levinas interprets creation as an expression of the experience of a dependence which is at the same time an independence, a freedom-which-did-not-make-itself, revelation as the ever-accessible testing ground of that experience through a calling of freedom into question, and messianism as the development of this questioning into ethical responsibility; redemption he seldom speaks of, and when he does he refers to a desire and not to a future occurrence. All of these interpretive moves are intended to preclude the abdication of

responsibility implied in the acceptance of a drama of salvation. They do not mean that there was no creation, no Sinai and will be no messiah. Beings and things are not themselves outside of history and ontology: they are existents and cannot escape the temporality and locales that accrue to existents. But the relations between them are outside history and ontology, in a time which is not a temporality or a history and which cannot therefore be pinned down; relations exist in a non-time; they are diachronous. Robert Gibbs argues, with respect to the redefinition of creation, that Levinas is erecting a correlation between ethics and theology. When “a term usually taken as theological is claimed for ethics,” there is some “retraction of the theological term,” but the exercise serves a critical purpose: it shows us that theology is founded in ethics and that ethics refers to the transcendent.¹⁶⁷

It is not immediately obvious that Luria’s scheme is intended to be read as a description of diachrony; it appears, rather, to present a grand vision of history which acts, precisely, as a drama of salvation. But this impression is undercut by certain features of Lurianic thought. For one thing, the history of creation Luria offers is not intended to supplant the biblical account of creation but to complement it. This already implies that Luria’s account is not a description of ‘what happened,’ and that we must look for another meaning here. For Levinas, this other meaning must be a prior meaning, a meaning which arises out of ethical experience which is the core of the transcendent, and out of the experience of the transcendent which is the core of ethics. That the purpose of the Lurianic scheme is to describe and exhort an extraordinary ethics suggests that the Lurianic ‘prior meaning’ may be the same. For another thing, we find in Luria, despite the detailed cosmogony, a reluctance to speak of first things similar to Levinas’ reluctance. Readers of Levinas are always stymied in their attempts to discover what was *there* originally, or what was there *first*. Not much answer is given these questions in the Levinasian corpus; in fact,

¹⁶⁷Gibbs, *Correlations*, 210-211, 214-5.

the formulations which he uses are clearly designed not to answer the question but to avoid giving an answer. When Levinas speaks, for instance, of ‘a past that was never present,’ he offers nothing more (or less) than a refusal to offer a time or a thing; in other words, he implies that he cannot answer because any answer would have to stand in temporal and ontological terms. The kabbalists seem, in distinction, to give an answer -- and yet it too is ambiguous and suggests uneasiness with the question. For the *En Sof*, the infinite, can also be referred to as *ayin*, meaning ‘nothing.’ Bloom notes that when the Kabbalah links the *En Sof* to *ayin*, it “thinks in ways not permitted by Western metaphysics, since its God is at once . . . total presence and total absence, and all its interiors contain exteriors.”¹⁶⁸ The Kabbalah, like Levinas, not only refuses to be tied down by any conception of ontological logic in its descriptions of God, but flaunts its own refusal.

These two points suggest that the historical cast of Luria’s thought is not definitive, or not a presentation of ontological fact. Insofar as the kabbalists are describing the human condition, they are, as we have seen, more or less compatible with Levinas. Their scheme, in temporalized form, maps onto a temporalized version of Levinas: (1) both begin with the withdrawal of the divine; (2) both continue with a kind of totality formed in the finite realm that is left by the withdrawal; (3) and both speak, next, of a restorative ethics. Thus, if in the Lurianic scheme, like in the Levinasian scheme, the temporalization is understood to be a narrative device rather than the laying-out of an ontological-historical time-line, they are more or less analogous to one another in thinking. If any discrepancy still remains on this point -- if Luria still seems more likely than Levinas to speculate about ontological transformations at the beginning and the end of history, if Luria still seems to offer a theological eschatology which stands in distinction to Levinas’ prophetic eschatology, if Luria still seems to speak of *this* time and *that* time rather than an experienced non-

¹⁶⁸Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, 53.

simultaneity -- it may be nevertheless possible to redeem the proximity between the two by saying of Levinas something like what Luria said of his teacher Cordovero: that Cordovero's thought dealt with the *olam ha-tohu*, 'the world of confusion,' while his own teaching was about *olam ha-tikkun* 'the world of restitution.'¹⁶⁹ According to Luria, there is no conflict here; reality is being examined from two different angles. Levinas does not speak of the world before *tsimtsum* world or after *tikkun*. Rather he speaks, in ways that still echo those of Luria, of our world of confusion.

The third aspect of the Lurianic symbolization relevant to a consideration of de-ontologization involves the fact that Luria is, in general, more friendly than Levinas to the idea of an order of being. For both Luria and Levinas, the withdrawal of the *En Sof* or God implies that a certain kind of wholeness is inappropriate to human beings. For both, the transcendence that exists in the world -- God for the kabbalists, or infinity for Levinas -- is not the same as the static wholeness which withdrew. Transcendence in the immanent realm or in human experience is dynamic, and is misrepresented or betrayed by the same-making that the Lurianists call *shevirah* and Levinas calls totality. However, the Lurianists connect *shevirah*/ totality to a breaking -- a breaking which, I have argued, is a same-making --while Levinas connects *shevirah*/ totality to same-making pure and simple, and reserves the term 'breaking' for ethics. A discrepancy emerges here despite the great proximity. Levinas' analysis of wholeness as inappropriate for human beings involves the idea of rupture as the human good. Luria's analysis of wholeness as inappropriate involves the idea of ordered differentiation as the human good, and may therefore, from a Levinasian perspective, be suspected of harbouring a nostalgia for wholeness.

This is not to say that the goal of the kabbalists is to re-attain or recreate the pre-*tsimtsum* state, although this *is* the Hasidic interpretation of Luria. For the Hasidim, *tikkun*

¹⁶⁹Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 427.

involves a striving for a personal union from which ultimately arises a cosmic union.

Yichud, the Hasidic goal, “refers to the reuniting of all things, transcending their particularity and separation and achieving the universal relatedness which is the true nature of existence; it also refers to reunion with God, overcoming the isolation and estrangement of creation from its Creator.”¹⁷⁰ Moreover, the Hasidim also strive for *ayin*, nothingness, self-annihilation or the annihilation of one’s worldly existence in the transcendent *ayin*. In short, the Hasidim have a unitive interpretation of Luria, and their union is the kind of union which both Levinas and Scholem regard as inauthentic and totalizing: they strive for the annihilation of alterity and autonomy in the oneness of everything with God. But the interpretations of Luria which pre-date the Hasidic movement are different. Hayim Vital, for instance, a student of Luria, suggests that *tsimtsum* was an act of love on the part of the *En-Sof* who wanted to create free beings outside of himself. For Vital, the human goal is not a return to primal unity, but to finish creation as it was meant to be, that is, by means of the study of Torah, “to attain the restoration of the supernal anthropos, which is the ultimate intention of the creation of man . . . [and] to perfect the supernal tree [of *sefirot*].”¹⁷¹ Idel notes that if there is a mystical union here, it is not the desired end but a stepping stone on the way to a further goal. And it is clear that the further goal involves not unity but proper differentiation. To repair the anthropos and the *sefirot* is to repair the vessels of particularity. Thus the Lurianic goal may be interpreted as right differentiation and right relation.

In short, though Luria does not seem to be guilty of the extremes of the ontological position, he is an ontologist of sorts. He wishes to put things in their proper places, i.e. to put them in places which are objectively rather than relationally determined; and this may bespeak a nostalgia for wholeness or the desire to weave an invisible mesh. To what we

¹⁷⁰Bokser, *Jewish Mystical Tradition*, 26.

¹⁷¹Hayim Vital, *Sha’ar ha-Mitzvot*, quoted in Idel, *Kabbalah*, 57.

have already said about the objectivity or ontological nature of Luria's understanding can be added two more points. The first is that the kind of union desired in Luria's thought, unlike Abulafian union, is communal and universal; it is for the all, rather than, as in Abulafia, for each mystical practitioner. The second is that Luria, again unlike Abulafia, wants not to break down the divine name but to restore it. "The *tikkun* restores the unity of God's name which was destroyed by the original defect -- Luria speaks of the letters YH as being torn away from VH in the name YHVH -- and every true religious act is directed toward the same aim."¹⁷² The connection between the two points is clear: Abulafia's breaking of words facilitates the kind of mystical ascent proper to the individual or the individual in relation, where Luria's objective vision of the redemption of the whole world and its historical transformation necessarily involves communication, and therefore whole language; in short, there is a grand vision in Luria, a vision of a union involving the *all* rather than the *each*. Though the Lurianists may not go all the way towards a gnostic alliance of God with the self or with the world, their thought, insofar as it remains ontological and recalcitrant to de-ontologization, is, from a Levinasian perspective, inadequate.

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That Abulafia rejects or internalizes the *sefirotic* theory, that he advocates a deconstructive letter-patterning, that he speaks of 'loosening the knots,' and that he describes an ambiguity of voice -- all these are indications of a rejection of ontology. His account of the knots could itself be read as an ontological account of human ascent, but such a reading would be in error; his abandonment of the axis mundi in that passage is precisely a rejection of such a reading. The Lurianists are less likely to reject ontology; they, however, stand in extraordinary proximity to Levinas when they describe ethical action as

¹⁷²Scholem, *Major Trends*, 275. I have altered his usage, rendering the Tetragrammaton as YHVH instead of JHWH.

the way to put right the blending of things characteristic of the world after *shevirah*. Both Abulafia and the Lurianists speak of a mystical union, desired or achieved. But I have argued that they mean by this something like the metaphysical desire Levinas speaks of in *Totality and Infinity*, the desire for what is not in the world (Abulafia) which directs us to humble ourselves in extreme responsibility before the other (Luria). Even Abulafia seems to speak of something like a trace, present in all human beings, of the withdrawn, unreachable God, and of ethics as humankind's link to this God -- and the Lurianists are certainly working with these (proto-) Levinasian concepts and motifs. These proximities allow us to speculate that Levinas comes close to describing a *unio mystica* himself, especially perhaps in chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*. The fact that he is unwilling to clarify the agent of the movement, that heteronomy appears in and as autonomy, that the infinite comes to pass in my witness to the infinite, that the "saying belongs to the very glory of which it bears witness" (OB 150) -- is this not a mystical union, a union which does not -- as a union need not -- abandon the radical separation between human and divine or postulate an ontology? But the gist of my argument is not really that Levinas is a mystic; I contend only that he draws on the mystical tradition while rejecting what he calls mysticism, just as he draws on the theological tradition while rejecting what he calls theology and on the philosophical tradition while rejecting what he calls philosophy.

The question that remains to be asked is: why? It should be asked with reference to all three forms -- mysticism, theology and philosophy -- but in the present context can only be asked with reference to the former. Given that Levinas draws on kabbalistic sources, why does he adopt an explicit anti-mystical stance? Given his own tendency toward the *unio mystica*, why does he reserve the word 'mysticism' for the esoteric, ontological planting of sacred groves? Why does he say repeatedly that Judaism is a 'religion without myths?'

I have two answers. First, I think some credence can be given to the argument

Susan Handelman attributes to Gershom Scholem.

Scholem . . . would make the same objection to Levinas' position as he made to Hermann Cohen's -- that his rationalism was hostile to myth and mysticism, still too tied to an Enlightenment ideal of reason. In fact, Scholem is purported to have once said of Levinas, "He is more of a Litvak than he thinks." This is a reference to the highly intellectual character of the Lithuanian Jewish culture from which Levinas came, which intensely cultivated talmudic learning, gave birth to the ethical sobriety of the *mussar* movement, and was a bastion of resistance to Hasidism.¹⁷³

As Handelman points out, Levinas cannot in fact be understood as tied to Enlightenment reason: he seeks always what he describes an 'other reason' -- or a one-for-the-other reason -- distinct from the classical reason of Enlightenment philosophy, and this already opens the possibility of an affinity with mysticism.¹⁷⁴ And yet there may indeed be a kind of knee-jerk rationalism operating in the recesses of Levinas' thought. I see such a rationalism in the various passages in his work which periodicize the emergence of the mature human being using the three-fold scheme we have discussed: enjoyment or oneness with the world, ethical relation, and the solidification of ethics in social relation. The Levinasian structure parallels a structure common in 19th century European thought, especially German thought, by which the development of the human being from infant to adult and the development of civilization are assumed to be analogous and periodicized with a single scheme: a childish or 'pagan' consciousness of oneness with nature; the emergence of the idea of God as separate from humanity; and finally the consciousness of full human autonomy that allows social and individual relations with God and under God.¹⁷⁵ I do not believe that Levinas adopts such an understanding wholesale, but there are signs that he is, at times, working unreflectively with a version of it, for instance when he labels the first of his own developmental stages 'pagan' (TI 142, 160), or when he distinguishes Judaism from pagan

¹⁷³Handelman, *Fragments*, 300. The central story is taken from Malka Solomon, *Lire Lévinas* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1984).

¹⁷⁴Handelman, *Fragments*, 299.

¹⁷⁵Representations of this conception are numerous. For Scholem's version, see *Major Trends*, 7-8. Also interesting is Idel's comparison between Scholem's version and that of Eric Voegelin. Idel, "Voegelin's Israel and Revelation: Some Observations," delivered at the International Conference on the work of Eric Voegelin, Manchester, 1996.

conceptions by calling it a 'religion for adults' (DF 11). It may be that what sticks in his thought from this progressivist intellectual inheritance is the idea of 'myth' as paradigmatic for totality. Myth, and by the same token early mysticism, can be dismissed as primitive ontology: myth and mysticism offer a complete explanation of human beings, the world and God or the gods, cushioning one from the discomfort of surprising encounters with the unexpected in the form of alterity.¹⁷⁶ In short, Levinas adopts a stereotype about myth. This is perhaps excusable, since he is not in the business of reading, say, Hesiod; but it appears less excusable when one remembers that he has at his disposal a de-ontologizing hermeneutic which allows him to do justice to the myths of the Jewish tradition, and which might also be fruitfully applied to those of the Greeks or of other cultures.

But what about what might be called 'mysticism-proper,' that is, medieval mysticism or, more specifically, the Kabbalah? Here I think Levinas has a better reason for his dismissal, namely, the prevalence of a misunderstanding of the Kabbalah, and the tendency, inherent in the Kabbalah, to allow or even encourage this misunderstanding. The misunderstanding is to a large extent perpetuated by Gershom Scholem. Scholem, like Levinas, denigrates myth as representative of a primitive stage of human development, but praises the Kabbalah as representative of the highest kind of human development. But this 'high' development has, in Scholem's thought, a peculiar character: it is antinomian, anti-*halachic*, and possibly also anti-ethical. For Scholem, ordered conceptions of thought come in several varieties, mythic orders, Enlightenment orders and *halachic* orders among them, and Kabbalah stands against all these; it is an 'anarchic breeze' which re-empowers an

¹⁷⁶A similar understanding emerges in Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka. Benjamin makes a distinction between myth and fairy tale, whereby the mythic structures that discourage free thought can be subverted by the fairy tale trickster. He then implies a comparison between myth and *halachah*, and contiguously, between the fairy tale trickster and *aggadah* -- *aggadah* perhaps standing in for the Kabbalah or a proto-Kabbalah. This interpretation emerges from dialogue with Gershom Scholem and is certainly compatible with Scholem's understanding of myth and *halachah*, and, as we will see in a moment, of the relation between myth and Kabbalah. See Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" and "Some Reflections on Kafka" chaps. in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 111-146, 117, 144.

atrophying religion by importing therein a creative force, or, in effect, by subverting the legal and ethical structures which form the basis of the rabbinic tradition.¹⁷⁷ Idel objects to this understanding: “Kabbalistic myth,” he writes, “is the result of a tenuous endeavour to explain the rationales of the commandments in accordance with the material extant in the recorded [and unrecorded] Jewish tradition.” Far from being in tension, Idel argues, *halachah* and myth (or mysticism) are “interdependent.”¹⁷⁸ But Scholem’s understanding persists in the scholarship and the population in general. Were Levinas to utilize the Kabbalah openly, he would have to preface his use with an extended argument similar to Idel’s; in short, he would have to argue that the Kabbalah subverts Enlightenment order while standing for another kind of order, an ethical order which is also a *halachic* order. He does not use the Kabbalah openly and does not mount an argument in defense of its ethical nature, perhaps because he knows that Scholem’s understanding carries an enormous amount of credence in a world which is itself largely governed by Enlightenment conceptions, perhaps simply because he does not have time, and perhaps -- or largely -- because the Kabbalah itself does support an a-ethical or anti-ethical reading in certain ways.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, to read the Kabbalah as fundamentally ethical may only be possible on the basis of a Levinasian understanding, for it is only after having absorbed Levinas -- or the ideas in the traditional Jewish texts that give rise to Levinas’ thought -- that one is likely to come to associate rupture with ethics, and rupture with *halachah*.

To present an ethical conception of human life and the human relation to the

¹⁷⁷Handelman, *Fragments*, 302.

¹⁷⁸Idel, *Kabbalah*, 157.

¹⁷⁹He does, however, write one short passage in which he questions Scholem’s assumptions. It occurs in a footnote to “Messianic Texts” which we will discuss at length in the next chapter. After praising Scholem for his “remarkable intuition” in distinguishing between apocalyptic anomian mysticism and rationalist mysticism, he suggests that *pace* Scholem, it may be that “not everything has been said . . . on the subject. . . . As if rationalization meant only the negation of the miraculous and as if, in the realm of the spirit, we could abandon one set of values without setting other values in motion. It is this positive meaning of the messianism of the rabbis that I want to show in my commentary” (DF 296-7n.1). It is perhaps also the positive, ethical meaning of the Kabbalah which underlies much of Levinas’ reading.

transcendent may be, at bottom, the intention of Abulafia and Luria, but they do not allow this intention to emerge from their teachings without work. They know, like Levinas does, that such a teaching presented exoterically would be mere moralizing. To be effective, the teaching must be offered after, and wrapped within, rupture, anarchy and atheism. So Levinas' Kabbalah remains underground, where, perhaps, it has always belonged. A student of Abulafia cites a conversation with his teacher in which he asks: "Why do you, Sir, compose books in which the methods of the natural sciences are coupled with the instruction in the Holy Names?" Abulafia replies: "For you and the likes of you among the followers of philosophy, to allure your human intellect through natural means, so that perhaps this attraction may cause you to arrive at the knowledge of the Holy Name."¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰Quoted in Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, 66.

What does the end of history matter? says the Lord. I judge each person for what he is, not for what he will become.¹⁸¹

CHAPTER FOUR: LEVINAS' TALMUD/ LEVINAS' HISTORY

The first Colloquium of French Jewish Intellectuals was held in the Spring of 1957. Levinas did not give a paper but was in attendance and participated in the round-table discussions. His first intervention -- his first public statement to the group of learned Jews to whom he was in later years to present his thirty talmudic lectures -- makes a controversial claim which, moreover, sets the philosophical agenda for his contributions to the Colloquium for the next three years.¹⁸² He announces that Judaism is not a religion; rather it is a way of comprehending reality such that the interpersonal relation is valued above all else. He then offers two illustrations from the Talmud of this Jewish way of

¹⁸¹The three lectures discussed at length in this chapter come from the proceedings of the colloquium of French Jewish intellectuals. They, and transcripts of the discussions which followed them, were first published in Volumes I and II of *La Conscience juive*, (Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1962-3). Later, the lectures were re-published without the ensuing discussions in *Difficile liberté*, (Editions Albin Michel), the third and last edition of which is dated 1976 and appears in a *Livre de poche* reprint. For *Difficile liberté*, Levinas conflated his second and third talks under the title "Textes messianiques," though the first talk appears intact under the title "Entre deux mondes." *Difficile liberté* also appears in English translation as *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1990).

All references to Levinas' first lecture in this chapter are in the following form: (a) the abbreviation of the French title of the lecture (EDM), (b) the page reference for the first volume of *La Conscience juive*, (c) the page reference for the *Livre de poche* edition of *Difficile Liberté*, and (d) the page number for the English translation in *Difficult Freedom*. The round-table discussions which followed the delivery of the lectures appear only in *La Conscience juive*, and citations of them are followed by only one page reference. References to the second and third lectures cite only the English version in DF; references to the roundtable read "*La Conscience juive* II, page." The single citation of an intervention by Levinas in the discussions of someone else's paper is footnoted in full (in the note that follows this one). All translations appearing in this chapter are my own. This first reference comes from the midrash Levinas cites toward the end of the first lecture (EDM, 137/ 280/ 201).

¹⁸²The intervention occurs toward the end of the discussions of the of the colloquium's first paper, "Sens de l'histoire juive," given by Edmond Fleg: *La Conscience juive* I. 5-21, Levinas' intervention, 15-16.

comprehending.

The first is an account of a talmudic commentary on Cain's words, "my sin is too great to be borne." The rabbis, Levinas says, twist the grammar and read the sentence as a question -- "is my sin really too great to be borne?" -- by which, as they explain, Cain means: "you, who will pardon the six hundred thousand Jews who make the golden calf, cannot pardon me?" Once the sentence is read as a question one must ask why God did not answer it. Could it be that God had no answer? No, continues Levinas, it is only that he did not wish to answer. If he had the response would have been simple, since the two cases are different. The six hundred thousand Jews sin against God, while Cain sins against a man. Levinas states the moral succinctly: "The only way to respect God is to respect the neighbour."¹⁸³

The second illustration is a story drawn from elsewhere in the Talmud. Levinas tells it as follows.

Different peoples present themselves before the Eternal in order to receive their place in history. . . . We affirm in passing that there is not at all a radical superiority of the Jews. A pagan who has studied Torah is as great as a High Priest. But everything acquires its meaning through Torah. The enemies of Israel [are aware of this and] ready to accept the law. They want to enter election. . . .

God lets the people take their chances. There is one commandment which is easy to accomplish: the Succah. Everyone applies himself to building a Succah. But God sends a torrid heat wave. Everyone leaves his hut and kicks it to pieces. They cannot withstand the test. But do the Jews resist the torrid heat? No, they also leave their provisional dwellings, but they do not destroy them. And God laughs. . . .¹⁸⁴

Again Levinas draws out the moral:

To reserve to themselves the possibility of residing outside the solid dwellings of the sedentary historical peoples --to keep the Succah -- is the privilege of the Jewish people. What is essential originates in interpersonal relation and not in the splendours of architects. The Jews too protect themselves from the heat and install themselves in houses, but they do not forget the Succah. The Jew does not situate his humanity in enrootedness.

¹⁸³*Sanhedrin*, 101b. Levinas' commentary adds much embellishment to the story.

¹⁸⁴*Avodah Zarah*, 3a-b. Levinas tells the story as it stands in the Talmud, omitting only some rabbinical asides.

Levinas calls the first illustration an example of the “desacralization” of the Bible in the Talmud. Though he does not often use the term again -- perhaps for fear of muddying his discourse with jargon -- it is an immensely useful and expressive coinage. By desacralization, Levinas refers to the hermeneutical phenomenon I described in the last chapter as immanentization or de-ontologization, that is, to the representation of the significant human ethical experiences that underlie and give rise to images of a supernal realm or a divine. The act of desacralizing is an element of what Levinas sees as the rabbinic Jewish anti-mystical¹⁸⁵ comprehension: just before he offers the first illustration he says, “ethics is an optics towards God; all the rest is suspect, and in this sense, is the mystical temptation and decadence,” by which he means that to employ the image of a relation with God which is *not* an expression of a relation with the trace of the infinite in the face of the other is the dangerous postulation of ‘invisible meshes’ and a sign that she who employs the image has succumbed to the mystical temptation, the desire to make a totality encompassing God. The application of the concept of desacralization to the first illustration is clear: whereas in the Bible the ultimate measure of virtue and sin might seem to be one’s relation to God understood literally as direct or participatory, in the Talmud, the measure of one’s relation to God, and thus also of virtue and sin, is revealed as one’s relation to one’s fellows. The biblical account is brought down to earth by the Talmud; it is not altered but its meaning is clarified; the ethical impulse behind its sacral images is made manifest.

Levinasian desacralization is what I have called his discovery of the horizontal in the vertical; it is also his discovery of diachrony in synchrony, or the other in the same. More simply, it is his phenomenological reduction, his looking back to see what is behind the

¹⁸⁵Although I argued in the last chapter for the existence of a Levinasian mysticism, I shall use the term in this chapter as Levinas uses it. Thus ‘mysticism’ must be understood henceforth as the perverse craving for ontological union with the Divine, or, more broadly, for any conception of a totality encompassing God and human beings. The fact that Western mystics do not, in general, have any such conception is from now on bracketed.

‘same’ or the ‘system’ or the ‘invisible meshes’ or the ‘sacred grove.’ This looking back is his philosophical work and his prophetic work; it is, to put it plainly, his message to the era. In the last two chapters I have touched, here and there, on the subject of how Levinas’ re-interpretations of the Jewish sources are intended to address a certain contemporary problem, namely, the reification of images which express our relation with divine and a subsequent inability to read the old texts in any way but literally. But this is not, as Levinas sees it, the main degeneracy of the contemporary understanding; it is merely a symptom. Our inability to read existentially or phenomenologically bolsters, justifies and arises from the real problem: a way of standing before the other which places him into a system where he becomes an aspect of ‘what is’ and has an identifiable, classifiable, ‘correct’ relation to all the other things that are -- in short, a way of being in the world which subsumes difference into the same. In other words, the reification of images is merely a form or a sign of sacralization of experience, for to reify an image, to read it as representing an idea or thing, is necessarily make a sacred grove, to place the idea or thing into a plan or pattern -- and thus to commit an idolatry in which the plan or pattern itself is regarded as paramount, or even worshipped, at the expense of any understanding of the experience that gave rise to the image. These sacral systems take two basic forms for Levinas, both of which can be called ontologies. In the first, space becomes a synchrony and spatial differences are understood to be the co-ordinates of the system; this involves theorizing about a hierarchical ‘order of being’ and might be called ‘ontology-proper.’ In the second, time becomes a synchrony and moments in time are understood to be the co-ordinates of the system; this involves theorizing about a progressive ‘order of history’ and can be called historicism. Both systems flatten out the gaps and diachronies of reality by seeing them under an all-encompassing rubric, a rubric under which they are seen -- or can theoretically be seen -- ‘in one place,’ or ‘all at once.’ Thus while at first glance the link between the two illustrations Levinas offers of the talmudic comprehension is not obvious, in actuality the link is part of

Levinas' philosophical point, for the second illustration, like the first, is an example of the desacralized talmudic comprehension. Placing one's faith or hopes for future betterment in the course of rooted history is equivalent to placing one's faith or hope for forgiveness in a spatially located and reachable God; both are signs of succumbing to the seductive grandeur of a scheme or realm that overarches the interpersonal, to which the interpersonal becomes secondary, a mysticism, an invisible mesh or a sacral grove. The connection between the high value the Talmud puts on the interpersonal relation and its a-historical or anti-historical stance is dependent on the logically prior connection -- or spiritual equivalence -- between participating whole-heartedly in world-history and totalizing the divine. Once the logically prior connection is seen, it becomes clear that one can only stand in relation to the extent that one stands outside world-history. Desacralization -- the removal of mystical elements in a text by uncovering the ethics that lies behind them -- involves thus the re-interpretation both of images that might be misunderstood as suggesting an order of being and of images that might be misunderstood as suggesting an order of history.

The question of de-ontologization (and that aspect of de-ontologization which is de-historicization) arises again -- but with a difference. I have been speaking in the last two chapters about Levinas de-ontologizing the sources of Judaism; or, to put it in the new jargon, desacralizing them. Now we find that Levinas himself speaks of one Jewish source desacralizing another, of the Talmud desacralizing the Bible. I suggested in chapters two and three that, according to Levinas, the Bible and the Kabbalah, read without interpretive help, will appear to be fundamentally ontological texts, full of sacral imagery, imagery which reifies and totalizes the divine, locating it in space or history. It now becomes clear that, in Levinas' view, the necessary interpretive help is found mainly in the Talmud. To be sure, the Bible and the Kabbalah offer their own hermeneutical keys to desacralization, for instance the negative theology of Isaiah, or the internalization and deconstruction of Abulafia. Nevertheless, it is the Talmud which stands, for Levinas, as the main source of

the de-ontologizing and de-historicizing hermeneutic, the hermeneutic that refuses to place beings, things, events and ideas into a 'world-view' -- a cosmic or micro-cosmic ontological system, or a progressive historical system -- and reads them instead as representations of the ethical urge, that is, as what they originally were. We may, however, ask whether and to what extent Levinas is correct to say that the Talmud desacralizes the Bible. If my argument is correct to this point, it is at least partly Levinas himself who desacralizes the Bible and the Kabbalah; it is possible, then, that he desacralizes the Talmud as well, and reads the desacralizing hermeneutic into it. In fact, both positions are to some degree true. Robert Gibbs lends some support to the second position when he describes Levinas' hermeneutic for reading the sources of Judaism by saying not only that Levinas "makes a strong claim that biblical texts can be approached only through the Midrash and the Talmud" but also that "he designs *his own style* of reading in such a way as to avoid both a historical-philological reading and a pietistic, *halachic* reading of the rabbinic texts."¹⁸⁶ By this account, Levinas' a-historical hermeneutic is his own; he himself desacralizes the Jewish sources. And the second position receives further support from the circumstances under which Levinas continues to illustrate the concept of desacralization. His contributions to the first four Colloquia comprise a full-scale battle with Hegel, a battle in which the a-historical or anti-historical aspect of the desacralized rabbinic comprehension becomes the vanguard. We may wonder, on this basis, whether Levinas does not emphasize, or even over-emphasize, the lack of historicity or historicism in the rabbinic comprehension in order to gain anti-Hegelian ammunition. And yet the first position can also be supported: with his first intervention, Levinas has begun to show that the Talmud does desacralize the Bible. It is likely, therefore, that when Levinas applies his own technique of desacralization to the old books, he understands himself to be working in the talmudic tradition; in short, he applies

¹⁸⁶Gibbs, *Correlations*, 158; italics mine.

to the Bible, the Kabbalah and the Talmud itself the hermeneutic that the Talmud, at least sometimes, applies to the Bible.

Levinas' first intervention receives no response. The discussion moves on to other issues; it appears that he has made little impact on the participants. But he does not let the matter drop. Almost everything he says in the next three Colloquia is an attempt to clarify and defend the initial intervention. He continues to argue that Judaism is a way of comprehending. He continues to maintain that sacral images are essentially anathema to Judaism, and that insofar as they are used they are always meant to be understood in light of the non-sacral, ethical (or just) experiences which underlie them. And though he does not take up the argument against ontology in his favorite form -- that is, Heideggerianism -- he does explicitly address Hegelian historicism, repudiating all structures which accord significance to world-history and representing such structures as sacral and immoral. Finally, he offers, in support of all this, a de-sacralized interpretation of talmudic messianism by which messianism has nothing to do with ontological transformation in a historical future, and everything to do with ethical transformation in the here and now.

Levinas' argument against Hegelianism, as I will take it up, has two basic aspects, one of which is fairly narrow and the other of which is wider in scope. The narrow aspect touches less on Hegel himself than on the interpretation of Hegel offered by his great French disciple, Alexandre Kojève. Levinas does not explicitly address Kojève, but the concepts he draws from Hegel in the second and third lectures to the Colloquium and especially his use of the phrase 'universal and homogeneous state' suggest more than a mere familiarity with Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's thought. I believe that Levinas' Hegel is largely Kojève's Hegel, and I am not alone. Peperzak writes that "as far as Hegel is concerned, we must be aware of the Parisian scene of the years during which Levinas prepared his opus magnum. In the fifties and sixties, it was still dominated by Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*" and it is "this Hegel" which looms so

powerfully in Levinas' thought.¹⁸⁷ In any case, when Levinas' critique of Hegel is read as a critique of Kojève's Hegel, interesting nuances emerge. We begin to see a Levinas who, for all he praises the liberal West as a place where political and religious freedom is possible, is also uneasy about certain aspects of liberalism. And we begin to see that liberalism (which we will take up below) and totalitarianism (which we will take up in the next chapter) have, from a Levinasian perspective, certain features in common: both are historicist ontologies; both are monisms; both are progressivist ideologies which seek to subsume difference into the same; both see world history as marching toward a time when human beings will be fulfilled because they have everything in common. In the main body of this chapter we will trace Levinas' argument that the Hegelian-Kojévian historicist ontology dominates our thinking and our politics, and also his argument that this ontology can be corrected only by the phenomenon he defines as Judaism, a phenomenon which, as we have seen, is universal or universally accessible, but which is best expressed in the sources of Judaism, for instance in the openness of a Rosenzweig or, especially, in the inconclusiveness of the rabbinic give-and-take, an inconclusiveness intended to preclude the fixed structures of the sacred grove.

This first aspect of Levinas' argument against Hegelianism will be fleshed out further as the chapter progresses. But it is necessary now to speak at some length about the second more general aspect. This begins with Levinas' admission of what is perhaps the central Hegelian point: dialectics is totality, or dialectics is ontology. This understanding is

¹⁸⁷A. Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 11-12. To this we may add the concrete fact that Levinas attended many of Kojève's lectures on Hegel at the Sorbonne. But whether Peperzak and I are right, it remains true that no commentator, including Peperzak, has looked in any detail at the relation between Levinas and Kojève's Hegel, while the subject of Levinas and Hegel himself has been written of extensively. I attempt here to remedy this gap. For Kojève's Hegel see Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969). Incidentally, Kojève and Levinas led similar lives up to a point. Both were born in Eastern Europe in the first decade of this century, both left home before the age of twenty to travel, both spent time in the 1920s in Germany studying with Heidegger and Husserl, both moved to Paris around 1930, and both fought for France in the war.

already relatively clearly drawn in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas links 'war' and 'being,' meaning by 'war' all actions and understanding that pit two or more sides against one another, and by 'being' ontology. The two are very nearly identified: the intended result of war, he argues, is participation, order, subsuming of the other into a structure of the same, identity, egology, totality, ontology. The discussion seems simple and straightforward, but it has far-reaching significance, for, with it, Levinas repudiates utterly a standard paradigm for the understanding of human nature, human society and human thought: the paradigm of 'agon vs. the end of agon,' in which beings either come together in a participatory order or 'whole' or else struggle constantly with one another to maintain their autonomy and ascendancy. For Levinas, these two things are one: a struggle of autonomies exists for the purpose of creating a stable synthesis or harmony; moreover, a synthesis or harmony already exists in the struggle insofar as the two parties struggling can already be seen as mutually dependent, mutually defined, two parts of the whole which is the struggle. Levinas allows struggle and harmony -- part and whole, war and ontology -- to merge. And the resulting hybrid of war-ontology or struggle-harmony is, he tells us in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, the nature of politics, the nature of "harsh reality," and the nature of history (TI 21).

The insight is borrowed from Hegel. Depending on how one interprets Hegel, one will either stress his synthetic telos, the achievement of Absolute Knowledge or political utopia -- in which case the distinction between struggle and synthesis is all part of a greater synthesis -- or one will stress the way in which his account illuminates the continuing course of world history and the history of ideas -- in which case the distinction between struggle and synthesis is all part of a greater and ongoing struggle. In either case it is clear that the two are effectively two sides of the same coin. Struggle leads to synthesis; struggle has synthesis as its purpose; struggle *is* synthesis and synthesis a temporary cease-fire which covers over struggle -- Hegel already knows all this. In Levinas, it becomes the

insight that, just as war (or dialectics) can be seen from above as a kind of ontology and thus linked to the act of theorizing about an order of being, so ontology -- any ontology -- can be seen as a war. For in war two structures dominate: first, the structure within an army, in which is established "an order from which no one can henceforth keep his distance" (TI 21) analogous to an order of being, and, second, the structure between armies, in which we find "a mobilization of absolutes" (TI 22) analogous to the war of all against all. In both "the meaning of individuals is derived from the totality" (TI 22). The two are one action or event or phenomenon, seen from different perspectives.

The question is where one goes from here. Is the hybrid of struggle-harmony an explanation of all human doings, or is there ground outside of the hybrid from which it can be criticized? Levinas' break from Hegel comes in the form of an argument that such a ground exists. The break is best seen in his re-writing of the Hegelian master-slave story. In Hegel's version, two men (a subject and an other, to use Levinasian terms) meet and fight for mastery until it is clear to both that one is the master and the other the slave. The differences between the two men -- and indeed all differences between all human beings -- are defined as antagonisms; difference is violence. The master can, however, achieve the temporary appearance of harmony or non-violence -- which lasts until a new struggle begins -- by subsuming the slave's possessions into his own and the slave into his way of life. History, for Hegel, is the story of such temporary struggles and temporary harmonies, and the course of history is pre-determined. In Levinas' version the story begins in the same way: two people meet with the intention of struggling for mastery. But the subject is arrested by the command in the face of the other -- that is, in his very difference from her -- the command that orders her not to kill, not to master, not to make same. Henceforth the subject who would have mastered subjugates herself willingly to the other. She offers herself to him, but she does not become his slave; she does not become part of him but 'remains separate and keeps her as-for-me.' This separation is not autonomy, for she has

seen in the moment of approach that she is fundamentally indebted to the other. But the separation does support a freedom, a freedom with which she can kill the other if she likes, or serve him. So Levinas transforms the story completely. Instead of the differences between people giving rise to antagonism, they give rise to ethics. Instead of the merging of two into one, the subsuming of the slave into the master, there is asymmetrical relation, relation in which the *you* remains higher spiritually and lower economically than the *I*, relation which bespeaks the desire for an ever-absent and infinitely higher God. Moreover, the Levinasian encounter, far from being pre-determined, is utterly indeterminate. Although the subject is responsible to preserve the freedom of the other, she is not bound or conditioned to do so. Each encounter is new, each surprising, each in its own way serendipitous or unfortunate; no encounter can be understood as part of a grand scheme of being or history. Thus, while history, for Levinas, may be Hegelian history -- at least this is what we read in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* -- the motivations for human action, and thus the originating impulses of history, are not Hegelian; these motivations or impulses stand, in this sense, outside of history.

It is critical to see that Levinas' transformation of the story is not a matter, as it were, of 'lopping the end off' the Hegelian dialectic. It is true that, in the standard interpretation of Hegel with which Levinas generally works, the entire history of struggle-harmony is finally revealed as part of a greater harmony which relativizes all previous stages, subordinating them to the system, making it evident that in the same way that all previous harmonies were merely disguised struggles, so all previous struggles were merely disguised manifestations of the ultimate harmony. And certainly it is precisely this vision of an 'end of history' which Levinas both accepts as the logical outcome of history and is horrified by, and this vision which leads him to seek a non-historical ground for history. But his deeper insight is that the end of history is already there *in* history if history is understood as dialectical. "Thesis and antithesis," he writes, "in repelling one another, call for one

another. They appear in opposition to the synoptic gaze that encompasses them; they already form a totality” (TI 53). Thus even a revisionist Hegel, for whom history was a progression of endless struggle, would already have sacrificed real difference to a paradigm, effectively proffering a telos of history; the fact that that telos may be temporally extended to the point of virtual endlessness makes no difference. Were the Levinasian subject and other to struggle with one another, or stand against one another, they would already form a whole, a whole which could be seen from the outside and would, from that perspective, appear as a totality or a participation or a synthesis or even a harmony. Only insofar as the two remain separate, giving and speaking to one another, are they engaged in something that cannot be seen from outside, something that cannot be classified in a pattern. In sum, Levinas finds his non-Hegelian ground in relation, and can thus reject the idea that human nature, society and thought is based in any primary way not only on struggle as opposed to harmony or harmony as opposed to struggle, but also on the hybrid of struggle-harmony which governs Hegelian history, whether one understands that hybrid ultimately as a manifestation of an overarching harmony or as a manifestation of a ceaseless struggle. Moreover, once the non-Hegelian ground is laid, Levinas can erect a wider critique of dialectical-ontological structures, or wars. His argument against the apparently harmonious intra-army structure is his general critique of ontological philosophy, especially the kind of philosophy based in a certain religious understanding which seeks to establish an order in which each being has its place or function and from which each derives its meaning. His argument against the apparently agonistic inter-army structure is his critique of those philosophies which base themselves on oppositions, most notably for him, Hobbes. When he writes that “the visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality that dominates Western philosophy” (TI 21), he is speaking of both ways of thinking. Harmonious systems in which “the ultimate meaning alone counts” are effectively equivalent to agonistic systems in which “the last act alone changes beings into themselves” (TI 22).

Thus Levinas accepts a certain Hegelian insight and repudiates a certain Hegelian error. But let us lay the matter out more clearly. The links between war or dialectics or ontology and politics, between war and history, and between war and ‘harsh reality’ -- all the links which are borrowed from Hegel and presented in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* -- are not inflammatory rhetoric; on the contrary they must be taken completely seriously. Levinas holds that Hegel understands the nature of totality better than any other single thinker, and that insofar as history and ‘reality’ (as well as the less controversial politics) are totalities, they can be best explained using Hegelian logic. However, Levinas does not conceive totality as the fundamental nature or ultimate meaning of reality, or history, or indeed politics; in fact it may be said that he does not even conceive totality to be the fundamental nature of totality, since totalities are themselves always already ruptured by infinity or responsibility. Thus, for Levinas, where Hegel goes wrong is not so much in his description of totality as in his notion that the totality he describes is total; in other words, he makes the error of postulating an avoidable totality. The matter can be described in plainer terms as follows. Levinas accepts Hegel’s description of most of the *features* of and historical political reality. He accepts Hegel’s description of most of the *course* of historical political reality. But he does not accept Hegel’s description of the *origin or end* of historical political reality. Hegel, according to Levinas, is correct to suggest that political history tends toward a universal synthetic regime which is already all but completely established, correct to suggest that the regime attempts (and to a great extent succeeds) in putting an end to movement and debate or history and philosophy, correct to suggest that political historical particularities are nothing more than inchoate syntheses or that struggles are nothing more than inchoate harmonies, and correct to suggest that action in any ‘present’ tends to be conditioned by an idea of a future telos. But Hegel is incorrect to suggest that the universal regime would be *utterly* synthetic, incorrect to suggest that the regime would succeed *completely* in putting an end to critique or philosophy or history, incorrect to

suggest that *all* particulars are the kind of particularity which tends toward totality, and incorrect to suggest that action in any present is not *also* conditioned by non-teleological future inscribed in desire for the 'not yet' and, just as importantly, by a past encounter with a divine trace. And no matter how critical the points on which Hegel is correct, the points on which he is incorrect are decisive. For although Hegel may describe much of our present and past condition to perfection, when he mistakes the origin and end of that condition he mistakes its meaning, conceiving a wholeness where none exists.

What Levinas begins to do in the re-writing of the master-slave story is to offer a way to move back out of the Hegelian understanding towards meaning. The turning away is accomplished by the awareness that, despite the evidence of war, politics and history, human experience is founded on something which cannot be subsumed into a synthesis, something which is not struggle but rather ultimate rupture. Dialectical structures present themselves implicitly as rupturing and as judging one another, but the presentation is false. Wars present themselves as great clashes or breakings which shake up and call into question everything in their path, but this is no true break, no true shaking up, a calling into question of nothing. Dialectical structures and wars -- all antagonistic struggles -- are closed, fixed, boundaried, and, because of this, essentially *at rest*. Any movement which seems to be taking place within them is a mere mimicry of the true dynamism of ethics, by which human beings *are* called into question; under this mimicry there is only a realm of the same, in which individuals are sacrificed to the war-machine, in which incoherencies are made to play their part in a pattern, or in which the event of the subject's encounter with the other has no meaning unless it furthers the postulated future course of world-history. *Shevirah* appears under the guise of rupture but it is, in fact, totality. *Tikkun* therefore must be true movement. Levinas seeks to step back out of the totalities of war, dialectics, politics and history -- with their false breakings -- into dynamism, into real rupture.

This second and wider aspect of Levinas' argument against Hegelianism returns us

to a structure of Levinas' thinking we took up briefly in section four of chapter one, a structure in which a common distinction -- for instance reason and revelation or theology and philosophy, or, as we now see, war and harmony, or struggle and synthesis -- is taken up, merged until there is no distinction left, and then set up against an element of experience which cannot be merged into the resulting identity, an unsubsumable element. In chapter one we called the unsubsumable element prophecy or ethics; in the anti-Hegelian texts taken up in this chapter it is more often called religion, or love, or messianism. In Levinas' first lecture to the Colloquium, he shows us that Franz Rosenzweig agrees with Hegel that history (supposedly active, dynamic agon) tends toward or merges into indifference (passive, synthetic), but sets up against this synthesis the unmergeable thing called religion or love. In the second and third lectures, he shows us the rabbis (anachronistically) agreeing with four Hegelian-like syntheses -- the present merges into the future, acting 'for one's own time' into acting 'for all times,' inside into outside, and particular into universal -- but all the hybrids are then put up against an unsubsumable 'here,' and a 'now' and an 'each-for-each other.' All of this is the overcoming of a the Hegelian sacred grove, an overcoming by means of moving back. Levinas does not fight Hegel on Hegel's ground, for he knows Hegel to be correct in his claim that to fight him is already to admit that life and thought are a matter of agon and harmony, and thus to lose the battle. Instead Levinas simply turns away from Hegel, and, moreover, shows us Rosenzweig and the rabbis turning away as well. Levinas' Rosenzweig and Levinas' rabbis make play with the truth of the Hegelian account of reality. They set antitheses against theses and conflate them into syntheses -- but out of this discover ethical elements of experience which cannot be made to play roles in the Hegelian drama. They anticipate Hegel, but finally make light of him. They never lose sight of non-agonistic, non-synthetic ethical difference; it remains for them the root of the richness of a created world that can never stand as an unbroken totality.

Only a few more introductory words need to be said about Levinas' critique of

Hegelian thinking as it emerges in the first three lectures to the Colloquium which form the focus of this chapter. Levinas' rhetoric in these lectures runs rather high. In order to set up a foil for the critique of Hegel which eventually arises, he argues strongly for the truth of the Hegelian account. Part of his subsequent counter-argument then consists of the suggestion that, although true, the Hegelian account is grotesque. The complete counter-argument, that the Hegelian account is at bottom incorrect, then depends in part on the grotesqueness of the account, which in turn depends on the assertion of the account's partial truth. This is a complex and at times confusing movement of thought. Moreover, Levinas' manner of expression is (as always) unsystematic. For the most part, he uses the term 'history' as equivalent to Hegelian History, thus suggesting that Hegel has analyzed history correctly and that history (and the history of philosophy) is a totality which moves inevitably toward its fulfillment and end in the universal and homogeneous state. At these times he speaks of standing 'outside of history' as the way to overcome, or avoid, or step out of the bonds of Hegelian logic. But once he has completed this part of the critique, once he is, as it were, standing outside of history himself, he begins to criticize any notion that history has a telos. At this point it becomes possible for him to speak again of action in history or historical action without the idea that such action must be part of a historical plan or a historicism. The second of these two ways of speaking expresses Levinas' bottom line: while there may be meaning *in* history, there is no meaning *of* history; history is not going anywhere. But he seldom speaks from the bottom line. In order to present the strength of the Hegelian threat he must show that Hegelianism, and especially Kojévian Hegelianism, gives a compelling if appalling account of most of what has happened in the course of history, and of modern society; he thus speaks throughout much of the three lectures like a disaffected Kojévian. It should be kept in mind, during the account that follows, that 'standing outside of history' is equivalent to standing within a history that has no overarching meaning; and we should be accommodating to Levinas' movements back and forth between the claim that

history is fulfilled in universality and homogeneity and the claim that history has no fulfillment.

This introduction has jumped, not entirely with ease, from the rabbis to Kojève-Hegel, for these thinkers are the poles which govern Levinas' participation in the first four Colloquia. They are approached and connected by means of three implicit questions and answers. First, what are the particular sacred groves which shape contemporary thought and action? Levinas describes a Kojévian end of history in which indifference is the dominant characteristic. Second, what is the way out of such sacralization? Levinas describes an anti-sacral way of comprehending which he calls Judaism, a way of comprehending focused on ethical experience; when pressed, he says that this kind of Judaism is found above all in the Talmud. Third -- and here we have a series of connected questions -- *if* Judaism is a way of comprehending, and *if* that way of comprehending is based on de-sacralization, and *if* desacralization is the way to stand apart from a Kojévian historicism in relation -- then shouldn't everyone be Jew? Or, indeed, given that this sort of standing-apart-from-history in-relation is foundational for human experience, isn't everyone *already* a Jew? And, if everyone *is* already a Jew, how can Hegelian history have come about at all? To these questions Levinas does not offer a clear answer. Part of the problem is already implicit in the analysis above, where Levinas both finds an ethics prior to Hegel and also accepts the Hegelian vision of the course of history; this part of the problem can perhaps be solved with the application of the (albeit sketchy) account I have offered in previous chapters of how endemic totalities become avoidable totalities. But in the course of the lectures to the Colloquium the problem remains entwined with Levinas' analysis of the nature of Judaism's relation to other religions, and is, I believe, left unresolved.

The three questions arise in his first lecture to the Colloquium, and we will treat them in order in the three sections that form the first half of this chapter. In the second half, we will turn to his second and third lectures to the Colloquium, published together as

“Messianic Texts.” Here he narrows his focus to the all-important second question, seeking a proto-anti-Kojévian-Hegelianism in certain rabbinic teachings about messianism.

I. Between Two Worlds

“Between Two Worlds” is a lecture on the life and thought of Franz Rosenzweig. I offer here an interpretation of the lecture, into which I interpolate some passages from Levinas’ other writings and an account of some parts of the round-table discussion which followed the lecture’s presentation.¹⁸⁸ I should mention that I occasionally employ my own neologism, ‘Levinas-Rosenzweig’ in place of the cumbersome phrase, ‘Levinas, speaking in the name of Rosenzweig.’ I offer as justification the fact that part way through the round-table discussion, Dr. E. Minkowski notes that Levinas effaces himself behind Rosenzweig during the lecture, effectively *becoming* Rosenzweig, and that Levinas later expresses gratitude for the insight (EDM 141 and I.147). It must, however, be kept in mind that Rosenzweig and Levinas differ in certain respects at least semantically. For instance, the setting of Rosenzweig’s discourse is the cosmos (understood as a macro-anthropos or ‘relation writ large’) while Levinas prefers to restrict himself to the anthropos and the relation per se; for another instance, Rosenzweig speaks of ‘love’ while Levinas prefers the terms ‘relation’ or ‘ethics;’ and for a third, Rosenzweig speaks of ‘eternity’ as what breaks linear history while Levinas understands eternity precisely as the extension of linear history. In this analysis, I use for the most part Rosenzweig’s way of speaking.

a. The problem

Levinas opens the paper with the beginnings of a biography of Rosenzweig, in which he explains that Rosenzweig came to Judaism gradually in the course of his life from

¹⁸⁸The fact that these comments are ‘interpolated’ is an innovation. I have re-organized the discussion by issue, although it took place literally ‘round-table,’ i.e. moving from person to person rather than issue to issue and ending with a single long response by Levinas to all his supporters and detractors.

his study of humanity in general and that his thought moves similarly “to Judaism from the universal and the human.” (EDM 122/ 256/ 183). Levinas’ lecture, he says, is intended to reveal the way this movement is accomplished, that is, to trace the route from the contemporary manifestations of universalism -- modern doubt, and participation in the modern State -- towards Judaism. Already Levinas has begun to address Hegel. According to Hegel history (and philosophy, which is equivalent to the history of philosophy) are to be understood as the progressive unfolding of spirit. As I have suggested, the unfolding takes the form of the struggle between masters and slaves, or between master-moralities and slave-moralities, in the effort to gain freedom and recognition. In each historical stage the ideas of the previous stage are synthesized and transcended until the achievement of absolute freedom and recognition for all heralds the arrival of the universal synthesis and the end of history and philosophy. The process is predetermined and the end inevitable; that history appears while it takes place as an unintelligible series of events merely reveals ‘the cunning of reason,’ which has dissembled the ultimate plan, hiding its existence from all thinkers prior to Hegel. Hegel can see the plan because, as he understands it, the end has arrived; history has reached its final stage in the ideas of the French Revolution being spread throughout Europe by Napoleon -- liberty, or absolute freedom, and equality, or absolute recognition. There can be no further historical stage; these ideals will nevermore be challenged. All that remains is their further spread and implementation, which are mere technical problems. In short then, Hegel’s philosophy and history moves from the particular to the universal, while, in contradistinction, Rosenzweig, in life and thought, moves from the universal to the particular; which is to say that Rosenzweig moves in a direction Hegel would call backwards. And it is all the more perverse, from a Hegelian perspective, that the particular toward which Rosenzweig moves is Judaism. According to Hegel, Judaism was in its early years a historically necessary phenomenon, providing the antithesis to the Greek comprehension of the divine which allowed the two to be subsumed

into the superior philosophy of Christianity. But it continues to exist in post-Christian centuries only as a sort of hangover, and in the present era of universality as a blind anachronism. Levinas' opening account of Rosenzweig's path thus attacks Hegel implicitly from two fronts.

But the attack does not take the form of a claim that Hegel was wrong in any simple sense. It is true that Levinas-Rosenzweig has suggested, contra Hegel, that genetic, credal or territorial particularities (like Judaism) need not merely be inchoate forms of syntheses ("the universal and the human"), and that it is possible to move temporally through life and thought against the flow of Hegelian history. He has, moreover, sketched the beginning a logical argument supporting this anti-Hegelian stance: he has labeled the notion that history culminates in the universal a "modern" notion, and thus, perhaps, temporally contingent and vulnerable to refutation. But he has also allowed us to perceive the difficulty of arguing against Hegel. For to label universalist conceptions "modern" merely highlights the fact that the conceptions are in a sense self-proving. That history has had universalism as its goal and end is surely manifest beyond doubt by the fact that moderns are fundamentally and profoundly universalists. If Rosenzweig swims against the Hegelian stream, he also swims against the prevailing stream. Levinas intends us to perceive this; he intends, in short, to begin the paper with what is at least a partial admission of the triumph of Hegel. So far, therefore, his attack only exists in the form of a question: by what means does Rosenzweig (and might we, with him) move outside and beyond this triumph? This is, in fact, the critical question; it is what Levinas means when he says, at the end of the lecture, that the question Rosenzweig raises is "the first question a Jew today should raise" (EDM 137/ 280/ 201). It is also a way of describing the general question of the relation between Hegel and the Talmud which governs Levinas' first three lectures to the colloquium, for, as gradually emerges, to move beyond the triumph of Hegel is to stand outside of history and within the Jewish way of comprehending that Levinas has referred to in his first intervention.

That Levinas-Rosenzweig gives a good deal of credence to the Hegelian conception of history becomes clearer as he begins to define contemporary universalism. “Rosenzweig knows,” says Levinas, “that Hegel spoke the truth when he affirmed that this was ‘the end of philosophy and that philosophers have become superfluous’” (EDM 125/ 260/ 186).¹⁸⁹ The end of philosophy, he continues, is equivalent to the ubiquity of philosophy. In the contemporary world, everyone has become a philosopher, and thus there is no longer any distinction between philosophers and those to whom they philosophize, and thus no longer a distinct thing called philosophy. The end of philosophy means, in effect, that everyone today experiences an unprecedented intimacy between life and thought, and that no one needs to be taught. This seems at first glance like a good thing. But, says Levinas, the end of philosophy should not be confused with an “age of philosophy” in which many or most human beings *choose* to philosophize. At the end of philosophy, everyone *must* philosophize. The necessity enters the consciousness of each individual through “the anguished certainty of the inexorable march of history towards goals that surpass the intentions of human beings” (EDM, 125/ 259 185). Hegel is right: we have attained absolute freedom. But by its very nature as an absolute, this freedom is manifest as tyranny and enslavement. “The movement that led to the liberation of man . . . [results in] the experience of the necessity of philosophical totality known as totalitarian tyranny” (EDM 125/ 259-60/ 186).

This sketchy description of the end of philosophy from the beginning of the lecture may be fleshed out somewhat with a further description of the malaise of the contemporary age from the lecture’s final paragraphs. Levinas illustrates the initial description by referring

¹⁸⁹Levinas quotes a letter to Rosenstock-Huessey, where Rosenzweig writes, “Hegel spoke the truth when he (implicitly) said what he (explicitly) knew: that he was the end of philosophy.” The letter in its entirety can be found in E. Rosenstock-Huessey, *Judaism Despite Christianity: The Letters on Christianity and Judaism between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessey and Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. D. Emmet (University of Alabama Press, 1969), letter #2, p. 83. See also the two letters to Hans Ehrenberg in December 1913, cited in the introduction to Rosenstock-Huessey’s book, in one of which Rosenzweig describes Hegel as the “last philosopher” and “the first of the new Church fathers”

to a Marxist poem,¹⁹⁰ but in the final description suggests that we face a further degeneration of understanding, beyond the Hegelian or Marxist forms.

Alongside [history's] Hegelian and Marxist interpretation, in which it seems to be ineluctably directed toward a goal, there is an interpretation which offers to go nowhere: all civilizations would be equal. Modern atheism is not the negation of God, it is the absolute indifferentism of *Tristes Tropiques*. I think that this is the most atheist book that has been written in our day, the most absolutely disoriented and disorienting book. It threatens Judaism as much as the Hegelian and sociological vision of history does. (EDM 136/ 279-80/ 200-201)

It is perhaps not necessary to speculate on Levinas' objections to Lévi-Strauss in great detail. Lévi-Strauss holds that the perceived differences between things are not given in reality but are a product of the structure-creating capability of the human mind, and that social or cultural structures are created in accordance with the structures perceived in reality, that is, in accordance with the shared human mental structures. A Levinasian critique of this understanding is not difficult to formulate. That Lévi-Strauss finds the essence of the human being in cultural or social structure means that the other, for him, does not remain other but can be made intelligible through a comparison of those structures. And it could be further argued that Lévi-Strauss's other is not a true other at all, for he sees each individual as, to all intents and purposes, composed of the same structure-creating mental material as each other.

I think it likely that Levinas conceives the structuralist understanding as fundamentally Hegelian and Lévi-Strauss's contention that all difference occurs within the given human mental material as a failed attempt to reclaim or re-internalize the Hegelian dialectic. In *Otherwise than Being* he suggests this in a brief attack on structuralism:

Anthropology cannot lay claim to the role of a scientific or privileged philosophical discipline, with the pretext, formerly put forth, that the whole of the thinkable passes through human consciousness. . . . Hegelianism, anticipating all the modern forms of distrust of the immediate data of consciousness, has accustomed us to think that truth no longer resides in the evidence acquired by myself . . . [but rather] in the

¹⁹⁰“This resembles a poem by Mayakovsky, in which everyday things and even emblems of signs begin to live on their own account among men, concepts go out into the street, arguments become events, and dialectical conflicts become wars” (EDM 124-5/ 259/ 185).

unsurpassable plenitude of the content thought. In our days truth is taken to result from the effacing of the living man behind the mathematical structures that think themselves out in him, rather than he thinking them. (OB 57)

The reason Levinas does not place Lévi-Strauss himself into the Hegelian camp in “Between Two Worlds” but instead labels *Tristes Tropiques* evidence of a further degeneration is that Lévi-Strauss himself argues against Hegel, dismissing the importance of history. Dialectical progressive history, according to Lévi-Strauss, is one of the structures by means of which *our* society perceives reality; it is not a given, but a myth, and in privileging it, Hegel (or, more often in Lévi-Strauss’s analyses, Sartre) illegitimately privileges our society over others. But his argument with Hegel does not preclude the possibility that his philosophy, as expressed in *Tristes Tropiques*, may be an expression of the ultimate triumph of identity over difference, and thus itself Hegelian. It may, therefore, be the beginning of an indication of what Levinas refers to when he adopts Hegel’s claim that we have reached the end of philosophy.

The matter may be further clarified by a different text: Levinas’ essay, “The Trace of the Other.” Here, as at the end of “Between two Worlds,” Levinas suggests that a new degeneration has succeeded Hegelianism or Marxism. Eric Weil expresses the old form: he is convinced that “every attitude of the rational being is directed into a category” and that “the outcome is a category reabsorbing all standpoints.” But in this comprehension, Weil is “in conformity with philosophical tradition,” tradition which has been abandoned by an “anti-intellectualist” contemporary thought. Contemporary thought is quite comfortable, even complacent, with a “multiplicity of cultural significations and . . . games of art,” and by this complacency, it “lightens being of its alterity.” Thus it remains “indifferent to the other and to others, refusing every moment which does not return” (TrO 347). In effect, while Weil sought a category incorporating all standpoints, contemporary thought employs a vast number of categories without questioning their nature or putting them into contention. The attempt to subsume difference into synthesis has given way to mere indifference to

difference. And again, while this most modern stance is perhaps not strictly Hegelian, it may be understood as the ultimate result of the Hegelian search for identity, for indifference is without a doubt the most effective form of non-difference. Lévi-Strauss's argument against Hegelian dialectics -- his unwillingness to privilege one society over another -- is precisely an example of this indifference to difference. Indeed, Levinas suggests that Lévi-Strauss's indifference is indifference par excellence by honouring it with the ubiquitous suffix of modern totalizing comprehensions, that is, the 'ism' (EDM 136/ 279-80/ 200-201). It may be then that Lévi-Straussian 'indifferentism,' which appears to stand contra-Hegel, is the ultimate expression of the Hegelian triumph of identity, and may likewise precisely represent the 'philosophy' of people living at the end of philosophy, when everyone is a philosopher, when everyone is satisfied with her own thought, and when no one needs to be taught by an other.

That Levinas sees contemporary indifference as a direct descendant of Hegelianism becomes clearer in "Messianic Texts," where he begins to refer implicitly to Kojève. Writing a century and a half after Hegel, Kojève documents the post-Hegelian spread and implementation of the ideals of the French Revolution. Liberty and equality have increasingly been achieved in what he calls 'the universal and homogeneous state,' the political entity in which each citizen accords recognition to each other and the freedom of each is ensured. And if we have not quite as yet achieved the practical implementation of the universal and homogeneous state, we are very close to having achieved the practical implementation of the universal and homogeneous state of mind. As a student of Kojève's thought, Barry Cooper, puts it: "Hegel's political teaching, as interpreted by Kojève and summarized by the phrase 'the end of history,' expresses the purposes and ideals of modern civilization for both bourgeois capitalists and bourgeois socialists (including that aspect of modernity identified as totalitarianism) with an unequalled depth, coherence, clarity and

exhaustiveness.”¹⁹¹

Cooper draws from Kojève’s thought a link between liberalism and totalitarianism. Certainly, the differences between the two are critical, but, according to Cooper’s Kojève, they are not different in all respects. For while it is true that liberalism founds its self-understanding on the idea that it has escaped totality by means of its pluralism or its respect for the individual, in practice it appears, like totalitarianism, to be a political version of what Levinas calls the realm of the same. Liberalism has as its goal the Hegelian ideal of the self-actualization of all citizens; its pluralism and individualism mean, to all intents and purposes, that each citizen respects each other’s chosen method of self-actualization. But because self-actualization is the goal of all, there is little need for philosophical debate; any method of self-actualization is as good as any other; we are ‘complacent with a multitude of categories or cultural significations.’ Meaningful arguments in which human beings throw political, ethical or philosophical concepts or principles into contention are superfluous, and any strong belief which might suggest the existence of fundamental differences between people, for instance religion, tends to remold itself until it is compatible with liberal goals or becomes a strictly private affair. Everyone is a philosopher; there is no need for discourse; effectively or in practice, there are no meaningful differences between people. This, at least, is Kojève’s Hegelian understanding of liberalism as it is interpreted by Cooper.

Levinas’ criteria for the justice of a regime, we recall, is two-fold. First, with respect to the other’s other or the ones ‘far off,’ the just regime will in one way or another make laws that arise from ethics and represent ‘ethics with a hard skin.’ What these laws might look like we are never told; thus it remains quite possible that Levinas sees liberalism as just in this respect. Second, with respect to the other or the ‘one near,’ the just regime will allow for difference and thus encourage ethics. Again the criterion is unclear -- this

¹⁹¹Barry Cooper, *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 25.

time necessarily so -- and yet it is clear enough to make us wonder if Levinas sees liberalism as entirely just in this respect. For the differences allowed for and encouraged by liberalism, as they are described by Kojève and Cooper, have little to do with the alterity, embodied in each of us, of which Levinas speaks. On the contrary, they constitute a plethora of affectations and affiliations -- chosen rather than endemic, superficial rather than deep, and, above all, arbitrary rather than ethical -- which together form nothing less than the illusion of fulfillment without the necessity of an encounter with an other; they are, in short, a distraction from infinite difference.¹⁹² Kojévian liberalism is not Levinasian liberality, for its live-and-let-live does not require encounter, and therefore does not engender the self-questioning that is manifest as the gift to the other. Kojévian pluralism is not Levinasian plurality, for in the 'ism' lurks the egological assumption that I need not change my chosen affiliations and attitudes on the basis of the other's needs any more than I would expect the other to conform to my affiliations and attitudes. Thus, with respect to the possibility of a true encounter with the other or the 'one near,' a liberal pluralistic regime is perhaps as unjust as a totalitarian one -- and the Kojévian link between liberalism and totalitarianism through indifference is quite probably the source of Levinas' claim that the modern movement of liberation is a movement toward a 'totalitarian tyranny.' The description of the end of philosophy from the beginning of "Between Two Worlds" is a description of a Kojévian end, one in which we have moved beyond the Hegelianism of a Weil into the Hegelianism of a Lévi-Strauss, into indifferentism. But empirically verifiable as this end may be, Levinas will turn away from it.

Incidentally, because this turning away is not only a rejection of the more

¹⁹²Levinas writes somewhat more cautiously, in the 1990 preface to an article from the thirties: "We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject. . . . Such a society loses living contact with its true ideal of freedom and accepts degenerate forms of the ideal. It does not see that the true ideal requires effort and instead enjoys those aspects of the ideal that make life easier. It is to a society in such a condition that the Germanic ideal of man seems to promise sincerity and authenticity" (RPH 63).

straightforward Hegelianism of Weil, but also of the ideas of the structuralists and contemporary philosophers who, despite their claim to be anti-Hegelian or anti-modern, merely take the Hegelian comprehension to its logical conclusion -- because of this, Levinas cannot be called post-modern without clarification or qualification. The definition of post-modernism by which it refuses closure -- by which it re-complicates, ruptures or breaks open each issue or question as soon an answer threatens to emerge -- is merely a form of indifferentism. Though Levinas appears at times to be a philosopher of ultimate rupture -- showing us always that the totalities and themes through which we see the world are always already broken; finding a different in every same, a many in every one, and an incoherence in every coherence -- he is in actuality a philosopher of structure. For the difference or openness to which he points is not arbitrary. It is an openness that points in a direction, a direction neither spatial nor temporal -- neither ontological nor historical -- but rather ethical. Thus the point of Levinas' argument against Hegel and Kojève is not merely that the progressive augmentation of Identity in History is broken *somehow* -- *anyhow*, by spontaneity or an a-directional openness -- for this would only be an assertion of the sameness which is indifferentism, and thus ultimately a vindication of Hegel and Kojève. The point, rather, is the nature of the meaning which does the breaking open, namely ethics. What emerges in Levinas' re-writing of the master-slave story is that to say, in the language of Levinas, that identity or the same is ruptured by the other or difference, is to say, in plainer speech, that identity or the same is ruptured by *service to the other*, by *responsibility for difference*. From a Levinasian perspective, Hegel and Kojève's argument is immoral: Hegelian-Kojévian 'relation' is a denial of true relation which is not mutual or reversible, but elevates the other. His argument against their understanding can be simply put: pluralism is always already ruptured by a prior plurality, and, more importantly, liberalism is always already ruptured by a prior liberality.

Levinas' account of Rosenzweig's movement from universal to particular must be

understood in this context. It is a movement away from universalism understood as the end of philosophy, as the fulfillment of the Hegelian plan in complacency. When Levinas describes Rosenzweig's path as a movement away from the modern idea that one's "participation in the State [is] the accomplishment of one's very vocation to be a human being" (EDM 123/ 257/ 184), he implies that it is a movement away from the Kojévian universal and homogeneous state, away from the state of indifference which characterizes the contemporary thought of moderns and post-moderns. The problem Levinas-Rosenzweig treats is a concrete one: the triumph of Hegel is evident in the ideals of our own society, which is Hegelian and totalitarian as well as liberal. We are the proof of the truth of Hegel's claim that history marches under the banner of the progressive augmentation of the realm of the same. But, as the remainder of the lecture shows, Levinas-Rosenzweig has a way to move back out of the Hegelian triumph, a way which involves the revealing of an original plurality and liberality underlying and undermining totality, and rupturing Hegel's claim, true as it may be in its own terms or empirically. The way is ethics; or, as it is called in "Between Two Worlds," religion, or Judaism, or love.

b. Religion and love

It is not possible, according to Rosenzweig, to avoid the inevitability of philosophy simply by refusing to philosophize and subsisting in spontaneity or asserting one's individuality. The only way one can live outside the tyranny of philosophy is by religion. Here we have a slight semantic irregularity, for what Rosenzweig means by religion turns out to be precisely what Levinas was referring to when he said, in the previous year's intervention, that Judaism was *not* a religion; in other words, religion, for Rosenzweig, means a way of comprehending reality such that the interpersonal is valued above all else. In fact, Rosenzweig, in order not to confuse his conception of religion with a human institution, a form of culture, a collection of beliefs or opinions which run parallel to rational

truths, or, for that matter, anything “unctuous, mystical, pious, homiletical or clerical,” avoids the word religion entirely in his great work, *The Star of Redemption*, just as Levinas tried to avoid or deny the word in his intervention (EDM 126/ 262/187). But Rosenzweig does use the word in other works and letters, and in “Between Two Worlds” Levinas chooses to use it also. Religion, in “Between Two Worlds,” then, refers to an ethics which involves no abdication of either action or reason and which “has to do with questions that are put to every man.” (EDM 125/ 260-61/ 186-7). Religion, understood as service to the other, provides the only adequate way of life after the end of philosophy.

The decision to use the word religion creates difficulties for Levinas. During the question period, Robert Misrahi asks: “why does it have to be religion which takes over at the end of philosophy? Why can there not be some true philosophical and non-religious life which rises to the challenge?” (EDM 139). Later, a slightly different objection is made by E. Minkowski, who asks, “does what Rosenzweig calls religion really still merit the name religion? For one word was not spoken, that is faith, and in the end, a religion without faith is nothing but a contestation of fact” (EDM 141). Levinas responds by clarifying his definition, in a way which may, incidentally, remind us that in 1959 he is in the process of writing *Totality and Infinity*.

The original concept of religion -- the condition for all positive religion -- signifies, for [Rosenzweig], the very life where God, Man and World are rejoined, God, Man and World which were affirmed in their irreducible distinction and had ruptured the totality where philosophy had united them. Philosophy has come to an end not because it is arrived at the point where all has been thought and it is necessary to realize this thought; it is finished precisely because it has already descended into the events of the street, and, since Hegel, humanity knows it. What comes after this end is Kierkegaard and the Kierkegaardians, the protestation against the imprisonment of life in the system or in history. Rosenzweig remains Hegelian on one point. For him, the subjective protestation is powerless against historical necessity. Religion and the religious community represent a mode of being which opens to the individual an existence which is neither his overlapping in a totality nor the vanity of his personal protestation. In this sense, religion is the event which follows the end of philosophy. It is determined in a manner anterior to concepts of belief and faith. (EDM, 148)

Misrahi and Minkowski both define religion in a way that Levinas-Rosenzweig rejects, as

‘belief and faith.’ Misrahi, like Rosenzweig, rejects this conception of religion, but in favour of ‘philosophy’ rather than in favour of a different conception of religion.

Minkowski, in distinction, embraces the conception of religion as faith and defends it against Rosenzweig’s rejection. Levinas’ answer reveals some frustration: it is difficult to speak of religion without evoking notions of faith. He defends his use of the word religion as opposed to the word philosophy which may suggest either totalizing conceptions like Hegel’s or subjective conceptions like Kierkegaard’s. Rosenzweig’s religion is neither a participatory exercise (in the sense of an invisible mesh) nor the work of the human being in solitude; rather, it is communal. It is based, both cosmically and socially, on the coming into relation of beings who retain their autonomy.

It is worth remarking that Misrahi and Minkowski have a point. Levinas-Rosenzweig uses the term religion to disassociate his ethics from what is usually called philosophy, but he might just as well have used the term philosophy to disassociate his ethics from what is usually called religion. As we have seen, Levinas vacillates in his use of the term philosophy. It is partly his assertion in “Between Two Worlds” that at the end of history or philosophy everyone must philosophize which prompts Derrida, turning to Aristotle to push the Hegelian envelope, to say to Levinas that ‘not to philosophize is still to philosophize.’¹⁹³ In a later essay, “God and Philosophy,” Levinas corrects Derrida, saying that, no, not to philosophize is *not* still to philosophize but rather to engage in prophecy (GCM 77). However, in more casual forums, such as the interview with Kearney, Levinas *is* willing to speak of a philosophy which comes after the end of philosophy, a philosophy beyond Hegel, a philosophy which remains broken or which is in question at all times, a philosophy which is equivalent to Levinasian prophecy or Rosenzweigian religion (RK 33). So Levinas might well have returned here to the usage of the previous year’s intervention

¹⁹³Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 152.

and called his way of comprehending a philosophy rather than a religion. But while in the previous year's intervention, Levinas *was* interested in disassociating his thought from religion, here he has a special interest in drawing a firm line dividing himself from philosophy, namely, his battle with Hegel. In fact, it might be argued that he draws his very definition of religion on the basis of the demands of this battle. Although Levinas defends the Rosenzweigian conception of cosmic relation not as something new but as the "original" religion or the "condition" for religion, he also suggests, with a twist of time, that this original religion comes about only *after* philosophy, in response to philosophy's having united God, Man and World in a totality. Such twists of time are characteristic of Levinas and I have tried to unpack them elsewhere in this thesis. But what is interesting about this particular twist is its slant: religion's status as 'original' is clearly of less interest to Levinas here than is its status as the post-philosophic answer to Hegel. Indeed he goes so far as to say that in a sense "religion is the event which follows the end of philosophy"; echoing the even balder statement made in the body of the lecture: religion "does not precede philosophy, it follows it" (EDM 125/ 260/ 186). At the beginning of his response to the round-table discussion Levinas says that of everything he has presented to them in the name of Rosenzweig, the anti-Hegelianism is dearest to him (EDM 147). It might be truer to say that everything he has presented to them in the name of Rosenzweig is anti-Hegelianism, even the definition of Rosenzweig's religion.

But, once again, this is not anti-Hegelianism in the simple sense of a claim that Hegel was wrong. "Rosenzweig remains Hegelian," says Levinas, "on one point," -- only *one* point, but one that happens to be the central point of Hegel's philosophy -- that "the subjective protestation is powerless against historical necessity." Autonomy becomes participation in history; the part is a part only by virtue of its relation to the whole. It is because Rosenzweig accepts the basic Hegelian insight that Levinas-Rosenzweig's definition of Judaism becomes, in effect, *that of which Hegel knows nothing*. The heart of

Judaism is an antidote to Hegelianism, an antidote further clarified as relation, love and life. The core of “Between Two Worlds” is a summary of *The Star of Redemption*, focusing on the structure of the Star and the love which generates it and holds it in place. We watch Levinas move, with Rosenzweig, out of universalism into religion: from the consciousness of the experience of death, to which philosophy cannot give meaning despite its evident universality, through the experience of a profusion of beings in their essences -- divine, human and natural -- to arrive finally at the awareness of the relations between beings, relations not of theory but of love, relations that cannot be described but are experienced, relations which have nothing to do with the category of relation but are always particular. And the critical or initial form of relation, for human beings, is the relation with other human beings. The love between man and God is neighbor love, for “the love of God for Man is the fact that Man loves his neighbor” (EDM 129/ 267/ 191) and “the response of man to God’s love is the love of the neighbor” (EDM 129/ 268/192). The Jewish law is love, for only love can command, and love always commands love. But love, though it commands, does not force or bind lovers into a totality; it is an infinite possibility, the possibility of a *me* learning to say *you* to a *him*. This conception of love is outside of Hegel’s comprehension. Hegel reduces the individual to a movement in the historical system, and a movement in the system is not capable of love. Only individuals can love, and only individuals can form a religious community. The key to understanding Judaism (and Christianity, though Levinas often omits to mention it since it is not his topic) can be phrased as a syllogism: religion is ethical relation, ethical relation is love and life, therefore religion is love and life. That human beings love is equivalent to their standing outside of the Hegelian framework, and is equivalent to their Judaism.

The question of love, like the question of the nature of religion, is taken up by Misrahi in the debates. In response to Levinas-Rosenzweig’s claim that Judaism is the religion of love, Misrahi argues that Judaism is one of the least loving of religions; on the

contrary, it is contractual. In support of this claim, he alludes to several biblical passages on the covenant, and, when prodded by Levinas, who suggests to him that the texts he has chosen are innocuous compared to some he might have chosen, he extends his claim, stating: "I said contract, but I was thinking extortion" (EDM, 140, 149). Levinas' response treats the relation between the Bible and the Talmud. "Judaism," he explains, "reads the Bible only through the Talmud." This allows the Jewish reader, he continues, to take in the Bible, not as a diverse collection of stories or sayings, but as an entirety, since "each page of the Talmud thinks the whole of the Bible at once." What the Talmud adds to the Bible is the "spirit" of the stories, which is to say, the ethics which underlies them. And it offers the spirit by means of a hermeneutic which sounds shocking to those trained in modern schools of biblical criticism; in effect, the Talmud takes what does not fit and reinterprets it until it does. "We claim," Levinas says, "that the primary evidence is that the Torah is a law of absolute goodness and justice. Consequently, particular texts must be treated to the light of what is essential and not the inverse. It is the tradition which gives to these obscure [biblical] texts, closed, and often more scandalous than you think, their meaning, and which restores order." Having explained the Talmudic hermeneutic, Levinas turns to "the problem of love."

I have been, for my part, very embarrassed by the frequency of this word in my exposition; it falls heavily from the mouth of a Jew because the Jew is not habituated to naming the absolute without reserve, and the prohibition against pronouncing the name of God in all letters expresses to him a congenital delicacy. There is, certainly, in Rosenzweig, a great familiarity with this word, as in the Western Jews who cite the Gospel in an absolutely spontaneous manner.¹⁹⁴ But the Jewish Bible speaks of absolute love when it seems to speak of other things, and this is not only out of reserve. Judaism is true because it doesn't preach in the ether

¹⁹⁴It is incidental, but somewhat interesting in light of what we shall shortly say about Levinas treatment of the Rosenzweigian analysis of the relation between Judaism and Christianity, to note that Levinas is himself one of these 'Western Jews.' Any reader of his philosophical works must be aware of how often he cites the gospel and alludes to Christian images. Indeed, at times he seems to envision himself a modern Jewish Jesus, universalizing the Christian images or ideas as Jesus is said to have universalized the Jewish images or ideas. In any case, the frequency of his references to things like 'the resurrection of the son' (TI, throughout) -- always a reference to the subject's relation with the other who appears as his *own* son -- deserves scholarly attention.

but in the concrete of the real. Recall the book of Jonah -- it is a book where there is a question of all other things besides love. But it is a book on the love of the neighbor, and above all on the love one must have for enemies. Jonah refuses the message which must save Ninevah. Why? asks the Talmud. Because Ninevah will destroy Israel and Jonah, the prophet, knows it. The love of enemies which God teaches to Jonah and to us is hard; it is mortally difficult. It is our way to teach it and believe it. (EDM 149)

Thus is Judaism defended as the religion of what Levinas-Rosenzweig calls love, and Levinas speaking on his own would call ethics. And if we recall the previous year's intervention, we are not surprised to find that it is in the Talmud's reading of the Bible, rather than in the Bible itself, that one discovers a conception of Judaism in which it becomes equivalent to love or ethics. The proto-anti-Hegelian thrust which, as we just saw, is the defining core of Levinas-Rosenzweig's religion, is found, first and foremost, in the Talmud, or in other texts read with talmudically trained eyes. The concept of desacralization is here, for the first time, mobilized as part of the argument against Hegel which drives the lecture as whole, a phenomenon which emerges more strongly in "Messianic Texts."

But we should be slightly wary of this particular example of desacralization. Does the Talmud really reveal that love is the subject and content of the Bible? Perhaps, to some extent it does. But surely Levinas' reticence about using the word love is *also* talmudically grounded -- and this suggests that to some extent the Talmud does *not* reveal that love is the subject and content of the Bible, that to some extent it is not desacralizing the Bible, or that it continues to contain sacral elements. To the extent that the Talmud is not desacralizing the Bible, Levinas must be understood in his response to Misrahi to be desacralizing the Talmud.¹⁹⁵ And this is a process which he has already begun during the lecture proper, for, as we will see, he concludes his argument there by asserting that Judaism -- and not merely Rosenzweig's post-Hegelian Judaism but Judaism in general, meaning rabbinic

¹⁹⁵It should be noted that the fact that the Talmud desacralizes the Bible is only part of Levinas' justification for desacralizing, at least in this instance. He has proved, with the example of Jonah and the examples offered the previous year, that the Talmud does desacralize the Bible. But this work is continued, profoundly, in Rosenzweig's *Star*. Arguably, it is the *Star*, even more so than the Talmud, which has taught Levinas that the whole of the Bible has love as its content.

Judaism -- is a-historical and thus anti-Hegelian. He is hotly challenged on the point.

c. Standing outside of history

Levinas closes the central portion of the lecture by taking up Rosenzweig's description of the interdependent relation of Christianity and Judaism. I will not summarize this now famous conception except to recall what is perhaps its central point, that Christians participate in history while Jews do not. "The Jews," says Levinas-Rosenzweig, "are strangers to the history that has no hold on them. The Jewish community already has Eternity" (EDM 131/ 270/ 194). By this understanding, instead of according significance to events on the basis of their placement in the progress of linear history, Jews bring an eternal significance out of each temporal event, a singular significance which is expressed by the pattern of the ritual structure according to which the community lives. The yearly repetition of fasts and feasts is a reenactment of the natural structure of the day -- morning, noon and evening -- and also of the three movements of the Star -- Creation, Revelation and Redemption. The cyclical nature of the ritual year operates as a desacralization: it reveals the brokenness of linear history and offers an alternative basis for life and thought. The Jewish ritual year stands apart from history and inaugurates eternity.

The command to resist historical necessity is the idea with which Levinas concludes the lecture. Once he has spoken about Rosenzweig's life, proceeded to a description of some of the key elements of his thought, and then returned to finish the biography by describing Rosenzweig's death, the lecture would appear to be finished. In fact, though, it has not yet reached its culmination. All of the philosophy he has expounded, he now says, was necessary primarily in order to raise the critical question: "does Judaism still exist?" For Judaism is threatened today, he argues, by a new opponent -- not Christianity, or atheism, or philosophical science, but Hegelianism. Hegelianism attacks Judaism's "most ancient claim," the claim to a stand apart from the political history of the world and freely to

judge its events without regard to their apparent internal logic. Hegelianism, “the exaltation of the judgment of history as the ultimate jurisdiction of every being, and the affirmation that history is the measure of all things” undermines any claim to eternity in an event or an other, or indeed, in a people like Judaism. According to Hegel, “what is eternal is the universal history itself which inherits the heritage of dead peoples,” and thus, for him, “the particularity of a people is equivalent to its finitude” (EDM 135/ 278/ 199). The reason the Hegelian attack is so strong today, Levinas suggests, is because it is only recently that the extraordinary benefits of modern universalism have become evident. How can Jews stand apart from the contemporary history which has provided all of us with freedom and comfort? Why would we want to? We are being assimilated -- and our erstwhile desire to stand apart is being revealed as subjective fantasy. All of us, says Levinas, fall prey to the temptations of modernity. We are preoccupied with finding our place in the meaning and direction of history, or more precisely, “with not finding ourselves opposed to the meaning and direction of history” (EDM 136/ 278-9/ 200). But, he insists, to be a Jew, even today, is to resist the temptation to draw the meaning of people and events from a conception of the meaning of history. History threatens the other, and above all the Jews. Thus the Jew has been and must continue to be the preserver of the idea critical to the continuing existence of human relation, the idea that one must stand outside of history. It is at this point that Levinas describes structuralism or indifferentism as a further, and perhaps even more tempting, degeneration of the modern comprehension.

Most of the comments in the discussion focus on the issue of the meaning of history. There are two main attacks, the first led by Jean Wahl who is, if possible, more anti-historicist than Levinas-Rosenzweig, and the second by M.W. Rabi, who argues in favour of the idea of a meaning of history.

Wahl opens the debate with two interconnected arguments. He begins by referring to Levinas-Rosenzweig’s analysis of the Jewish calendar and suggesting that it

compromises his a-historical stance.

That one must stand free from events no one is more persuaded than I. That which you condemn, I condemn just as energetically. But in spite of everything, what remains? What remains is what the Christians call sacred history. I would like to say that you erase all of history . . . but implicitly at least, you reintroduce it -- I do not say surreptitiously, but implicitly. Thus, in a sense, I go much further than you.

To this he adds the question of why, given that to stand outside of history ought to be a feature of all existence, Levinas wishes to call it distinctly Jewish? In his view, he says, “there is only truth.” Thus, if it is true that one ought to “say ‘no’ to history,” all human beings should say it. But, Wahl concludes, he “will not therefore say that all human beings should be Jewish” (EDM 138).

Both of Wahl’s points are well taken, but the first is more easy to treat than the second. The cyclical calendar is not intended as a new sacred grove, but as a breaking of the Hegelian sacred grove. Neither Levinas nor Rosenzweig understands history to be a process of eternal return any more than a process of gradually augmenting fulfillment. The cyclical calendar is not a plan which replaces a plan, but rather a device for promoting a kind of anamnesis. Somewhat later in the session Arnold Mandel argues, correctly I think, that Rosenzweig and Levinas have not spoken for sacred history (which he calls a “profoundly Catholic” concept), but for something that might be called holiness.

Holiness is precisely not a history in the evolutionary sense of the word. Holiness excludes and dominates history. It has its very real presence at each instant, like a kind of incarnation. So it is presence and much more than history. It is an incessant stream and an eternal presence. (EDM 143)

Levinas defends himself similarly in his final remarks.

The rhythm of the Jewish year is the mode of existence which preserves the person against all the glamour of events and of human beings. The person living, really individual and living, living the eternal life according to the terminology of Rosenzweig, places himself in the religious community. Religious community, in distinction to the Hegelian or political totality . . . is for Rosenzweig a promotion of the person and not his invisibility in the system. (EDM 147-8)

Certainly, then, Levinas rejects any understanding of sacred history, any understanding by

which history, as an entirety, has a purpose or a meaning.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless Wahl is right to point to the resurrection of sacred history as the danger of adopting a cyclical understanding. Levinas-Rosenzweig uses the symbol of the cycle in an effort to reclaim the broken or diachronous instant brought to me by the other, but it may be that the cycle does not actually offer ‘a promotion of the person’ but rather precisely ‘his invisibility in the [new] system.’ It must be said that nowhere outside of his writings on Rosenzweig does Levinas call the Jewish understanding of history cyclical. Moreover, in “Messianic Texts” he suggests that the Hegelian linear conception of history, which he is attacking in all these lectures, can itself be seen as presenting an ‘infernal cycle.’ We will look at this passage later; for now it is sufficient to note that Wahl’s point is well taken, and that Levinas later rethinks the question, perhaps on the basis of Wahl’s interjection, and in all likelihood rejects the Rosenzweigian idea that cyclical history breaks linear history.

But Wahl’s second critique is more difficult to treat. Arnold Mandel makes an attempt to address it, arguing that it is quite legitimate to say that all human beings should be Jewish. “I believe,” he says,

that every kind of conduct which has a pretension to value dignity must in some way proselytize. According to the Jews, in effect, all human beings should be Jewish, in the sense that the term [Jewish] shows the way a human being ought to comport himself. And if a human being comports himself thus, he is called Jewish. (EDM 144)

But this is not at all the gist of the response later given by Levinas. On the contrary, Levinas reasserts Rosenzweig’s scheme in which it is necessary only for Jews to stand outside of history, and equally incumbent on Christians to enter history. To this he adds that

in order to judge history, you do not necessarily have to be Jewish, but it is Judaism -- by virtue of its concrete existence -- which has perhaps made it possible to be free of history, without necessarily being Jewish oneself. It is perhaps the subsistence

¹⁹⁶However, in certain texts he does reclaim the term ‘sacred history’ and redefine it as the history of ethical encounters, a move we will look at briefly in the next chapter.

of Judaism, in the empirical sense of the term, that still guarantees this freedom. This empirical presence is one of the coordinates of the Western consciousness. (EDM 148)

Because the Jews do not enter history, they make it possible for the Christians to remain free enough of history that they, like the Jews, can stand in judgment over it.

But this does not entirely solve the problem, which is, in fact, quite a sticky one. We must begin by acknowledging the fact that, since we are on Rosenzweig's ground, we are speaking only about Judaism and Christianity. Rosenzweig does not approve of Islam and does not treat the Eastern religions, and thus his theory of religion effectively divides the religious world -- or the world of truth -- into two camps, Judaism and Christianity (the latter of which also has dealings with those who are more or less outside the world of truth, the 'pagans'). The question Wahl raises, in Rosenzweigian terms, is how the distinction between Jew and Christian is to be mapped onto the distinction between particular and universal. Of course, no one present at this Colloquium is likely to propose a Hegelian mapping: no one will argue that Judaism is a particularity which must be subsumed into the more universal and synthetic Christianity. But the Rosenzweigian mapping, in which Christianity and Judaism are two particularities which together offer a universal truth is also attacked. First, Wahl proposes a mapping in which both Jews and Christians should come to the awareness of the universal necessity of standing *against* Hegel and saying 'no' to history. Second, Mandel (ostensibly arguing against Wahl) points out that not only should everyone stand against history but that this means that everyone should be Jewish. And third, underneath all of this, is the fact that Levinas-Rosenzweig has suggested (and this is perhaps Levinas himself coming to the fore) not only that everyone *should* say no to history, but that everyone *does* say no to history insofar as love or relation persists always outside of and prior to historical determinism. This debate may shed some light on why Levinas, in all of the works on Judaism written after these discussions, does indeed come close to adopting the Wahl-Mandel position and, indeed, taking it a step further. Judaism,

in the majority of Levinas' works, is the antithesis of systematization and especially historicism, and all human beings insofar as they stand outside of avoidable totalities or systems can be said to be enacting Judaism, or indeed, to be Jews.

But on the occasion of the delivery of "Between Two Worlds," Levinas is presenting Rosenzweig's ideas and feels it necessary to defend them. He is on difficult ground. As we have seen, he speaks of Rosenzweig's 'religion' -- referring both to Judaism and to Christianity -- as the conception which ruptures the totality philosophy has erected of God, World and Man. But he has also said that only Judaism stands entirely outside of history, and implied therefore that only Judaism offers the ground for a rupture of the specifically Hegelian totality. If Christianity is unlike Judaism in that it participates, to a certain extent, in history, how is he to avoid charging it with Hegelianism? Claude Vigée appears to hold that such a charge has actually been brought. He comments that

with regard to history, Christianity, as Rosenzweig has said, consists of marching towards a being, towards a Parousia for human beings, a Parousia which has already taken place, theoretically, through the incarnation of Christ. But we are not saved. It is a march in the desert. Christianity, you said and repeated, is proselytizing, it wants to encompass the world, history, etc. This is the modern conception of history, it follows directly from Christianity. (EDM 145)

Vigée is arguing for a direct connection between the Christian conception of providence and the Hegelian conception of historical necessity as guided by the cunning of reason.

Moreover, he is arguing that the connection is implicit in Levinas-Rosenzweig's argument.

He also holds that Levinas-Rosenzweig has described Judaism as the one form of understanding which does not commit the error of postulating an over-arching historical or providential scheme. He explains:

During your exposition you made a digression. You cited a magnificent passage which is ultimately the key to all this: *Vous êtes aujourd'hui dans ce lieu*. This is to say, we are today in this place, here. . . . The Jewish conception of time is that the time of manifestation is always now; . . . it is always now and for always now; . . . even as space is always manifested, time manifests being always now. . . . I believe that this is quite right; it is our principle insight. . . . Eternity is in time. (EDM 145)

Then, in polar distinction to the thrust of Vigée's intervention, Starobinski argues that both Christianity and Judaism are Hegelian.

This axially of time and irreversibility of time which has been called something entirely Christian . . . has always seemed to me to be where Christianity held onto Judaism; after all, the revelation of the Decalogue is an event with the same character of decisive apparition after which things are not as before. It seems to be simply that this progressivity, this character of tending towards an end, was what Christianity owed to Jewish messianism. I don't know if I'm correct historically, but it seems to me that Hegel and the philosophy of history are less separated from Judaism than was said a while ago. (EDM 146)

The problem is thus complicated and re complicated in the course of the discussion.

Levinas' response does not provide a decisive solution. He agrees with Vigée to an extent -- as he must in order to maintain, contra Wahl, that Judaism and Christianity have different roles to play vis-à-vis history -- but expresses his agreement by saying little more than: "M. Claude Vigée was right to underline a difference between the Jewish institution of time and the Christian one" (EDM 147). Then, later in the discussion, he makes what may be an attempt to redeem Christianity from the charge of Hegelianism, saying that Christians have their own experiential access to eternity.

Religion is not only Judaism, it is also Christianity. Rosenzweig thinks that Judeo-Christianity is the axis of the world. . . . [His] analyses (which I could not summarize) of the manner in which the cycle -- the anticipation of eternity in time -- is accomplished through the Jewish and Christian experience sustain, at least in [his] view, this fundamental character of the eternal life of Judaism and the eternal path of Christianity. (EDM 148)

Thus, in this lecture, Levinas maintains a Rosenzweigian mapping of Judaism and Christianity onto universal and particular. Both religions are particularities which must be maintained and which cannot be synthesized.

The main difficulty here with respect to Judaism -- laying aside the matter of the relation of Christianity to Hegelianism -- is part of the general problem of parts and wholes. If Levinas agrees with Wahl and Mandel, he is making an argument that all human beings or the whole of humanity should take a stance against history, and by dictating to the all he is perhaps erecting a totality. If, on the other hand, he continues to defend Rosenzweig, he is

adopting a kind of universal scheme in which two parts have different roles to play vis-a-vis history, and thus still dictating to the all and erecting a different kind of totality. The impulse to defend Rosenzweig contra Wahl and Mandel is intensified by the fact that if the whole of humanity were to stand against history there would be no history to stand against and Levinas' analysis would lose its meaning. But this means that his account of Rosenzweig depends on understanding Judaism as a part rather than a whole -- and yet a part is a part of a whole and therefore, according to his philosophical comprehension, necessarily an element of a totality. The move which he makes in "Messianic Texts" and subsequent works, perhaps partly in response to the Wahl-Mandel barrage, is to stop speaking of parts and wholes at all. In "Messianic Texts," as we shall see, he begins to develop the concept of the universal-each, a concept opposed to the universal-all which is the whole of humanity or the sum of its parts.

It is not until roughly half way through the debate that a voice is raised on behalf of progressive history. M.W. Rabi is surprised, he says, at the general affirmation that the essence of Judaism is to be outside of history. For a long time, he continues, we were 'objects' of history -- or pawns in the historical game -- now we are 'subjects' -- or players. Without becoming subjects of history we would have had no emancipation from the ghettos, and we would have no Zionism. The idea that Jews should live outside of history is not only an error, but a version of escapism; it is "the refusal to make choices when confronted with the problems which interest the modern world." Either our debates here "have absolutely no importance" or else we must see ourselves as "one of the currents of history, participate with other collectivities . . . in the gestation of the new world, and risk our lives and our doctrine in the face of the problems which concern it" (EDM 144-5). Rabi may well express the reaction of many people to Levinas' a-historicist stance. If one says 'no' to history, if one assumes that history is not progressing -- or cannot progress -- towards better societies or understandings, what is the motivation for acting in the world?

But Levinas is not at all denying action in the world, or the efficacy of such action. He does not stand against the attempt to create a better world, only against the conviction that the world *is* getting better. Attempts at betterment have their place, as long as they are enacted without being understood as elements in the process of history-at-large. He begins his response by speaking of a “misunderstanding.” Existence outside of history “does not at all mean, as M.W. Rabi thought, the comfort of neutrality, of a wait-and-see policy, or non-engagement, the ivory tower.” Rather, he repeats, it is to refuse to identify events and others by a function defined by history and to retain the capacity to judge them. Existence outside of history does not put an end to action. On the contrary, it is accounts of the meaning of history which, taken to the limit, “would prohibit us from thinking or speaking.” Free thought and speech breaks the force of the overarching structure: “to think and to speak is the interruption of the course of history” (EDM 147).

By the end of the discussion it is clear that there are several difficulties that require further address. This may be partly due to the fact that Levinas’ idea that the Talmud desacralizes the Bible, presenting the ethical experience which underlies its images, is not raised until Levinas’ response, which comes at the end of the discussion. Several of the participants in the colloquium are unwilling to accept the here-and-now -- the eternity -- of Levinas-Rosenzweig’s Judaism, and want, on the contrary, to preserve more sacralized conceptions: ontological conceptions of religion as faith in a locatable divine, and historical conceptions of Judaism as a part of the progressive scheme of world-history. Levinas must show further how it is that the Talmud desacralizes; he must vindicate his definition of Judaism as a-historical and clarify the nature of its a-historicism. Only then will he be able to claim that his argument against Hegel and Kojève is a Jewish argument. Bearing on the question is the problem raised by Wahl of whether and to what extent Judaism is a universal or a universally necessary particular, and whether this status is compatible with an anti-Hegelianism. Levinas must resolve or at least shed some light on this problem as well.

Wahl's issue, already much discussed, is raised twice more in the course of the debate. First, Dr. Fouks argues, contra Vigée and also contra Levinas, that the only reason Jews do not participate in world-history is because they are rejected by the world-historical community for following God's laws, including the laws which speak of a sacred history or providence that "guides us to the end of the world and to the final community" (EDM 142); Fouks is entirely unwilling to accept a desacralized or desacralizing Judaism. Second, and finally, Mme. Amado Lévy-Valensi attempts a resolution, suggesting that there may be a Jewish "history of fulfillment" -- a history apart from history, linked to eternity -- which is still not a sacred history in the strictest providential sense. "The history which we challenge," she says, "is the history of fatality, of a material determinism of which the meaning is not tied to human action. But there is a history of fulfillment which is creation, a newness, a Bergsonian time if you will, and which is itself messianism" (EDM 146). The nature of the history of fulfillment or messianic history of which she speaks is not immediately clear. What is clear, however, is that in order to complete the discussion of the Jewish conception of history, Levinas must take up the question of the nature of Jewish messianism. If he can draw from the texts of the Talmud which deal with messianism (and, thus, one would think, with the meaning of history) an a-historical comprehension, he will have shown most adequately that Judaism, conceived through the Talmud, is a desacralized religion. But to take the texts which seem, more than any others, to deal with a providential conception and to show that they are a-sacral or a-historical is not an easy task.

II. Messianic Texts

In "Messianic Texts" Levinas exegetes a number of talmudic passages in an effort to complete the argument against Hegel and Kojève.¹⁹⁷ Here we are presented with a

¹⁹⁷The passages are from *Sanhedrin* 99a and 97b-98a.

profoundly desacralized comprehension, a comprehension both a-ontological and a-historical. The desacralization appears under two aspects. First, Levinas explains during a digression that he understands the words of the rabbis to have as much to do with our time as with their own; indeed, he makes a joke at Hegel's expense, claiming that the rabbis, having already thought the homogenization of the technological modern state, had, in effect, absolute knowledge. In other words, Levinas holds that the Talmud is intended to be read with reference to the reader's experience rather than as a historical document. This seems innocuous enough, but it becomes important, and perhaps more controversial, when it is understood as the justification for the second aspect of de-historicization: reading the text's own images and meaning as a-historical and a-ontological. This is more problematic. Having been introduced to the concept of desacralization by the examples given in Levinas' first intervention and offered further explanation of it in "Between Two Worlds," we are now ready to consider the question of its legitimacy more closely. Did the rabbis intend to speak a-historically and a-ontologically? Who is desacralizing here? The question -- at least as far as it concerns the de-historicizing aspect of desacralization -- can be taken up fruitfully through a comparison between two accounts of the a- or anti-historical nature of the rabbinic hermeneutic, Levinas' and Jacob Neusner's.

In a recent article, Neusner has argued that the rabbis understood meaning not in terms of history but in terms of what he calls "paradigms," that is, ordered sets of symbols.¹⁹⁸ Rabbinic paradigms, according to Neusner, were based originally on the narrative or historical accounts of the Bible, but in becoming paradigms were denuded of historical status so they became timeless models which could be used to impose order and meaning on subsequent events. The Bible, he contends, is "a set of writings of a one-sidedly historical character," and the rabbis subverted that history when they reinterpreted

¹⁹⁸Jacob Neusner, "Paradigmatic versus Historical Thinking: The Case of Rabbinic Judaism," *History and Theory* 36/ 3 (October 1997): 353-377. This article was brought to my attention by Wendell Dietrich of Brown University.

the Bible “in an utterly a-historical way.”¹⁹⁹ The rabbinic practice of a-historical reinterpretation, he continues, came about as a result of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. When the first Temple was destroyed (in the sixth century BCE), the event was seen by the Bible as a world-historical one-time event, a radical break with the past. But the second time, precisely because it was the second time, destruction appeared as a repetition which could provide a certain continuity with the past. “Paradigm replaced history because what had taken place the first time as unique and unprecedented took place the second time in precisely the same pattern and therefore formed an episode in a series.”²⁰⁰ Moreover, the second destruction threw into question providential notions that had previously been taken for granted. In short, the event shattered any conception of history as leading linearly towards a telos thus suggesting the need for a new a-historical or non-linear comprehension, and at the same time provided such a comprehension by becoming the first paradigm, the first example of a repeated set of symbols. Like Levinas, then, Neusner feels that the Bible is de-historicized in the post-destruction rabbinic writings, especially the Talmud. No doubt Levinas would object to certain parts of Neusner’s analysis. For one thing, Levinas suggests that the Bible is not a fundamentally historical document -- that it was always intended, as it were, to be read with rabbinic eyes. For another, he might point out that Neusner’s account of rabbinic a-historicism is itself historicist account, and add the idea that the rabbis were blessed with a genius not determined into existence by the event of the destruction of the Temple. Nevertheless, we can find some support in Neusner’s argument for Levinas’ idea that the Talmud de-historicizes the Bible.

But though Neusner and Levinas share an understanding of the rabbis as a-historical, they mean somewhat different things by it. On the central point they are compatible. Neusner (perhaps overstating the case somewhat) says that “the paradigm

¹⁹⁹Neusner, “Paradigmatic Thinking,” 371.

²⁰⁰Neusner, “Paradigmatic Thinking,” 375.

obliterates distinctions between past, present and future, between here and now and then and there.”²⁰¹ By this he means that the paradigms lessen the importance of linear history, allowing the rabbis to allocate significance to events based not on whether they are world-historical but on whether they seem to fit and reinforce the paradigm. This is analogous to Levinas’ understanding of rabbinic a-historicism, by which a-historicism and the de-historicization of biblical images is an attack on an understanding that regards linear history as the source of the meaning of events. But Neusner also argues (perhaps with some self-contradiction) that the paradigms which ‘obliterated linear history’ were often used to predict the course of the future. A paradigm, he writes, is a “model -- the past that is present -- [which] accounts for how things now are, and also explains what is going to happen in time to come.”²⁰² Here he departs from Levinas, for whom the rabbinic subversion of history implies that they do not -- or cannot, or must not -- speculate about the end of history. “What does the end of history matter?” say Levinas’ rabbis with their God. They judge each person and event in the here and now. The difference between Neusner and Levinas is manifest again in their opinions of cyclical thinking. Neusner holds that though cyclical thinking was the great temptation after the destruction of the Temple, Jews could never accept such a comprehension, remaining tied, at least to some extent, to the biblical conviction that history was going somewhere. But according to Levinas-Rosenzweig, Judaism does at least partly adopt a cyclical comprehension in the institution of its ritual year. This adoption supports Levinas’ idea that, according to the Talmud, history is not going anywhere, at least nowhere that is within the bounds of legitimate speculation.

To the extent that Levinas and Neusner are in agreement, we can assume that their analysis is correct. The rabbis are focused on present experience at the expense of linear history, and they employ hermeneutical schemes to break the idea of linear history as it

²⁰¹Neusner, “Paradigmatic Thinking,” 354.

²⁰²Neusner, “Paradigmatic Thinking,” 362.

appears in the Bible; in other words, they de-historicize the Bible and to this extent desacralize it. But the question on which Neusner and Levinas disagree remains open. Are the de-historicized biblical symbols used to predict the future, as Neusner thinks? Or, as Levinas thinks, are the very symbols which appear to treat the end of time being used consciously to express the present? For this will be the basis of Levinas' interpretation of the passages from the end of *Tractate Sanhedrin*: that when the rabbis speak of the end times they are expressing experience in the diachronous here and now. To Levinas, in order to break the back of a theory in which linear history is paramount, it is necessary to destroy entirely the idea of a judgment made by history or a meaning of history -- and thus to abandon the idea of an end of history -- and this, he holds, is what the rabbis were about. From a historian's point of view, it may be necessary to side at least in part with Neusner. While the rabbis, good phenomenologists that they were, were undoubtedly thinking primarily about the experience of human beings in this world, at least some of them were also speculating with utmost seriousness on the end of the world as we know it and the advent of a new ontological and historical dispensation. Levinas, in distinction, moves his reading of the talmudic texts on messianism gradually but surely always towards its a-ontological, a-historical culminating claim: that the messianic era or world is not a location in time or place; that it is here already for those who choose it; that messianism is ethical responsibility; that "the messiah is me; to be me is to be the messiah. . . . everyone is the messiah" (DF 89). The voices in the debate which present the historical and ontological case are heard, but eventually passed by along the way to the concluding claim: there is no historical, ontological messianic era; there is no meaning of history. We may, however, speculate that Levinas' reading is not an attempt to determine the spectrum of views held by the rabbis as historical figures. Indeed, this is where the first aspect of his desacralized hermeneutic becomes critical: Levinas' lecture itself has as its purpose philosophically to challenge our desire to take a historical viewpoint. We will keep this in mind, and return at

the end of the chapter to the question of the legitimacy of his hermeneutic, at which point the matter may appear in a clearer light.

I will discuss here only a few passages from “Messianic Texts” from the perspective of its culminating claims: that ‘I’ am the messiah and that there is no meaning of history. These few passages should be enough to show that, as I argued above, Levinas’ battle with Hegel is also a battle with Kojévian indifferentism, with the utterly open stance of the egalitarian citizen of the universal and homogeneous state. For though Levinas delights in the lack of conclusiveness of the rabbinic give and take, he does not draw from it the idea that one opinion is as good as another, but shows rather how an ethically decisive truth emerges from the interplay. A first glance at the lecture suggests that he begins with a neutral exegesis, clarifying the poles and positions in the rabbinic discourse and refusing to take sides, and then moves gradually toward eisegesis, taking sides (or even inventing sides) as the argument against the Hegelians becomes more and more explicit. A closer reading, however, reveals his guiding hand there all the time, breaking open the text in a way which is profoundly directional, a way which moves always toward the culminating claims. Levinas’ openness is thus not arbitrary but directional, and his rupture of the talmudic text is a structured rupture. Moreover, the text’s closing claims themselves constitute another structured rupture: the rupture of history and being by ethics. At four points in the lecture he argues or implies that Hegel was right, within the boundaries of Hegel’s own ontological and historical logic. It is these boundaries, therefore, which must be seen through or ruptured in the name of ethics. The hermeneutical structured rupture opens upon a philosophical structured rupture.

The first passage Levinas discusses records a debate between Johanan and Samuel.

Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said, in Rabbi Johanan’s name: “All the prophets prophesied only about the messianic era. As for the world to come, no eye has seen apart from you, O Lord, what is prepared for the one that waits for you.”

There also exists on this point an opposing opinion, that of Samuel. Samuel says: "Between this world and the messianic era there is no difference other than the end of the 'yoke of the nations' -- the end of political violence and oppression." (DF 60)²⁰³

I will skip over Johanan's distinction between the messianic era and the world to come and move directly to his debate with Samuel about the nature of the messianic era. Levinas' interpretation of the debate is straightforward. Johanan sees the messianic era as the institution in the world of everything good the prophets prophesied, thus the end of all injustice both 'social' (which Levinas uses here to mean interpersonal) and political, while Samuel sees the messianic era only as the end of political injustice. This interpretation lays the ground for Levinas' comments.

Johanan, he begins, believes that it is possible to have "a pure and gracious spiritual life" in which difficulty in the form of need or moral dilemma is done away with. He envisages a life in some way stripped of difference, of struggle and of drama, a life in which the other will no longer be the different one but a 'companion,' and there will be "no more professions, only arts" (DF 62-3). In effect, Johanan is an idealist. Moreover, Levinas implicitly links him to Kojève, who likewise holds it possible for there to be a society with no radical difference between beings, a society in which there will be full equality and mutuality; no more conflict, only free play. Then, in distinction to the Kojévian Johanan, Levinas offers up a relatively Levinasian Samuel. Samuel, according to Levinas, would like to see a world rid of political injustice or inequality but knows that interpersonal injustice, or inequality between subject and other, must continue to exist because the root of goodness is the gift to the other. This is not, as Levinas points out, to say that we must keep the poor poor so as to be able to give them charity. It is rather to say that difference is the mark of

²⁰³The Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud renders this passage as follows: "R. Hiyya b. Abba said in R. Johanan's name: All the prophets prophesied [all the good things] only in respect of the Messianic era; but as for the world to come, 'the eye hath not seen, O Lord, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him.' Now he disagrees with Samuel who said: This world differs from [that of] the days of the Messiah only in respect to the servitude to [foreign] powers."

human life, and that the different one, the other, is always worthy of whatever one can give. Unlike Johanan, then, Samuel “knows the permanent effort of renewal which the spiritual life demands” (DF 63). He is the realist to Johanan’s idealist;²⁰⁴ he stands for difference where Johanan stands for commonality.

But despite the fact that Samuel appears Levinasian, Levinas refuses to take his side in the argument, saying instead that the two positions are poles “between which thought oscillates eternally” (DF 64). What does Levinas mean by this? We can begin by speculating that he wishes to preserve something from both sides of the debate. From Samuel’s position he takes, first, the idea that human interaction cannot be made perfect, that it cannot be radically or ontologically transformed in history, and, second, the ground for this idea: that poverty and inequality are the foundations of ethical action, i.e. that ethics is not found in a Johananian commonality but in difference. From Johanan’s position he takes the idea -- echoing Rabi’s defense of ‘subjects of history’ from the previous year’s discussion -- that we should nevertheless struggle for a better world, and even perhaps for a world where there is more equality and more commonality. The two poles must be maintained in tension: we should strive (with Johanan and contra Samuel) for commonality while recalling (with Samuel and contra Johanan) that such striving is conditioned by fundamental difference, or, in Levinas’ more usual terms, we should make a totality of equality without forgetting that it is ruptured by inequality. But already we run into a problem, namely, that this whole understanding seems already to be expressed by Samuel. Samuel suggests that equality and commonality are the proper modes for politics, while inequality, poverty and asymmetry are the proper modes for interpersonal relation: in other

²⁰⁴I wish to avoid any crude associations of naiveté or belligerence associated with the term “realist.” I intend, on the contrary, to evoke an echo of the term “empiricist,” which Levinas used of Rosenzweig in “Between Two Worlds” (EDM 126/ 263/ 188). But I do not use the term *empiricist* here because that term implies the awareness of a metaphysical element in reality, which, I shall argue, is missing in Samuel’s understanding. Samuel, as Levinas renders him, does not fully grasp that part of the structure of reality which is the effect of the desire for the beyond.

words, he seems to allow for striving towards a third-level equality while preserving rupture on the level of the two. And this is precisely Levinas. We must therefore seek another, deeper answer to the question of why Levinas refuses to take either side in the debate.

I believe what holds him back is that the entire debate as it stands is not quite (or not as yet) situated on the level on which he himself prefers to think. Johanan seems certainly to be speaking of a historical, ontological messianic era in which everything will be common. Samuel has laid the ground for a de-historicization and de-ontologization of the idea of the messianic era by suggesting that the status quo, in which not everything is common, will and should in part remain, and thus that there is to be no complete ontological transformation in history. But Samuel still to some extent links human commonality with the human relation to God; in other words, he seems to argue that messianism resides in political commonality rather than in interpersonal difference. And while this is not the utter opposite of Levinas' way of thinking, it is a shift in emphasis, since Levinas, to a very great extent, understands the human relation to God, and thus messianism, as an aspect of interpersonal difference. The shift means that the messianic era as described by Samuel is in fact close to the self-understanding of the liberal regime, where 'the good' is defined by the fact that everyone is equal politically, and the fact that inequalities persist in the private realm is irrelevant. If I am correct about Levinas' uneasiness with the goals of liberalism -- if I am correct to say that, according to Levinas, the political equality imposed by liberalism tends to distract one from interpersonal inequalities -- then it becomes amply clear that Levinas cannot quite take Samuel's side, or at any rate not without reservations. In short, if Johanan is a Kojévian idealist, then so, to some extent, is Samuel: for according to both rabbis the messianic era has to do with a teleological commonality; even if Samuel's teleological commonality is to some extent compromised or ruptured and thus more Levinasian.

Thus while Samuel has begun to show the way the Johananian understanding might be de-historicized and de-ontologized, he has not gone far enough; he is still speaking of a

partial perfection, a partial telos, a partial position of rest or wholeness or harmony. What is missing, even in Samuel's position, is the Levinasian notion of rupture, by which not just interpersonal relation but also politics is never allowed to come to rest or to assume it has achieved perfection. That Samuel sees commonality as the good and understands that good to be *partially* achievable by an ontological transformation in history, means that he does not provide an adequate corrective to Johanan, who sees commonality as the good and understands that good to be *entirely* achievable by an ontological transformation in history. A Levinasian messianism would, in a sense, be more like Samuel's position than Samuel's itself: it would be uneasy about any imposition of equality, either between two people who would then become 'companions,' or between the citizens of a political body; it would hold that such equalities are imposed on the differences in reality (admittedly, often with good intentions and relatively good results) and thus in a fundamental sense at odds with the real differences which continues to underlie them. It would be a position which, while preserving a little of the Johananian revolutionary spirit, holds that there can be no radical wiping away of difference -- that is, no ontological transformation in history of either interpersonal relations or politics -- and thus that attempts at such ontological, historical transformation are violent, unjust, and grotesque. Levinas' refusal to take one of the two sides against the other bespeaks a respect for rabbinic openness, but not a mindless or neutral respect. It is not the case that Levinas is content with whatever the sages say simply because it is said by the sages, nor is it the case that he refuses to make a choice because he holds that each rabbi is 'entitled to his opinion.' Rather, Levinas is convinced that the rabbinic debate will eventually offer deeper answers to the questions at hand. He is waiting until the text offers a shift in context or level, a shift which will clarify and transform both positions.

Now to the analysis of the passage at hand, Levinas adds an analysis of the two comments which follow directly in the Talmud on the one quoted above, comments which

raise what I will call the ‘second debate.’ Hiyya, speaking again in the name of Johanan, sets out to explain for whom the prophets prophesied, and answers the question with a ranking of human beings. The messianic era, he says, is for repentant sinners, the world to come for those who have never sinned; the messianic era is for those who feed scholars or marry their daughters to scholars, the world to come for the scholars themselves (DF 63). From these passages arise two new issues: whether or not the messianic era is for everyone or only for the righteous, and whether or not its coming depends on merit. Johanan clearly holds that the messianic era is not for everyone and that its coming depends on merit; in short, that certain people are going to press for the end, and that they are the ones who will get it. Samuel (and Levinas draws this not directly from the text but from a rather sweeping extension of the thrust of Samuel’s earlier comment) would seem to stand for the position that the messianic era, being political, is for everyone and also for the position that human beings, frail and limited as he understands them to be, cannot bring it about. Again, Levinas seems to remain neutral, and again, his is not the neutrality of utter openness, but has to do with the fact that there is something true in both positions and something that is not quite true or not as yet quite true. He cannot side with Johanan, whose idealist position that there can be a new ontological dispensation for human beings in history is now shading into a position analogous to that of Marxist Hegelians: that it is possible for human beings, or some human beings, to bring about the historical shift and usher in the new dispensation for themselves. But, on the other hand, it now appears even more than before that Samuel is also postulating a quasi-Kojévian historicist sacred grove with his idea that the messianic era is for everybody and that it comes objectively in history, regardless of merit. In a later section of “Messianic Texts,” Levinas effectively repudiates the position he here applies to Samuel, commenting: “Not everyone enjoys the messianic era. One must be worthy of it, and in this messianism differs from the End of History, in which objective events free everyone who has the good fortune or grace to be present at the final hour of History” (DF

80). So, once again, Levinas cannot quite take either side. Nevertheless, he may now see the truth in both positions even more clearly than before. For, if we stop now and put the whole debate together, we see that already all the strands of Levinas' own position are assembled.

There are three issues. (1) Is the messianic era an ontological transformation which takes place at the end of history and reveals the meaning of history in complete equality and mutuality -- or is it a matter of political equality without interpersonal equality? (2) Is the messianic era only for some human beings -- or is it for everybody? And (3) can the messianic era be brought about from below, from inside the human being or the world -- or is it imposed from on high or from outside the human being or the world? The two rabbis have offered opposing answers to the three questions; each has apparently made his position clear. But Levinas is going his own way, or rather, *he is going the way the text is going to go in a moment*. As we have seen, he uses the first debate to suggest a partial answer to the first question. There can be no ontological transformation of the human being or human relation in history and thus the messianic era must refer to something else, something non-ontological and non-historical. He preserves Johanan's desire to change the world for the better and tempers it with Samuel's understanding that the world cannot be perfected and that inequities must remain; in other words, he draws from the first debate the idea of ethical action in a history which is not ultimately going anywhere and does not have an overarching meaning or a telos in ontological transformation. Now, if we carry the Levinasian answer to the first question into a discussion of the second and third questions, the answers given those questions by the two rabbis begin to look different than they might have at first glance. For if the rabbis are talking about ontological, historical transformation, their understandings are providential and, as Levinas sees it, proto-Hegelian: they disagree only insofar as Johanan holds that the ontological, historical transformation to commonality or rest or telos is brought about by the few for the few and Samuel that the transformation is

brought about by God for everyone.²⁰⁵ But if they are not talking about ontological, historical transformation, but rather about ethical action, then: (a) Johanan's ranking of individuals is the expression of an ethical truth -- some human beings are good and some bad, or some are ethically better than others; (b) Samuel's refusal to rank human beings is also the expression of an ethical truth -- somehow, all human beings are on the same footing ethically; (c) Johanan's assertion that the messianic era may be brought from within or by human beings is the expression of an ethical truth -- the necessity of ethical effort; and (d) Samuel's assertion that the messianic era must be imposed from without or by God is also the expression of an ethical truth -- that human beings do not strive ethically in solitude. In effect, a de-historicization and de-ontologization of the discussion reveals that the concept of the messianic era and the arguments about the concept are ways of expressing human ethical experience and of bringing into play the contradictions inherent in that experience.

Is this desacralization legitimate? I have suggested that Levinas cannot either side in the debate as it stands, that insofar as the rabbis describe a providence in which history has a telos and in which that telos involves ontological transformation he can take up neither position. But I have also suggested that his refusal to take a side bespeaks a desire to preserve rabbinic openness, since his inability to agree with either side is matched by a conviction that the text, in its openness, will eventually offer clearer and better answers. The answers do not take the form of a decision in which one rabbi wins out over the other, nor do they take the form of a synthesis or a compromise. Rather, they are a matter of a

²⁰⁵Levinas' rejection of providential conceptions will form much of the subject of the next chapter. I can now, however, quote again a passage I quoted in chapter one, but here at greater length: Here again I must express my reservations about the term eschatology. The term eschaton implies that there might exist a finality, an end to the historical relation of difference between man and the absolutely other, a reduction of the gap that safeguards the alterity of the transcendent, to a totality of sameness. To realize the eschaton would therefore mean that we could seize or appropriate God as a telos and degrade infinite relation with the other to a finite fusion. This is what Hegelian dialectics amounts to . . . (RK 30).

See also on this point Maurice Blanchot, "Our Clandestine Companion," 41-50. Blanchot's and Levinas' clandestine companion is a post-end-of-philosophy philosophy, a philosophy that appears in different guises such as literature, or "standing outside," or love.

movement of thought. Before they emerge, there is no need for Levinas to examine the two sides of the debate as they stand for their internal consistency or to test them against his own understanding of reality. The text is about to offer a desacralized conception of messianism, a conception by which messianism is neither ontological nor historical but ethical, in which it is neither for the few nor for everybody but for each one who chooses it, and in which it is neither imposed from without nor brought forth from within but takes its place in relation.

The next passage I want to look at focuses on the question of desacralization and the question of the without and the within, that is, the first and third of the three issues delineated above (the second issue, the question of the 'each,' we will pick up later). Here Levinas turns back to *Sanhedrin* 97b,²⁰⁶ where Rav is representing Johanan's side of the argument, and Samuel appears again in the role of antagonist. But now Samuel becomes cryptic enough that the movement of thought which expresses what Levinas understands Jewish messianism to be may emerge.

The passage reads as follows:

Rav said: All the dates of extension have expired, and the matter depends only on repentance and good deeds. And Samuel maintained: It is enough for the mourner to keep his period of mourning (DF 69)²⁰⁷

Of course, the crucial interpretive question is: whom does Samuel mean by "the mourner"? Levinas offers three traditional interpretations, the third of which brings Samuel into concurrence with Rav so that they are standing together for the position which Levinas himself also takes up. The first interpretation says that God is the mourner; that is, God will bring about the messianic era. Here we find the exact opposite of Rav's position that the matter rests on the shoulders of human beings. Levinas' reading of the interpretation,

²⁰⁶This point marks the beginning of what was originally the second talmudic lecture of the two which Levinas later conflated into "Messianic Texts." The first deals with *Sanhedrin* 99a, the second with 97b-98a.

²⁰⁷Here Levinas renders the talmudic passage accurately.

though, is the beginning of a remarkable argument. He says that the insight at the root here is the recognition of the need for something external to make messianism possible. The second interpretation says that the mourner is Israel, who must suffer to bring about the messianic era. This is a little closer to Rav's position, since suffering is something that human beings always do. But, for Levinas, what is important here is still the recognition of the necessity of external force, of movement from without, movement suffered. The third interpretation, that of Maharsha, says that the mourner is Israel who must suffer *and repent*. By this interpretation, Samuel is finally in concurrence with Rav, who also spoke of repentance. But by adding the necessity of suffering, he is seen to be standing for more than Rav, representing a position in which the external and the internal, the 'from without' and the 'from within' are brought together.

Here we find an anticipation of the theme that closes *Otherwise than Being*, the theme which we discussed in chapter two: that the revelatory relation involves an ambivalence in which the order from beyond appears only in the response from the human being. The inside and the outside are linked. Our actions and natures are at once our own and formed from without. It is almost impossible to distinguish the active from the passive, the autonomous desire from the response to external stimulus, the 'from within' from the 'from without,' the subjective from the objective, the repentance from the suffering. Ontological distinction has become blurred; its oppositions are merged and, as a category, it is rendered useless or marginalized. To the three interpretations, Levinas adds a fourth of his own: the mourner is the messiah. He finds precedent for this idea from the image of the leper-messiah drawn from elsewhere in the Talmud. The leper-messiah sitting at the gates tells Rabbi Joshua that he will come "today." Today is traditionally interpreted, following Psalm 95:7 as "today if you will hear my voice." *Today*: this effects another blurring, a historical blurring of this world and the next into a single today in which history is rendered useless as a category, or marginalized. *If you will hear my voice*: this adds to the motif of

suffering and repentance Levinas' other great motif for the 'from without' and the 'from within,' namely hearing and speaking. The command appears as the response; in other words, hearing the divine word appears as speaking the ethical word, and suffering appears as repentance. We now have a full Levinasian understanding of messianism. The messiah is here, "today"; the messianic moment is the moment of the meeting of the 'from without' and the 'from within,' the future and the now; and the paradigms for the meeting are suffering and repentance, and hearing and speaking.

Agreement has been reached through a gloss in the interpretive tradition which takes the words of Samuel and uses them to bring forth the non-sacral meaning of the entire debate. The debate has shifted its context or level, to the point where the reason for Levinas' prior hesitations becomes clear. Difference is vindicated over commonality, for difference is the root of potential error, of suffering, of repentance, of hearing and of speaking. But what is more important is that the difference in question is not a matter of an ontological or historical transformation, but of a diachronous meeting 'today,' that is, a meeting in which any teleological understanding of time is inexorably broken. Johanan no longer appears as a Kojévian idealist; Samuel no longer appears as an idealistic liberal; both are revealed to be using the symbol of the messianic era to discuss what human beings should do, and what human beings do do.

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Levinas sees the strength of Hegel's philosophical account of reality: philosophical polarities, like historical polarities, *do* merge into syntheses. But what must be remembered is that the truth does not lie in the polarities, historical or philosophical, but outside them. The rupture of which Levinas speaks is different from Hegelian rupture in two respects. First, it is ultimate; it precludes any coming to rest or fulfillment; and thus it reveals all rests or fulfillments which exist ontologically and historically to be conditional. Second, it is ethical, and it reveals all rests or fulfillments which exist ontologically and historically to

be at least un-ethical, and maybe also anti-ethical. What Levinas has done so far in “Messianic Texts” is to show us the rabbis showing us this. Through his eyes, we have watched them take up two dialectical oppositions -- one historical and one ontological -- allow them to merge into two syntheses, and then juxtapose them to something outside history and ontology, something which always ruptures and is thus unassailable and unsynthesizable. This world fades into the next, objective fades into subjective, and up against the new syntheses is the always available here and now of anarchic ethics, an element which cannot be made to play a role in the Hegelian drama. Johanan/ Rav fades into Samuel, Samuel into Johanan/ Rav, but what emerges is Johanan, Samuel and Rav all treating the contradictions and difficulties of ethics. This movement -- thesis, antithesis, synthesis, and something beyond -- is the leitmotif of “Between Two Worlds” as well as “Messianic Texts.” In “Between Two Worlds,” Levinas gave us a first example of the movement when he showed us that Hegel was right, that philosophical contentions coming into conflict in history have indeed lead to the universal synthesis characterized as the end of history -- and yet that there was an element of human experience outside the synthesis, an element he called religion. So far in “Messianic Texts” we have been offered two further illustrations of this movement.

Two more illustrations emerge in the course of the lecture, and, once again, one is historical and one ontological. Both illustrations take up the issue we left hanging above -- the question of the ‘each’ -- and, by the same token, both return to the problem we touched on in the first half of this chapter, the problem of parts and wholes and the need to turn away from that problem. The second historical opposition is between temporally relative and absolute, that is, between acting for one’s own time and acting for all times. It arises in the course of the discussion of the following passage:

R. Giddal said in Rav’s name: Israel, in the future, will enjoy the messianic era.
 Rav Joseph objected: Isn’t that obvious? Who else, then, would enjoy it? Hilek

and Bilek? (DF 80)²⁰⁸

The commentators are aware of the plain sense of R. Joseph's words. 'Hilek' and 'Bilek' generally come into English as 'any Tom, Dick or Harry,' and thus the passage literally means that not just anyone will enjoy the messianic era, but only Israel. Nevertheless the commentators also interpret the passage in less nationalistic ways. One commentator, Levinas relates, suggests that 'Hilek' and 'Bilek' are the names of the judges of Sodom. One would presume the judges of Sodom were righteous men, so why are they excluded from the messianic era? Because, says Levinas,

the judges, even if they are judges of Sodom, in their capacity as judges place their action under the sign of universality. The judges of Sodom are people who are still familiar with political life and the State; and according to the theoreticians of the end of History, people who act under the sign of universality, act just for their era. All politics, through the universality of its designs, is moral and every intention is directed towards the unfolding of history. (DF 81)

Levinas is arguing that the theoreticians of the end of history are right: the claim to be acting universally, or for all of history, is equivalent to acting for one's own time and vice versa. Those absolutists who claim to be acting for all of history are actually acting according to what the overarching plan demands *for their particular era*, and those relativists who claim to be acting for their own era and disregarding history at large cannot by this claim escape the overarching plan. The two positions, relativism and absolutism, are equivalent. Thus the so-called historically relative and the so-called historically absolute merge, and Hegel is right again. But his triumph is complete only if the distinction between relative and absolute, and their synthesis is held onto as a principle. To the synthesis of judgment with respect to the relative and judgment with respect to the absolute, Levinas newly opposes a different kind of judgment, one made in immediacy.

Our text would therefore teach us that the simple fact of acting under the sign of universality does not justify entry into the messianic era. . . . Hilek and Bilek,

²⁰⁸The Soncino edition has: "R. Giddal said in Rab's name: The Jews are destined to eat their fill in the days of the messiah. R. Joseph demurred: Is this not obvious; who else should then eat -- Hilek and Bilek?"

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- . "God and 'Being's Move' in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas." *The Journal of Religion* 62.2 (1982): 145-55.
- . "The Moral Self: Emmanuel Levinas and Hermann Cohen." *Dædalus* 4 (1980): 35-58.
- . *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974.
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judges of Sodom, are not judged in relation to their historical situation -- they are at every moment ready for absolute judgment. (DF 81)

Hilek and Bilek wish on the one hand to be judged relative to their historical era, in which case they must be vindicated for being better than other Sodomites, and on the other hand to be judged relative to history as a whole, in which case they must also be vindicated for having condemned Sodom for all time. But actions are not, according to Levinas judged either by a historically relative standard -- which in any case is merely a matter of a division of the 'absolute' plan of history into a series of phases -- nor are they judged by the absolute standard of the course of history -- which in any case is merely a matter of adding up the results of all historically 'relative' periods. Rather, each action is judged in itself and each human being in herself. Judgment depends on one's relation to the other and the others, not on the basis of whether one is better or worse than the others, nor on the basis of how one furthers the course of history. The relative/ absolute synthesis has been admitted and transcended in the idea of a judgment which comes 'at every moment' from beyond time, or from the meeting of two times, and thus by the idea of a time which is neither the 'my time' or the 'all time' of history, but the 'each time.'

The second ontological opposition is the distinction between ethnic Jews and the other nations, between the particular and the universal understood as 'all peoples.' Robert Gibbs has worked through the problem of particular and universal in Levinas under the rubric of the status of 'Hebrew' and 'Greek' in Levinas' thought.²⁰⁹ As we saw in chapter one, these are terms which Levinas employs occasionally to distinguish coherent, conceptual speech and thought which tends toward totality ('Greek'), from polysemic dialogical speech and thought which tends toward relation or ethics ('Hebrew'). 'Greek' thought is universalizing; it seeks to absorb and synthesize everything around it into a coherent whole. It reaches out to the 'Hebrew' in an effort to absorb it -- and finds that at

²⁰⁹Gibbs, "Correlations, Translations," chap. in *Correlations*.

the same time, the 'Hebrew' is reaching out to it. Gibbs has carefully documented Levinas' understanding that Jews should translate their 'Hebrew' into 'Greek.'

The Talmud breaks with the particularism of the Bible and universalizes through reason. Thus the only legitimate reading of the 'Hebrew' of biblical thought is one which seeks a universalized reading. The best reading of 'Hebrew,' therefore, is philosophical -- is in 'Greek'!²¹⁰

Judaism wants its concepts to be intelligible to the world at large; its role, as we saw in the first part of this chapter, is not only to remain distinct from history with its tendency to universality, but also to teach others to remain free enough of history to be able to judge it. This Jewish out-reach occurs, in Rosenzweig's *Star*, through Christianity, but Levinas' attempt to translate his 'Hebrew' into 'Greek' shows that he holds that Jews, or at least some Jews, can play the role of both the Rosenzweigian Jew and the Rosenzweigian Christian. How are they then to avoid becoming part of, or even creating, a universal synthesis?

In fact, the problem of reconciling Judaism and universal humanity -- the problem raised by Jean Wahl, who says in response to "Between Two Worlds" that he believes there is only one truth, or 'one world' -- should not arise at all for Levinas. Levinas does not, in general, treat totalizing concepts like universal humanity and universal truth, replacing them instead with ethical ideas which are never universal but always individual. The Levinas who is bold enough to call himself an atheist in *Totality and Infinity* is surely bold enough to tell Jean Wahl that there is no universal truth! And if he does not, it is in deference to Rosenzweig, for whom there still remains the idea of a universal truth and in whose name there must be maintained a delicate balance between the universal truth and various particularisms. That Levinas encounters the problem of the relation between Judaism and universal humanity at all in the meetings of the Colloquia is perhaps partly due to the fact that he has begun his series of speeches to them with "Between Two Worlds" and is

²¹⁰Gibbs, *Correlations*, 171.

reluctant thereafter to abandon the Rosenzweigian formulations. But towards the end of “Messianic Texts,” he does point to a way of allowing this last distinction to be synthesized and then moving beyond it.

Still moving through the passage from *Tractate Sanhedrin*, he arrives at a description of a conversation between Rabbi Abbahu and a Min (a heretic or Christian). The Min comes to the Rabbi and asks when the messiah will come. He answers: ‘when darkness covers those people who are with you.’ The Min is shocked, and responds: ‘You have condemned me!’ And Abbahu continues: ‘It is but a verse: For behold the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people, but the Lord shall shine upon thee, and his glory shall be sent upon thee’ (DF 93).²¹¹ The verse cited is Isaiah 60:2, and it is offered in support of what appears to be a strongly particularist condemnation of the Min. But, says Levinas, if one looks at the verse which follows in Isaiah, one sees that Abbahu is not at all speaking from a particularist perspective -- or at least that he wishes to allude, for those who can hear, to an entirely different comprehension. For the next verse reads: ‘And the nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.’ Abbahu points with the evocation of the unstated verse to the idea that redemption is available to all the nations. So it is not the gentiles who will be covered in darkness, and Abbahu is not to be understood as a particularist. And yet Abbahu does suggest that the darkness must cover some individuals -- that not all will be redeemed -- and thus he is not to be understood as a universalist either, if universal is conceived as referring to all human beings.

Before Levinas offers his final interpretation of Abbahu’s words, he describes once again the Hegelian understanding of particularities and universals. First, he suggests that the Hegelian understanding is true.

What is in fact the march towards the universality of a political order? It consists in confronting multiple beliefs -- a multiplicity of coherent discourses -- and finding

²¹¹Levinas renders the talmudic passage accurately.

one coherent discourse that embraces them all, which is precisely the universal order. . . . This situation can also be described as the beginning of philosophy. But it is precisely the destiny of Western philosophy and its logic to realize that it is a political condition. . . . The conflicts between men, the opposition of some to others, the opposition of each one to himself, create the sparks of an enlightenment or a reason that dominates and penetrates antagonists. The ultimate truth is set ablaze by all these sparks as the end of History embraces all histories. (DF 94)

Then he suggests that the Hegelian understanding, while true, is grotesque

Suppose for a moment that political life appears not as a dialectical adjustment which men make towards one another, but as an infernal cycle of violence and derision; suppose for a moment that the moral ends which politics prides itself on achieving . . . appear steeped in the immorality that claims to sustain them; suppose, in other words, that you have lost the meaning of the political and the consciousness of its grandeur, that the non-sense or non-value of world politics is your first certainty, that you are a people outside peoples . . . capable of diaspora, capable of remaining outside, alone and abandoned: then you have a totally different vision of universality, one no longer subordinated to confrontation. (DF 94)

The course of Western history follows Hegelian lines, and in so doing follows immoral lines, even horrific lines. Hegelian history appears as appalling, and particularly appalling and unacceptable to Jews. However, it still appears as the truth. For this second paragraph, surely one of the most moving in Levinas' oeuvre, does not offer anything which stands outside the Hegelian comprehension. From a Hegelian perspective, one could say that Levinas was defining the Jews correctly as a negative force. If the great march of the Hegelian dialectic could incorporate this antithesis once and for all, it would finally reach fulfillment. In short, the position that only the existence of the Jews keep Hegel from being right is itself a Hegelian position, and a position which, at its extreme, gives a perverse justification to the Shoah. Had the Shoah been successful, there would be a good deal less chance that infinity be remembered, that anything would rise up to call the state a totality. For a Hegelian to prove his case, or at least to make sure it will not be disproved, he must only slaughter all the Jews -- a sentiment perhaps shared by some notable Hegelians.

But, in Levinas' interpretations of Abbahu's words, which follow directly after this paragraph in the text, it is not, in fact, particularly the Jews who stand between Hegelianism and the world. For now we are given the positive counterpoint to Abbahu's conception that

the darkness does not fall on the gentiles, that is, we are told where it does fall. The darkness falls, suggests Levinas, on Hegelian dialectics; it falls on the understanding which forces one to pit particular against particular and squeeze them into a universal; it falls “on all those teachings that call you to fallacious confrontations” (DF 94). These teachings will be covered in darkness and reduced to silence. In effect, Levinas figuratively condemns Hegel to hell. But he refers here not to a future event but to something that is always taking place. For when the dialectic is in darkness, the “real light” behind it shines out. And this is the “true universal” which refers neither to everyone nor to a particular group, but to each individual person in her responsibility. The true universal, says Levinas is universal insofar as it “consists in serving the universe. It is called messianism” (DF 95).

Thus, once again, two sides of a dialectic merge. Levinas is not remotely ironic when he says in “Between Two Worlds” that “the particularity of a people is identical to its finitude,” that “Hegelian logic presides over this . . . disappearance” and that this must be so because “the particularity of a thing has significance . . . only in relation to a whole” (EDM 135/ 278/ 199). Hegel was right; all ethnic or national particularities do march in history toward universal identities. And, once again, if the distinction is held onto as a principle, Hegel has won. But to the particular/ universal synthesis is newly opposed a different kind of universal, an unsynthesizable universal. The Hegelian triumph is once again made clear, but an element of experience is offered which remains outside it and which reduces it to a matter of relative unimportance. We cannot put our faith in all human beings or in our kind of human being, but must put it, instead, in each human being. With Abbahu’s answer to the Min, Levinas provides an answer to Wahl. The rubric of parts and wholes is abandoned, since any argument that stays within its boundaries stays within Hegelian boundaries and emerges in a call for violence. Levinas shows Abbahu turning away from Hegel, toward the other, or more specifically, toward each other.

What about the distinction between ‘Greek’ and ‘Hebrew’? Gibbs defines three

senses of the word 'Greek:' one in which it stands for "the rule of the universal" in the sense of "the power of a political State," another in which it means "the desire to know in an a-ethical way" and a third in which it refers to the language of rhetoric.²¹² In the first two senses, 'Greek' is generally understood in Levinas' talmudic works, to be bad; in the third sense, as Gibbs shows in a comprehensive argument, it is necessary and perhaps good. But it is the first two senses which interest us here. Gibbs links them together as doing violence to the individual; and to this we may add that in these senses 'Greek' thought is best represented by Hegel. This kind of 'Greek' thought is therefore overcome in "Messianic Texts," not because it loses its battle with 'Hebrew,' but because the distinction between 'Greek' and 'Hebrew' -- between universal and particular --- is entirely transcended. Gibbs points out that at times (even after the delivery of "Messianic Texts"), Levinas asserts that the Jews have something to teach the 'Greek' world which the 'Greek' world cannot find out on its own. At other times, however, he suggests that each human being has access to whatever truth arises from human ethical experience.²¹³ Without discussing this issue in detail, I will only say that the evidence of "Messianic Texts" tends in the latter direction. Whenever Levinas maintains that the Jews know something, in a fundamental sense, that no other nation has access to except through the Jews, he opens up all the paradoxes of the universal/ particular problem, and in doing so walks onto ground ruled by Hegel. Must all 'Hebrew' be translated into 'Greek'? He must answer yes (for the Jews have a duty to teach what they know), and he must answer no (for if all 'Hebrew' is translated, the Jews disappear). May the Jew play the roles of both the Rosenzweigian Jew and the Rosenzweigian Christian? Again, and for the same reasons, he must answer yes and no. If it is true that all particularities march, in history, toward universal syntheses, then the claim that Jews form a distinct polarity is simply a concession to Hegel. Levinas is

²¹²Gibbs, *Correlations*, 158.

²¹³Gibbs, *Correlations*, 155-175, esp. 164-7.

at his best when he transcends the issue entirely, and deals exclusively with the human individual. Which is not to say there is no place in the world for Judaism. Obviously, at this point in time and at all previous points in time, Jews do carry and have carried conceptions that are different from and truer than the prevailing historical conceptions. They must continue to do so.²¹⁴

Derrida asks Levinas to choose: is he Greek or Jew?²¹⁵ But Levinas is neither. He is not a universalist; he can not identify his thought exclusively with that of a particular group; and he cannot be accused of arriving at some sort of synthesis of the two. In the round-table discussion which follows the presentation of the first half of "Messianic Texts," Levinas says:

That all their teachings remain without conclusion, in the state of pure dynamism, is in effect the characteristic trait of talmudic thought. It is a dialectic certainly. The theses return on themselves. But it is at least a dialectic without a synthesis. . . . The synthesis . . . is an idea of the mixed. In Talmudicism is produced something completely curious: a reason that, in the final analysis, is revealed as personal. . . . In the talmudic method, the solution is always the solution of a person who chooses, each time, in his way. (La Conscience juive 289)

The intention of "Messianic Texts" is to show that most of the distinctions with which we

²¹⁴Is it actually possible to transcend the rubric of universal and particular? Not completely, or not for long. Jews, as a 'minority,' will always return to the rubric. And so they should -- but while they do so they should remember that all discussions of the issue are always already ruptured. The matter can be put generally. Levinasian postmodernism does not stand for ethnic autonomy as against universality but tries instead to reveal individuality and gift as the ground of the entire debate, and thereby to undermine the debate's primacy. But because the universal/ particular debate cannot be done away with, only undermined, all its dangers remain alive. Elliot Wolfson, responding to discussions by S. Kepnes, P. Ochs and R. Gibbs about Jewish postmodernism, writes:

In spite of all [their] well-intentioned qualifications, one cannot help but come away from reading [the record of their discussions] with the feeling that there is a real potential in the postmodern Jewish project for a lapse into ethnocentrism that could promote rather than heal the suffering of others. . . . The challenge for postmodern Jewish philosophy is to facilitate the growth of a culture based on the textual specificity of the past without losing sight of the place that Judaism must occupy in the human community at large. We must get beyond the dichotomy of the universal and the particular, but not by reducing the one to the other. On the contrary, the particularity of the Jewish tradition is meaningful only to the extent that it improves on the moral condition of humanity.

Elliot R. Wolfson, "A Response to Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy" in *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy*, ed. S. Kepnes, P. Ochs and R. Gibbs (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 93-104, 102, 104.

²¹⁵Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 153.

commonly view the world are dialectical oppositions which seek to merge together into syntheses, or 'ideas of the mixed.' It is useless to search around within them seeking the mix which will enable us to live good lives. We must search outside them, using a 'personal reason,' this is to say, asking the other.

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So Levinas breaks open the text in a way which refuses the finality of a version of Hegelian synthesis. Or, to be more precise, he refuses to remain in indecision, torn between two versions of that synthesis, Greekjew and Jewgreek; he refuses to maintain thereby an openness or an 'openness of openness.' He ruptures the text, but his rupture is a structured one, it is a rupture which cannot be accused of indifference or indifferentism. He never refuses to make a choice; he does not vindicate debate for debate's sake or say, after the manner of that great liberals, that opposed and contradictory positions should nevertheless be preserved and given hearing. What Levinas understands by 'these and these are the words of the living God' is that within the opposition between these and these, a rich, complex and decisive truth is to be found. And this truth is itself a structured rupture -- or a "structure which is . . . dis-structure itself" (GCM 199n.15) -- the breaking of history and being by an other meaning. Out of the breaking of text comes truth; out of the breaking of history comes ethics: as the hermeneutics, so the philosophy.

And finally it can be said that the question of the legitimacy of Levinas' reading -- of who is doing the desacralizing -- involves one more false distinction, the distinction between exegetical readings and eisegetical readings. In the round-table discussion which follows the presentation of the first half of "Messianic Texts," Levinas is asked whether human beings can speed up or slow down the course of history. Since he is arguing that there is no "course of history" in the sense of a pattern or plan which could be sped up or slowed down, he is quite distressed by the question. (It must be recalled, in support of the questioner, that Levinas' argument is unclear, given how often he overtly champions the

Hegelian understanding in order to show its grotesque nature before turning away from it.)

He responds:

The manner in which you pose the question shows that you take these texts -- which I have tried above all to transpose -- in their strictly theological sense. Thus it is extremely difficult for me to answer. . . . I am very embarrassed by the theological question you pose: can good action speed up history? I think that if you read these texts as texts of pure piety you will perhaps find your problem in them . . . For me, I wanted to find in these texts a conception of the role of the individual in history. (La Conscience juive 287)

With these words he suggests that his method is eisegetical insofar as it depends on coming to the text with certain questions. Later in the discussion, however, he explains that his teacher, Chouchani, has taught him an exacting method of talmudic criticism, one that refuses to settle for a platitudinous meaning, but instead assumes that the Sages thought “everything,” or at any rate, could think “everything” (DF 68). With these words he suggests that his method is not strictly eisegetical; the meanings he finds are in the text to be found. Both are true. For the distinction between exegetical and eisegetical is merely the ‘from without’ and the ‘from within’ applied to text, and like the ‘from within’ and ‘from without,’ it may be allowed to merge, following the pattern we have traced, and can then be put up against the unsynthesizable hermeneutic, the ethical reading. All exegetical readings, as recent theorists assure us, are in actuality, eisegetical -- and the opposite is also true: there is no eisegetical reading which does not refer to a text and is not therefore in some sense exegetical. Levinas’ reading stands in opposition to the entire distinction.

For even if one takes what is apparently a strictly eisegetical reading, and assumes that rabbis are speaking of a historical and ontological messianic era, the philosophical problems Levinas deals with would remain. He finishes his answer to the question of whether human beings can speed up the course of history with a meditative statement which may provide the best answer to the question of the legitimacy of his readings:

Even if God allowed the course of history to be bent by human beings, it would be necessary that God resolve, for his own account, the problems over which [these rabbis] are opposed. Even if the messiah arrives as in the popular imagination, it

would be necessary to unravel these contradictions. (La Conscience juive, 287)

Levinas' questions are necessary questions, and his readings may likewise be necessary readings -- not for all times or our time, not for history at all, but for us, or, since one can only speak for oneself, for me. We who live in the second half of the twentieth century can hardly deny that history does march under the banner of the progressive augmentation of the realm of the same, whether the same be the fascist state or the universal and homogeneous state. Therefore it is critical for us not to put our faith in a historical plan but instead to remember that all determinations of such a plan are ruptured by a structure of meaning that lies outside and before them, a structure of ethical service to the different one. Otherwise the other is lost and so is the anachronistic Jew, always the victim of world-historical attempts to impose homogeneity on reality. The relation between philosophy and scepticism described at the end of *Otherwise than Being*, is paradigmatic for the relation between history and the Jews. History always has the last word; it always wins against the Jews. But the Jews refuse to admit defeat and return to harass history. And just as the sceptic must deny philosophy's claim to be an unbroken thread, the Jew must deny history's claim to be an unbroken march. It is true that history has never quite succeeded in defeating the Jews, but it has come very close; and this is what makes it possible for Jews to judge history. Ultimately it is for this reason, the reason of the ethical necessity to perform the tasks one can perform, that Levinas' reading of the Talmud is a legitimate Jewish reading.

But let me conclude by undercutting my argument slightly, as Levinas, I believe, undercuts his. What happened to Johanan's idealism? It was dealt with in the way indicated -- his hopes for the next world were de-historicized, revealed as impulses or actions in this world springing from the ethical moment or the flash of eternity into time. But how well does this particular case of de-historicizing work? The problem with it is that those who withdraw from history, while they may be able to judge history, also tend to get beaten up by history. At the very end of the lecture, Levinas returns to the polarity between

idealism and realism and re-erects it as the polarity between political messianism (equivalent, for him, to Zionism) and messianism proper. There is room for a little political messianism, as there was room for a king in Israel -- as long as it is understood that political results are necessarily of limited duration, since the course of world history shifts up and down, in no particular pattern, between its narrow poles of truly horrific and somewhat better. The question for Jews, he notes, is how to remain outside of history while also entering it, how to maintain true messianism while participating in political messianic movements. However we may answer this question, it seems clear that just as there is room in Levinas' understanding for political and historical action, there is also room there for some of the polarities of the common understanding.

Interregnum or end of the Institutions, or as if being itself had been suspended. Nothing was official anymore. Nothing was objective. Not the least manifesto on the Rights of Man. No “leftist intellectual protest”! Absence of any homeland, eviction from all French soil! Silence of every Church! Insecurity of all companionship. So these were “the straits” of the first chapter of Lamentations: “None to comfort her!”, and the complaint of the Yom Kippur ritual: “No high priest to offer sacrifices, nor any altar on which to place our holocausts!” (PN 120)

CHAPTER FIVE: NIGHT SPACE

Having traced certain biblical, kabbalistic and talmudic themes in Levinas’ work, we turn now to the way his themes arise from or are shaped by reflection on the Holocaust. Such reflection, I argue, has in large part defined the *space* in which Levinas philosophizes; it is not the source of his ideas but the source of their possibility. As the Holocaust ruptured the souls and bodies of its victims, so reflection on it ruptures any conviction that there is a plan of the whole, be it historical, ontological, founded on a conception of the good, or founded on the idea of a present and accessible God. All the totalities of previous philosophy and theology are swept away in a shift so radical that it demands to be described with images of the death of God, or of apocalypse. In the wake of this occurrence, a movement toward the other is possible. The movement is not new, but it is demanded now more than ever before. It is the movement Levinas describes in all of his work. He is a prophet to the post-Holocaust world.

This chapter does not take up in detail the destruction of previous philosophy; instead we focus on the destruction of previous theology. We begin with four stories, briefly told, each of which, in its own way, describes that destruction and the subsequent

movement toward the other.²¹⁶ From the stories we turn to Levinas' discursive account of the movement in "Useless Suffering" and close the first half of the chapter with a discussion of that essay's critique of Emil Fackenheim. In the second half, we move to a more general discussion of the way Levinas' ethics is shaped by the Holocaust.

I. Nights

a. *Four Stories*

1) Elie Wiesel's *Night* was the one of the first literary works to describe the horrors of the Holocaust, and may remain the best description of the crisis of faith in the camps. Wiesel opens the memoir with an account of his childhood in a shtetl in Transylvania, focusing on his faith, which is centred in complete trust in God's presence *in* history, in his providence *over* history and, as the culmination of this presence and providence, in the historical coming of the messiah. Wiesel-the-author sees this faith as childish, but he does not attribute his earnest adoption of it to the fact that he was a child at the start of the war; rather he portrays the entire shtetl as mired in a religious infancy. Convinced that since God is good historical events must ultimately be just, the Jews pray to be forgiven for whatever sin brought the Nazis upon them, or for a miracle to free them from the ghetto or the roundup or the camp. The most reflective of the men Wiesel meets in Auschwitz are twisting themselves desperately to find a way to maintain their belief in the good God's involvement in the events of the world, claiming for instance that the evil of the camp is a test, and therefore a sign of God's love. For these Jews, faith in the God present in history and presiding over history is the only faith; the alternative is atheism and despair.

Wiesel is from the first uneasy about this alternative and hungry for something

²¹⁶Levinas does not tell or make allusion to the first of these stories, which I nevertheless include because it expresses the movement in its entirety so well. The other three, which add particular aspects and symbols to the account of the movement, are drawn from his essays. A description of the movement in Levinas' thought, supplementary to mine, is offered by Wes Avram, "On the Priority of 'Ethics,'" 273-278.

deeper. While still living in the shtetl, he takes up the study of the Kabbalah -- stumbling fortuitously upon a master of the first order -- and this study lends a humanistic thrust to his faith, allowing him a glimpse of the idea that humankind must redeem God and of the kinds of responsibility that this might entail. But the teaching does not stick, and the Kabbalah he encounters later in Auschwitz is not of this nature; the Kabbalist there clings to a faith as providential as that of the shtetl rabbis, murmuring numerological formulas ceaselessly in an effort to determine when Europe will be liberated. On his first night in the camp, Wiesel falls back on the traditional alternative and turns away from the God of history into a kind of atheism, writing of the turn: "Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust."²¹⁷ This is the first appearance in *Night* of the image of the dead God, which reappears most effectively in the famous story of the execution of the "sad-eyed angel." A young boy, beloved of all, has participated in an aborted insurrection and is subsequently tortured to reveal the names of his comrades. He is silent, refusing to name names; and he remains silent as he is hung in the square, refusing even to shout out his defiance at the last moment. Wiesel, forced to watching the hanging along with the entire camp, hears someone behind him ask -- "Where is God? Where is He?" -- and voice within Wiesel answers -- "He is hanging here on this gallows."²¹⁸ The story belies its simplicity; it seems to constitute an admission that Nietzsche's madman was right, both in his central claim that God has been murdered and in his claim that he is ahead of his time. God is dead, executed at Auschwitz.

But what does the death of God mean? Wiesel tells us he has lost his faith, but nevertheless he continues to pray, if oddly. He argues with God, asking neither the ontological question -- where or what he is -- nor the historical question -- when he will come -- but instead reproaching him. In short, Wiesel experiences, in extraordinary

²¹⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1986), 32. Original French text, 1960.

²¹⁸ Wiesel, *Night*, 61-2.

circumstances and thus in an extreme or twisted way, the phenomenon Levinas calls contestation. He becomes aware that all the responsibility lies on human beings. He denies God, but in denying him, he seems to affirm him if only as the object of his denial.

Wiesel's densest account of contestation occurs in the description of a Rosh Hashanah service when ten thousand inmates of the camp come together to pray. He interpolates his thoughts into a few lines from the liturgy.

Blessed be the Name of the Eternal!

Why, but why should I bless him? . . . Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz. Birkenau, Buna, and so many factories of death? How could I say to Him: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory?"

All the earth and the Universe are God's!

And I, mystic that I had been, I thought: "Yes, man is very strong, greater than God. When You were deceived by Adam and Eve, You drove them out of Paradise. When Noah's generation displeased You, You brought down the flood. . . But these men here, whom You have betrayed . . . what do they do? They pray before You! They praise your name!"

All creation bears witness to the Greatness of God!

Once, New Year's Day had dominated my life. I knew that my sins grieved the Eternal; I implored his forgiveness. Once, I had believed profoundly that upon one solitary deed of mine, one solitary prayer, depended the salvation of the world.

This day I had ceased to pray. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone -- terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied for so long.²¹⁹

Though he says he has refused to pray, Wiesel offers, in effect, a new three-part prayer. First he refuses to bless the God of history, the God who supposedly caused these events to come to pass. Second, he discovers a new strength, but can use it only to manufacture disgust for those who continue to worship this God. Finally he turns, in his

²¹⁹Wiesel, *Night*, 64-65.

new strength, toward God and becomes his accuser. The prayer makes it clear that what Wiesel means by saying that God is dead is that a particular God -- the present and providential God, awaited by the camp theologians and the camp Kabbalist -- is dead, or rather, that he can now see that that God never was. In becoming the judge of history, he has become the judge of the God of history. He is not a part of a grand scheme but outside, alone, autonomous, counting on no one and nothing; he is without totalities. But, having lost his faith in the present God, he may nevertheless affirm an absent God, a God who is met in contestation.

In the third and last tier of his prayer, Wiesel shifts grammatically from a second person address to the third person. We are reminded of Levinas' description of the ancient Hebrew blessing, which begins in the second person ('Blessed art Thou') and shifts to the third person ('He who creates all things,' or etc.). Between the two forms of address sits the Tetragrammaton, which in this position, according to Levinas, encompasses God's presence and his absence, or functions as the gate from awareness of his presence to awareness of his absence (BTV 122). The one who moves from second person to third person in his prayer acknowledges a God who does not show himself, but whose absence is the absolute holiness which resonates in human relation (EI 106). Wiesel closes his account of the Rosh Hashanah service as follows.

I ran off to look for my father. . . . He was standing near the wall, bowed down, his shoulders sagging as though beneath a heavy burden. I went up to him, took his hand and kissed it. A tear fell upon it. Whose was that tear? Mine? His?²²⁰

The young man who is stronger than God turns toward his father. To continue to love the one he loves, to stay with his father in danger -- these things are at the limit of Wiesel's strength, and, as it is perhaps the main purpose of *Night* to show, they are sufficient. Wiesel has turned away from the faith of his boyhood toward the other, away from

²²⁰Wiesel, *Night*, 65.

structures which explain by imposing meaning on events toward ethical relation. In this turn, he lays the ground for a different understanding of God and a different understanding of faith: an 'adult' God and an 'adult' faith.

But the adult faith is -- and here I understate -- not nice and not easy. During the course of Wiesel's narrative several sons desert their fathers, allowing the fathers to die alone; in one episode a son steals a crust of bread from his father, a crust that the father has procured at great pains only to feed to his son. Wiesel, by great courage, does not degenerate this far, but he cannot save his father's life and he cannot even prevent himself from having the thought, at times, that he would be better off if his father were dead. Indeed, at certain points in the story, the utmost Wiesel can do to retain his humanity is to *feel shame* at the thought of deserting his father. The emptiness and fruitlessness of this kind of turn to the other -- its pathos -- is all that emerges from the Holocaust for Wiesel. Such pathos is also what drives Levinas in his own reflection on the Holocaust. Levinas' adult faith is the antithesis of resignation; on the contrary it is active -- but the action which constitutes it is a passive action. In a word, adult faith is a 'passion,' understood as a suffering or an undergoing. It is experienced as the passive actions of anger and love. It is not a matter of hope or of edification.

2) In "Loving the Torah more than God" Levinas speaks of a story called "Yossel, son of Yossel Rakover from Tarnopol, speaks to God."²²¹ It is set in the final hours of the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion, and relates the thoughts of a man whose family has been killed and who will soon be dead himself. Levinas does not retell the story, but instead offers an

²²¹DF 142-145. Levinas explains that the story was originally published anonymously in an Israeli journal and then translated and republished in a Zionist journal in Paris (DF 142). There are at least three noteworthy scholarly discussions of Levinas' commentary on the story: Susan Handelman's discussion (275-278 of *Fragments*), Michael Oppenheim's discussion (41-52 of *Speaking/ Writing*) and the commentary by Richard Sugarman and Helen Stephenson, "Emmanuel Levinas' 'To Love the Torah More than God'" *Judaism*, 28 (1979): 217-222.

interpretation. He begins by saying that the most common response to the Holocaust is to claim that there is no God, and that this is also the sanest response, at least for those who had believed in the kind of God who “dished out prizes, inflicted punishments or pardoned sins” (DF 143). But it is not Yossel’s response. Yossel sees, in a single moment, that there is no help, no intervention, no providence, no ultimate justice, and no promise of an afterlife; standing alone, he realizes that he must bear all the responsibility. But he arrives in this moment not at a denial of God, but at the idea that “the path that leads to the one God must be walked in part without God” (DF 143). This is the moment, writes Levinas, when “the adult’s God is revealed precisely through the void of the children’s heaven. This is the moment when God retires from the world and hides His face” (DF 143).

In this moment, Yossel sees himself as free; he is under no obligation; he is the hero of his own story. And therefore, he can love God freely, and at the same time -- as an aspect of the same movement -- can reproach God, calling him to show his hidden face. And because Yossel has come to this point, he does not love only God. The story ends with Yossel saying: “I love him, but I love even more his Torah” (DF 144). Above all he loves the Torah, that is to say, the words which express the ethical law. *The words:* for speech is the way relation is expressed, the way that autonomy and intimacy, presence and absence, are maintained together. *The ethical law:* for true relation is ethics. Yossel, alone, has no opportunity to turn to the other, but, according to Levinas, he shows us that this is the meaning of Judaism and its book. Words, ethics, Torah -- these are the meaning of God, the expression or mode of the one who remains hidden. To love the Torah more than God is to love this God.

Both Wiesel and Yossel begin with faith in a God present in history; both must confront an utterly inhuman manifestation of that history; both face this manifestation with lament and anger; both abandon all conceptions of providence, discovering themselves alone and strong; both turn, in the strength of their anger, towards a hidden God, different

in nature from the present God they have rejected; both accuse the hidden God or contest with Him; and, finally, both turn to something else, Wiesel to his father and Yossel to the Torah. In *Night*, it is clear that this final turning is all that may be expected from a human being; this is how one's humanity is to be claimed and retained in extreme circumstances. In "Yossel speaks to God" it is clear that not only is this turn sufficient, it is itself the path to the hidden God, who, in his own person, can only be approached by means of reproach.

Again, though, this adult faith or path to God is an atrocious one. Yossel's shift can be described glibly as a turn from dogmatism to humanism: Levinas explains Yossel's adult faith as arising from "the internal evidence of morality [also] supplied by the Torah" (DF 144). But what gives the shift its meaning are the circumstances under which it takes place, and the fact that they are paradigmatic for the circumstances of Jewish faith. According to Yossel, God has always attempted to discourage the Jews' love by heaping miseries upon them, but the Jews in turn have always refused to stop loving God -- and thus their very love exists as reproach. "To be a Jew," says Yossel "means . . . to swim eternally against the filthy criminal tide of man," to be aware that this swimming accomplishes practically nothing, to be, therefore, "the most unhappy people on earth," but also, and finally, to be "happy [to be] unhappy" (DF 144). Levinas ends his interpretation with the following description of Yossel's adult faith:

This is a long way from a warm and almost tangible communion with the Divine and from the desperate pride of the atheist. It is a completely austere humanism linked to a difficult adoration! . . . A personal and unique God is not something revealed like an image in a dark room! The text I have just commented on shows how ethics and principles install a personal relationship worthy of the name. Loving the Torah more than God means precisely having access to a personal God against Whom one may rebel -- that is to say, for Whom one may die. (DF 145)

Yossel's awareness of the futility of counting on God is matched by an awareness of the futility of human action in the world -- is the same awareness. His rebellion against God is not made in the name of a humanity without God, but is precisely a rebellion against the human condition. But this rebellion means also that God, and humanity, are worth dying

for. It is the simultaneity of anger and love, reproach and adoration, which constitutes Yossel's turn.

3) In "Beyond Memory" (ITN 79-91), Levinas speaks of Vassily Grossman's *Life and Fate*,²²² a novel about the victory of Stalingrad. Grossman was at one time a good Bolshevik, which is to say that he adopted a faith comparable in its naiveté to the one held by Wiesel as a child, believing, as Levinas has it, with 'hope' as well as 'faith,' that in October of 1917, "he had entered into the times of eschatological events" (ITN 88). By the time of the writing of *Life and Fate*, however, he has changed his mind, and that work portrays the circumstances of the battle of Stalingrad blended and thus compared with an account of other Nazi atrocities. Like *Night* and "Yossel Speaks to God," *Life and Fate* describes the triumph of horror:

an uninhabitable world in the abyss of its dehumanization. The breakdown of the very basis of European civilization. A . . . world of people who have been degraded, stricken in their dignity, delivered to humiliation, suffering, death" (ITN 88-9).

Perhaps surprisingly, Levinas does find a kind of eschaton in the wake of this shattered world. The war as Grossman describes it appears, to Levinas if not to Grossman, as the war of Gog and Magog, and the dehumanization of the world of the war heralds an apocalypse which brings an end to "the theologies of a past, shaken to the point of atheism" (ITN 90). The remnant that emerges from this apocalypse is not, however, a group of human beings fit to enjoy a millennium of freedom and peace, but a particular kind of human activity, namely, simple kindness stripped bare of the trappings it wears as part of 'the good.' The description of kindness is not offered as 'part of the story' but as something outside the linear course of historical events; it is given in words spoken not by

²²²V. Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. R. Chandler (London: Fontana, 1986).

Grossman's narrator but by a minor character, one who has been able to watch events pass by because he is 'feeble-minded' as well as 'inspired.' Levinas closes his essay with a long selection of the words of this feeble-minded sage, of which I will cite an abbreviated version.

Last year, on September 15, I saw twenty thousand Jews -- women, children and old people -- executed. On that day I understood that God would not have allowed such a thing. It seemed obvious to me that God did not exist. . . . When violence is carried out, calamity reigns and blood flows. I was there for the great suffering of the peasants . . . and yet the goal of the collectives was good. . . .

What did [the Christian] doctrine of peace and love bring to humanity? The tortures of the Inquisition, the struggle against heresies in France, Italy and Germany, the war between Protestants and Catholics. . . .

I have been able to see in action the implacable force of the idea of social good born in our country. I saw it again in 1937; I saw that in the name of an idea of the good as humane as that of Christianity, people were exterminated. I saw entire villages starving; in Siberia I saw the children of deported peasants dying in the snow. . . .

There exists, side by side with this so terrible greater good, human kindness in everyday life. It is the kindness of an old lady who gives a piece of bread to the convict along the roadside. It is the kindness of a soldier who holds his canteen out to a wounded enemy. The kindness of youth taking pity on old age, the kindness of a peasant who hides an old Jew in his barn. It is the kindness of those prison guards who risk their own freedom to smuggle the letters of prisoners out to wives and mothers. That private goodness of an individual for another individual is a goodness without witness, . . . without ideology, . . . without thought. (ITN 90-91)

Again the childhood theologies give way to an adult understanding. Again, the new understanding begins from the idea that 'God does not exist,' and is therefore able to answer what Levinas calls, in "Loving the Torah more than God," "the legitimate demands of atheism" (DF 143). And again it is constituted by the turn to the other. But here, in addition, we find a new motif. To rid religion of the notion of providence is a move radical enough to be referred to as an apocalypse. What is gone is not merely the conviction that God is involved in history or that all will come out right in the end, but all overarching ideas of what is good, theological or secular. The idea of the good is a totality, a monism, an attempt to make plurals singular; Grossman's feeble-minded sage can express it using generalizations like "the goal of the collectives," or "Christianity." Kindness, which

replaces the idea of the good after the apocalypse, is and must be in the plural; the sage's kindnesses are described one by one, never classified or defined but only told. Thus kindnesses emerge as the many ways of an ethics of diversity or plurality, the infinity to the good's totality. And like the Levinasian infinite in all its manifestations, they show three aspects. They are prior to the good, as a primary human impulse. They give rise to the good -- as in the case of Christ's doctrines, which began in kindnesses and yet had to speak of a good and thus "weaken the power" of kindnesses (ITN 91). And they follow the good and break it, allowing Grossman's sage to say: "I do not believe in the good, I believe in kindness" (ITN 91). Kindnesses precede, condition and rupture the good.

4) The image of the apocalypse and the kindness which is its remnant is found again in "Wholly Otherwise,"²²³ where Levinas relates his own experience of the retreat of 1940:

A retreating military unit arrives in an as yet unsuspecting locality, where the cafés are open, where the ladies visit the "ladies fashion store," where the hairdressers dress hair and bakers bake; where viscounts meet other viscounts and tell each other stories of viscounts, and where, an hour later, everything is deconstructed and devastated: houses closed up or left with their doors open, emptied of their occupants who are swept along in a current of cars and pedestrians, through roads restored to their "former glory" as roads when, in an immemorial past, they were traced by great migrations. In these in-between days, a symbolic episode: somewhere in between Paris and Alençon, a half-drunk barber used to invite soldiers who were passing on the road to come in and have a free shave in his shop; the "lads" (*"les petits gars"*) he used to call them in a patriotic language which soared above the waters or floated up from the chaos. With his two companions he shaved them free of charge -- and it was today. The essential procrastination -- the future *différance* -- was reabsorbed into the present. Time came to its end with the end of the interim period in France. (WO 4)

Here is an apocalypse. The "immemorial past" is here *today*, as is the future or "essential procrastination." The beginning and end are now; the world and time are at an end. And

²²³In *Rereading Levinas*, ed. Bernasconi and Critchley, 3-10. "Wholly Otherwise" is Levinas' only essay written solely as an address to Jacques Derrida. Derrida's play with '*différance*' involves the claim that today is always deferred until tomorrow, and thus that "it's today tomorrow" -- the phrase which Levinas uses as the sub-title of the first section of his essay. In this excerpt, which is found at the end of that section, Levinas is announcing, in effect, that "it's tomorrow today" and thus turning Derrida's *différance* on its head.

this fourth and final story adds to the image of apocalypse an image of the messiah. The barber who stands outside his door also stands outside history, watching it pass by. His gesture, magnificent for its magnanimity despite or because of its utter simplicity, says, with Levinas or to Levinas, that the messiah is here, that there is no further coming, that one does what one can for the other. The barber's language "soared above the waters" of history just as "the-one-for-the-other of responsibility . . . 'float[s] above the waters' of ontology in its irreducible diachrony" (OB 167).

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The today of the barber is surely any day. The Levinasian apocalypse -- the shift from providential theologies to ethical relation, forced by extreme circumstances -- is not once and for all, but takes place in various places at various times; it may indeed take place in many places frequently, or perhaps even everywhere all of the time. Still, it is particularly linked, in Levinas' writings, to the horrific events of the twentieth century -- to the experience of men like Wiesel in Auschwitz, of Yossel in Warsaw, of Grossman in Stalingrad, and of Levinas in France. And it is linked especially to the event which, for Levinas, is paradigmatic for all historical horrors, the Holocaust. In another essay -- "Useless Suffering," where Levinas expresses most deeply his reflections on the Holocaust -- it becomes clear that that event has made this apocalypse more possible or more likely now than ever in the recent past.

b. Useless Suffering

Levinas begins "Useless Suffering" with a complex phenomenology of pain or suffering in which it appears as the enemy of all peace or harmony, indeed, as utter negation. In Levinas' analysis, suffering is not something one *does*, but something *done to* one. Moreover, it is not an experience, or a characteristic or an affectivity, for although it is *done to one* all the time it cannot be fitted easily into our understanding of what it means to

be a human being or a particular human being. It is a sensation-destroying sensation; in other words, it is both a sensation which stops us from thinking -- a negative of a positive -- and in addition the sensation of the stoppage -- a positive of a negative. Suffering, pain, *mal*: these are “contradiction by way of sensation” (PL 157), but the contradiction is not a strict one, for both sides are negative. Suffering, then, is utter negation, “pure undergoing,” a passive which has no corresponding active. It is the referent of all evil, and it offers a *not* which is more negative than the apophatic *not*, for there is nothing beyond it; “the *not* of evil is negative right up to non-sense” (PL 157). Suffering destroys meaning and *is* the destruction of meaning. It is utterly without purpose, entirely useless.

But, Levinas continues, human beings cannot bear these truths. They attempt always to find purpose in suffering, to impose meaning on it. Some suffering can easily be given meaning as a means to an end -- as in the case of hard work which produces an effect or a product, or the case where bodily pain is understood as a warning sign leading one to seek treatment. Then there are more abstract justifications or rationalizations, where suffering appears as necessary to the life of the mind properly lived, or as producing moderation in the otherwise wayward soul, or as a force necessary to the health and continuing dynamism of society or political life. Levinas understands there to be a certain kind of truth in all this, for all these rationalizations are taken up in the spirit of good will. But he does not believe that they go to the heart of the matter. As he has it, all these ‘rationally’ inflicted or ‘rationally’ tolerated pains somehow ‘rejoin’ the pains which are inflicted unjustly and the pains which are given in nature (PL 160). There is something in every pain deeper than considerations of justice and injustice, voluntary and involuntary, means and ends; at bottom, it is all of a piece, all malignant, negative and useless. So it is that human beings have been forced to come up with a greater justification, an absolute rationalization: a theory of providence in its aspect as theodicy. We make pain bearable by totalizing it within the idea that God has a “plan of the whole” (PL 160), a plan in which

each pain or the totality of all pain has purpose.

Levinas does not analyze the theodicies of various traditions or periods in any detail; he merely sketches their basic characteristics. They tend to attribute evil to human fallibility or finitude; the fulfillment of the plan of the whole generally involves atonement or compensation or both; the whys and wherefores of the plan are, as a rule, understood to be invisible in nature and history -- in effect, theodicies subordinate pain to a metaphysical ultimate "in one way or another" (PL 160). Levinas contends that the idea of theodicy has dominated Western thought since biblical times; it held and still holds empire over our thinking. It has survived the Enlightenment in the form of a theory of progress, in which the plan is no longer hidden to nature and history but revealed in them, and in this form has made its way into the canon of Western secular thought as the source of the moral norms -- the ideals or utopias -- of triumphalist progressivism. Whether explicit, as in the pre-modern world, or implicit, as in the modern world, it was and remains the foundational idea of our theology and philosophy.

At this point in "Useless Suffering," Levinas turns to a description of the movement we have been looking at. We saw in the four stories that the suffering at Auschwitz could be called an apocalypse or a deicide; in "Useless Suffering" Levinas reminds us of this asking, in the manner of Wiesel: "did not the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of a quasi-empirical fact?" and explaining further that Auschwitz reveals with "a glaring, obvious clarity" the inadequacy of any idea of a plan of the whole (PL 162). In short, Levinas claims that after Auschwitz it is possible for us to rid ourselves of the idea which has dominated and defined our thinking for centuries. Moreover, it is in "Useless Suffering" that he makes his clearest statement on what remains after this apocalypse. He begins by explaining that the double-negative that is suffering-as-a-phenomenon can also be described as a complete passivity: the sensation of suffering is suffered and the destruction of sensation in suffering is also suffered. Thus the

one suffering has no foundation for activity and there is nothing there except a reaching out. In other words, because suffering is suffered, because it is not something the subject does or an aspect of the subject, assumed into the subject, there appears in suffering a space for the other. The

evil of suffering [is] extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment and solitude [but] also the unassumable and thus the possibility of a half opening, and, more precisely, the possibility that wherever a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh happen there is the original call for aid, for curative help, for help from the other ego whose alterity, whose exteriority promises salvation. (PL 158)

While the other's suffering is useless, it calls out to me, and my compassion, my pity, my charity toward the other in suffering is not useless. Suffering for suffering carries meaning; intrinsically meaningless, suffering takes on meaning in the inter-human sphere. The central content of the essay, then, is a call to suffer over the other's suffering. Levinas calls this call "the supreme ethical principle -- the only one which it is not possible to contest" (PL 159).

The supreme ethical principle takes over the role played in previous theology by one of a number of layers of meaning beyond ethics and reinscribes those layers into the ethical; it is relation beyond relation as opposed to providence beyond relation. It is also true messianism as opposed to false. For the error of providence is also the error of historical and ontological messianism. These ideas are violent in two ways or on two levels: first, insofar as they ignore the other except as a function of a plan of the whole, promoting complacency with suffering, allowing us passively to close our eyes to the other's pain and do nothing when we should be doing everything; and second, in cases where they allow us actively to subjugate the other to the needs of the plan, where they lend support "to a dialectic of progress that requires war, violence, and economic depression," a dialectic in which suffering is not merely legitimized but required by "a teleological drama."²²⁴ The

²²⁴Gibbs, "Unjustifiable Suffering," delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November, 1997, 7.

way to avoid both kinds of violence -- complacency with suffering, and the dangerous 'alliance of God with the self'²²⁵ which calls for suffering to be inflicted -- is to understand God to be hidden or absent, to be a reality which, in itself, can only be contested, but which appears also in the incontestable form of a trace in the face of the other. Once the present God is abandoned, in its wake arises the acknowledgment of evil and suffering for what they are, and consequently, pity for the suffering other; in its wake, as well, arises messianic expectation understood as spiritual orientation and the recognition that this orientation is equivalent to an ethical order. Our four stories attest to these truths when they suggest that the hidden God is God, and that he is expressed with a messianic gesture which turns from the ashes of historical and ontological expectation to compassion, or more specifically, to the father, to the Torah, to kindnesses, or to the world as it passes before one's door. This is the messianism of the rabbis described in "Messianic Texts," a messianism which counts on nothing, which says that the messiah is here, today; that I am the messiah. It is the messianism which comes when one 'soars above' or stands outside of the course of world-history, or which consists of standing outside of the course of world history.

But in all likelihood one does not choose to stand outside of world-history. One stands there because -- like Wiesel, Yossel, Grossman's sage, or the barber -- one has been thrust there: either pushed out or simply left behind. Perhaps only in this position, knowing that there is no meaning *of* history, can one discover a meaning *in* history. For there is indeed meaning *in* history for Levinas, in two senses. First in a simple sense: because all human events take place on a literal level in time, history is a forum where meaning appears; in other words, the ethical relation -- as the diachrony of time -- takes place in history. Second in a more complex sense: because different societies and epochs

²²⁵See Oppenheim, *Speaking/Writing of God*, 47.

have different characteristics, a particular society or epoch may be more or less open to ethics or diachrony; in other words, the history of political, social and economic changes can be understood as the story of the rise and fall of structures which encourage or discourage human encounters with the divine trace. In the first sense, meaning in history can be had in any age or any society. In the second sense, our age and our society are, according to Levinas, poised on the edge of an unprecedented realization of meaning. Having lived, as a society, through the apocalypse described in the literary accounts above, we have together been stripped of the imperial grip of theodicy and made fit as never before to realize the supreme ethical principle, to suffer for the other's suffering. This is what Levinas means when he refers to Auschwitz, and the destruction of theodicy it initiates, as an event in sacred history (PL 161). He does not mean that Auschwitz reveals a plan of the whole, or that our new fittedness to realize the supreme principle is a sign of any continuing progress; he speaks rather of a sacred history "without rhetoric or theology," without the illusion that history has led us inevitably to our elevated state or that we will necessarily retain it and improve it -- indeed, this sacred history is even without the certainty that we will take up the new ethical possibilities in the first place.²²⁶ The destruction of the Good at Auschwitz is an event in sacred history insofar as it creates a space for ethics -- and, as I maintain, a space for Levinas' philosophy of ethical rupture. The idea is crystallized into a few lines in an interview:

... I want to say that this business of Auschwitz did not interrupt the history of holiness. God did not reply, but he has taught that love of the other person, without reciprocity, is a perfection in itself. (Mortley, 21)

²²⁶Levinas clarifies the difference between the common conception of sacred history and his own in "Poetry and the Impossible," one of his essays on Paul Claudel. Claudel holds, at least for a time, a strong belief in providence which leads him to research prefigurement imagery in the Old Testament and to attempt to define the continuing role of the Jews in sacred history. To all of this, Levinas contrasts his own conception, saying that there is a kind of sacred history in "the life and death of the Jews under the Nazi occupation, the life and death of the Jews who built the State of Israel," but it is a sacred history "without rhetoric or theology." It is not the secret significance of these events but their literal meaning where sacredness lies. It is in the daily reality of lives lived, and in Jewish life in general (DF 129).

The event in Sacred History, the apocalypse of the Holocaust, does not 'interrupt the history of holiness'; it does not usher in anything radically new. Judaism has always, according to Levinas, been a 'religion of adults.' And yet, through the Holocaust, God has taught again, and perhaps taught better, that suffering for the suffering of the other is the supreme ethical principle. Levinas speaks in "Useless Suffering" of "a still uncertain and blinking modernity" which "at the end of a century of nameless sufferings" is now capable of the "elevated thought" in which suffering can take on meaning in the inter-human perspective (PL 159). This elevated thought is not exclusive to modernity, but it is nevertheless our call and thus the mark of our age.

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Towards the end of "Useless Suffering" Levinas turns to the topic of how Jews, in particular, should live in the wake of the Holocaust, and, as a framework, to the treatment of this question in Emil Fackenheim's *God's Presence in History*.²²⁷ But the discussion which follows is somewhat confusing for anyone who knows Fackenheim's book well. Levinas cites an extended passage in which Fackenheim argues for the uniqueness of the Holocaust, saying that it differs from other genocides not only because it is evil for the sake of evil rather than for the sake of acquisition, but also because the Jews died not on account of their faith but on account of the faith of their great-grandparents.²²⁸ But he does not cite Fackenheim's subsequent argument: that because they did not choose to die for their faith, because often they did not even die for a faith they had chosen, and because even those who had chosen Judaism were stripped, before their deaths, of their faith along with their

²²⁷Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). First delivered as a series of lectures at New York University in 1968.

²²⁸PL 162. Levinas omits the gritty centre of Fackenheim's argument, that Hitler killed anyone with one Jewish grandparent, and that therefore the supposed sin belonged to the victim's great-grandparents and consisted of raising Jewish children (*God's Presence*, 70). The argument comes through, however, without this detail.

humanity -- that because of all this, those who died cannot be understood as martyrs. Instead, he proceeds, in his own voice, to call the victims martyrs and to contend moreover that "the final act of [the Nazi] destruction is accomplished today in the posthumous denial of the very fact of martyrdom by the would-be 'revisers of history'" (PL 163).

A brief examination of the relevant themes in Fackenheim's book will help us to understand the nature of the critique here. The burden of *God's Presence in History* is to describe the crisis in providential faith. Fackenheim argues, like Levinas after him, that none of the theodicies of biblical and midrashic Judaism is equal to the Holocaust. It cannot be accounted for as punishment for sin because children and other innocents were murdered. It cannot be accounted for with the midrashic rubric of martyrdom because of the reasons stated above. It cannot be explained as a lesson to the gentiles since its existence in history renders a second Holocaust not less likely but more. It cannot be accounted for with the biblical rubric of a test since in the biblical accounts of such tests -- in the stories of Abraham, Jeremiah and Job -- a restoration follows unlike anything that happened in the camps. And finally, it cannot be accounted for with the idea of the absence of God for a theory of absence relies on the hope that God will re-appear when he is needed, and yet at Auschwitz he did not appear.²²⁹ This series of repudiations leads Fackenheim to an impasse. On the one hand, the fact that none of these theodicies is adequate suggests the conclusion that there is no good God, and leads therefore to the abandonment of Judaism. On the other hand, to abandon Judaism is to give Hitler a 'posthumous victory,'²³⁰ and for this reason, if for no other, the conclusions that there is no God or that Jews should stop being Jews are the most unacceptable of possible conclusions.

When Fackenheim retreats from the edge of his impasse, it is to return to the God of

²²⁹Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 69-70. This is a longer version of the two-theodicy scheme he describes in the middle of the book, in which the first theodicy, where evil is punishment for sin, gives way after the Bar Kochba rebellion to the second, where God feels remorse and laments the evil he has allowed, and goes into exile with us. *God's Presence*, 25-31.

²³⁰Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 84.

Judaism, and thus, necessarily as he sees it, to the God of history and providence. He does not conceive of Judaism as a religion of difference or brokenness; he does not make use of any conception like that of the Levinasian face or the God who appears only in the relation with the other. On the contrary, he seeks God always in the overarching structure or the plan of the whole. The origins and foundations of Judaism, he contends, are found in 'root experiences,' which he explains, quoting Mártin Buber, as moments in which the "laws of nature" and the "laws of history" become "transparent, and permit a glimpse of the sphere in which a whole power, not restricted by any other, is at work."²³¹ And though he speaks in the description of root experiences of the "laws of nature" as well as the "laws of history," when he speaks in his own voice rather than Buber's, it is the laws of history, not the laws of nature, which reveal the 'whole power' of God, or God's plan of the whole. Moreover, according to Fackenheim, all religions and philosophies are based on a plan of the whole; other conceptions depart from that of Judaism only insofar as they discover or situate the plan elsewhere than in history. Much of *God's Presence in History* consists of a list of the rubrics which thinkers have used to replace the God of history and an account of what is wrong with each one; what is interesting here is not, however, the argument between these rubrics and Fackenheim's, but the fact that all of them are versions of the plan of the whole. Fackenheim explains one may turn away from the God of history "to eternity above history, to nature below it, . . . to an individualistic inwardness divorced from it,"²³² to the positivism of Laplace,²³³ to the messianism of the Marxists,²³⁴ or to the humanism of Nietzsche.²³⁵ But the turn to the other does not arise. At the end of the book, having repudiated the alternatives just mentioned and also Jewish theodicies listed above, he

²³¹Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 12-13. Fackenheim quotes here from Buber's *Moses* (see *God's Presence*, 32n.14).

²³²Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 6.

²³³Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 35-43.

²³⁴Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 52-59.

²³⁵Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 49-52.

presents part of a new plan of the whole, a renewed Jewish providential framework in which the Holocaust itself becomes a revelation, comparable to the Exodus and Sinai.

At certain points, Fackenheim comes close to expressing a Levinasian understanding. In one passage, he suggests that God-talk that is adequate to the human condition cannot take place within philosophy but only within midrash. Philosophical reflection would destroy the root experience by focusing on its contradictions: the involved God in contradiction with evil; the involved God in contradiction with human freedom; and the involved God in contradiction with the transcendent God. In distinction, midrash, which is "fragmentary," and which expresses rather than explains, can hold these things together in tension without attempting to reconcile them logically; as Levinas would say, it can preserve an enigma without having it become a dilemma. But, according to Fackenheim, traditional Jewish midrash also insists that these tensions will one day be resolved, and in this sense it is not only fragmentary but at the same time whole. Thus while Fackenheim appears here to acknowledge the idea of rupture or enigma, he cannot rid himself of the conviction that all rupture must one day give way to the wholeness guaranteed by the existence of the plan, and all enigma to the ultimate answers the plan will offer.²³⁶ Again he comes close to Levinas when he says that in the Bible, God is not an explanatory concept. Rather than presenting God as what explains or does not explain, he argues, the Bible presents God as revealed and concealed.²³⁷ But, the upshot of this discussion is only that Fackenheim's God does not function as an etiology, a projection, or a stop-gap. For although he is not an explanation, he nevertheless has an explanation, which he will eventually make manifest to human beings in a messianic era. Fackenheim's critical ire is directed not to those who say there is a plan of the whole, but to those -- like Laplace, Marx and Nietzsche -- who think they can grasp the plan prematurely.

²³⁶Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 20-21.

²³⁷Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 39.

Let us return now to “Useless Suffering.” Levinas’ charge against Fackenheim is on the one hand radical and, on the other hand, unexplicit to the point of obscurity. That it is radical is obvious: Fackenheim denies the victims the name of martyrs; Levinas says that those who deny the victims the name of martyrs finish Hitler’s work posthumously. Moreover, Levinas makes his claim not only in a discussion of Fackenheim, but in a discussion of the very argument Fackenheim uses to support his denial of martyrdom, and thus he makes it quite clear that he is not merely mistaking Fackenheim’s meaning but consciously criticizing it. However, the radical nature of the critique is mitigated by the fact that it is not stated explicitly. Since Levinas makes use, for the purpose of the critique, of something very close to a phrase Fackenheim himself is famous for coining -- ‘posthumous victories’ -- it must sound to a reader only partly familiar with *God’s Presence in History* as if Levinas’ accusation is being made in Fackenheim’s name against others. The radical nature of the critique shows that something in Fackenheim’s book, or perhaps a number of things, have offended Levinas gravely. Its implicit or covert nature suggests that Levinas respects Fackenheim’s experience, and perhaps some of his ideas.

What is behind the critique? I see three ways in which Levinas may be offended or distressed by Fackenheim’s book. First, I believe that Levinas may be put off by Fackenheim’s extended discussion of the question of martyrdom, in which he rejects its usefulness as a midrashic theodicy piece by piece.²³⁸ He begins by noting that unlike in previous martyrdoms, the Nazis did not offer their victims the choice of conversion, and suggests that there can be no martyrdom without choice. He then presents the argument that there may still be found among the victims “a faithfulness resembling” martyrdom, but casts doubt here as well, since the Nazis made every effort to destroy souls before bodies and thus to force their victims into faithless deaths. Finally, he notes that the Nazis did not

²³⁸Fackenheim, *God’s Presence*, 74-75.

always succeed in destroying faith -- some victims died in the gas chambers with the shema on their lips -- and in this context he begins tentatively to use the word martyr again. His general point is merely that a theodicy of martyrdom is not sufficient to reconcile the deaths of the victims with the existence of the good God, a point with which Levinas would certainly agree. But the point is developed through what might appear to Levinas an excessive interest in the grizzly details of how the killing was carried out and in what state of mind or soul the victims died. To make distinctions between those who died piously and those who did not, and to accord the name martyr to one group and not the other -- this may seem to Levinas an unworthy way to think. The existence of ethical behaviour in the camps, documented by Wiesel in *Night*, is evidence of God's trace, and in any case the awareness of the infinite in the individual human heart is not something that can be disclosed, defined, or designated. God is not present in a particular set of historical circumstances and absent in others; he is always absent, and always present in the trace of his absence. But if it is saying too much to say that Levinas finds Fackenheim's discussion unworthy, it is certainly legitimate to say that it must seem to him to be missing the point, that is, misunderstanding the meaning of the word martyr. For Levinas, the word is connected to the supreme ethical principle; to accord the term is not to designate a certain state of mind or status, but to suffer for the other's suffering.

The second issue at stake in the critique is Fackenheim's impasse: that he finds theodicy unacceptable and also the rejection of theodicy unacceptable, that he both repudiates theodicy and reassumes it. I believe that Levinas sees the two sides of the impasse together in Fackenheim's denial of martyrdom. Immediately after Levinas speaks of that denial as the "the final act of . . . destruction," he adds: "this [denial] would be pain in its undiluted malignancy, suffering for nothing" (PL 163). This is to say that the denial of martyrdom shows, in part, that Fackenheim, like Levinas, rejects theodicy in the awareness of the uselessness of suffering. But, for Levinas, it is from this position that the

shift to adult faith is accomplished; it is from this position that one moves to the other, to the supreme ethical principle, to suffering for the other's suffering. And Fackenheim's denial of martyrdom means not only that he has reached this position, but also that he is unable to recognize this movement, or unwilling to make it. In short, the denial signifies both that he knows something true -- that there can be no theodicy -- and that he does not know something true -- that beyond theodicy is the supreme principle. Levinas' critique is covert out of respect for Fackenheim's arrival at the impasse. It is radical because Fackenheim falls away from the impasse, choosing the wrong side of the dialectic.

Were Fackenheim to remain torn between the two sides of his impasse -- theodicy and the critique of theodicy -- he would, we may speculate, be on the verge of the discovery of the supreme principle. The critique of theodicy would harass theodicy continually; like scepticism harassing philosophy it would tear down any version of completeness or providence Fackenheim presented to it; in the end he would surely be forced to abandon the impasse, choosing the sceptical, harassing apocalyptic side, and, in its light or in its darkness, would be left with nothing grand but only the turn to the other. And the impasse *could* be preserved as a tension for a time and expressed in the style of Fackenheim's fragmentary midrash, if he were to argue that the Holocaust was both a sign that God was not present in history and also a sign that he was, both a destruction of structures and also a structure, and that the God above the Holocaust was both silent and also be revealed. But Fackenheim does not keep revelation and silence together in tension and nor does he opt in favour of silence; instead he discards silence and verbalizes the assignation conveyed by the 'Commanding Voice of Auschwitz,' which orders the Jew to remain a Jew. It is at this moment -- the moment when it becomes clear that "according to [Fackenheim], Auschwitz would paradoxically entail a revelation of the very God who was nevertheless silent at Auschwitz" (PL 163) -- that he falls away from the potentially fertile position of the impasse toward the wrong side. Fackenheim is simply too profoundly attached to the plan of the

whole.

The third and most important element in Fackenheim which has perhaps offended Levinas, is the nature of the assignation conveyed by the 'Commanding Voice of Auschwitz.'²³⁹ Fackenheim argues that Auschwitz, or rather God-through-Auschwitz, reveals what he calls the 614th Commandment, namely, that the Jew must not abandon Judaism and thus give Hitler a 'posthumous victory,' or in short, that the Jew must remain a Jew. If the Holocaust also brings a command to the gentiles, it is only that they must allow the Jews to remain Jews. Levinas cites this idea, but then adds a reflection of his own, one which critically undercuts Fackenheim's idea.

This final reflection of the Toronto philosopher, formulated in terms which render it relative to the destiny of the Jewish people, can be given a universal signification. From Sarajevo to Cambodia humanity has witnessed a host of cruelties in the course of a century when Europe, in its 'human sciences,' seemed to reach the end of its subject, the humanity which, during all these horrors, breathed -- already or still -- the fumes of the crematory ovens of the 'final solution' where theodicy appeared impossible. (PL 164)

All of humanity, not just the Jewish part, has experienced horrors which are perhaps unprecedented. Therefore, as Levinas goes on to say, all human beings should be "pledged" to the supreme ethical principle and to a faith without theodicy. This is a far cry from Fackenheim's point both in the sense (on which we have focused above) that Fackenheim does not, ultimately, think that anyone should be pledged to a faith without theodicy, and in the sense (on which we will focus now) that the lesson Fackenheim draws from the Holocaust is strongly particularist and cannot be universalized.

We have seen that Levinas tends to use the word 'Judaism' to represent characteristics common to humanity which appear paradigmatically in Jews. This is especially the case with respect to what might be called the negative aspect of Judaism: antisemitism, for Levinas, is quintessential hatred, the hatred not of gentile for Jew but of

²³⁹I am in debt in this discussion of the third element in the critique and its link to the first element (which I will discuss presently) to Robert Gibbs, who suggested these ideas to me in conversation.

one -- any one -- for the other. He writes that

antisemitism is not simply the hatred felt by a majority towards a minority, nor just a xenophobia or some form of racism, even if it is the ultimate reason for these phenomena which are derived from it. For antisemitism is the repugnance felt toward the unknown of the other's psyche, the mystery of his interiority, or, beyond any conglomeration into a whole or organization into an organism, the pure proximity of the other man -- in other words, social living itself. (BTV 190)

Judaism stands, in Levinas' thought, for a certain way of being in which other peoples can also engage; it is common to Jews perhaps because they are, by nature or by circumstance, quintessentially involved in what he here calls "social living itself"; Jews are social beings. The way of being is best expressed, I think, by Yossel, when he says that to be Jewish is to be happy to be unhappy. It is to understand and accept that history or reality is mainly a matter of misery and injustice and to be happy with this history or reality; but it is to do this without becoming resigned, but instead, continuing to swim against the tide of misery and injustice. This comprehension, by which one's love of God is equivalent to one's reproach of God and is also equivalent to one's love of one's fellows and is also equivalent to one's suffering for their suffering -- this is Levinas' Judaism. It is profoundly non-exclusive; it expresses the experience of all who suffer, all who undergo passion. And to hate the Jew is, for Levinas, to hate this way of being, to fight it in an attempt to grasp a happiness more certain than the Jewish happiness to be unhappy.

The third element of Levinas' critique of Fackenheim is thus connected to the second element. Fackenheim's struggle with the question of universal and particular which ends with the assertion that the Holocaust brings a message exclusively for Jews reveals, once again, his attachment to the God of history or the plan of the whole, and his own desire for a happiness more certain than that of Levinas' Judaism. Fackenheim is thinking in ontological or overarching terms: he is thinking of humanity as a whole divided into groups rather than as a collection of alterities; he is thinking of the 'all' and the 'Jew' rather than the 'each,' and he is thinking in this way in order to facilitate the postulation of a plan in which

happiness in unhappiness does not figure. For what is behind the fact that Fackenheim both reasserts providence and insists on the continued exclusive survival of the Jews? What stops him from moving into adult faith? In part, it is probably simply the understandable desire to live in the awareness of a God who will put things right; certainly this is what is suggested by Levinas' analysis of theodicy as having as its sole purpose making life's suffering bearable. But there is also an anger here -- an anger that is not, like Wiesel's and Yossel's directed at God, and not, more surprisingly, directed at the Nazis -- an anger that is directed at the rest of the world, at non-Jews. It emerges most clearly, perhaps, in his unwillingness to offer, ethically, more than he receives; he finds "totally unacceptable" the idea that "because of Auschwitz the justification of Jewish existence depends on Jews behaving like superhuman saints toward all other peoples ever after";²⁴⁰ here, the sarcasm behind his overstatement betrays his anger. And he falls back into theodicy and into an insistence on exclusivity in order to provide an ontological philosophical framework for what is essentially an ideological statement: Jews for the Jews.

With this in mind, we can return to the first element of the critique. Fackenheim returns at the end of his account of martyrdom to the idea that some of the Nazis victims, those who died with the shema on their lips, might be called martyrs. But he begins the account by saying that the victims, in general cannot be called martyrs. Clearly, he does not think that most of the Nazi victims died with the shema on their lips. How, then, does he see the Nazi victims? As liberal, enlightened Jews like himself. Without doing Fackenheim too much injustice, I think it is possible to suggest that his book is not actually an attempt to deal philosophically with the Holocaust at all, but an attempt to deal ideologically with the contemporary question of Judaism and liberal assimilation. The morally bankrupt utilization of the Holocaust by flag-waving Jewish ideologues is described in some detail by Jacob

²⁴⁰Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 103 n.51

Neusner in his book *Stranger at Home*.²⁴¹ Levinas' critique of Fackenheim's discussion of martyrdom in which it becomes clear that Fackenheim's concern is the loss of Jewish identity rather than the loss of life, his critique of Fackenheim's historicism in which it becomes clear that Fackenheim is erecting a grand historical scheme in which Auschwitz becomes a buttress for historical ontology rather than its end, and his critique of Fackenheim's exclusivism in which it becomes clear that for Fackenheim that historical ontology has as its sole function to ensure continued Jewish existence -- all of these critiques may suggest that, as Levinas sees it, Fackenheim is engaged in an endeavour which could be classified as the same kind of flag waving criticized by Neusner.

Levinas' most radical critique of Fackenheim may appear in a passage in which he does not seem to be addressing him at all. He comments that there are only two philosophical positions open in light of the experience of the Holocaust:

to abandon the world to useless suffering . . . or . . . in a faith more difficult than ever, in a faith without theodicy, [to] continue Sacred History, a history which now demands even more of the resources of the self in each one, and appeals to its suffering inspired by the suffering of the other person, to its compassion which is a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering for nothing and which straight-away has a meaning. (PL 164)

If one clings to theodicy, one "abandon[s] the world to useless suffering." Fackenheim clings to theodicy and thus, we are forced to assume, Fackenheim abandons the world to useless suffering.²⁴²

²⁴¹Neusner, *Stranger at Home: The Holocaust, Zionism and American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

²⁴²Other thinkers have formulated similar critiques of Fackenheim. Michael Wyschogrod, for instance, argues that Fackenheim places the Holocaust -- or rather, a drive to thwart Hitler posthumously by ensuring the survival of Judaism -- at the centre of his religion, where it does not belong. He shows, further, that Fackenheim dismisses Richard Rubenstein only because Rubenstein's argument would divide Jews so that they could no longer stand against assimilation, rather than on any theological or philosophical basis. Fackenheim attempts, he writes "to turn the state of affairs into an ideology. . . . One is almost driven to the conclusion that in the absence of the Holocaust, given Fackenheim's profound understanding of the irreversibility of the secular stance, no justification for the further survival of Judaism could have been found. With the Holocaust, amazing as this may appear, Judaism has gotten a new lease on life." M. Wyschogrod, "Faith and the Holocaust" in *In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* V. 2, ed. J. Neusner (New York: Garland, 1993), 252-260, 289-90. In the same article, Wyschogrod deconstructs the notion of 'uniqueness' on which Fackenheim pins so much of his argument; the claim of 'uniqueness' -- if

If my contention that the Holocaust defines the space in which Levinas philosophizes is correct, then the lack of movement toward the supreme principle in Fackenheim is of great personal concern to Levinas. The point of "Useless Suffering" is that modern society as a whole is now ready to understand the supreme principle because of the events in which we have been involved. But Fackenheim, who was incarcerated in a labour camp for a short period before the war and thus is more closely involved with these events than most of us, is quite evidently not ready. Moreover, his attitude is indicative of the general trend. Jewish theological treatments of the Holocaust have tended either to defend providence or to give up on, or repudiate, the entire Jewish tradition.²⁴³ This range of treatments -- described perfectly by the categories of Fackenheim's argument -- represents a threat to Levinas. For in light of this range, what is the status of Levinas' claim that the destruction of theodicy is an event in Sacred History, or that human beings are more

it is not to be relativized by the simple fact that all events are unique -- can only mean 'worse than anything else,' despite Fackenheim's insistence that it does not mean this (Wyschogrod, "Faith," 291-2).

Arthur Cohen, in distinction, takes issue with Fackenheim in a way that makes Fackenheim sound a little like a late-in-life Levinasian -- though we should note that he is speaking not about *God's Presence* but about a later work, *To Mend the World*. He points to Fackenheim's early ambitions toward developing his own philosophical system and notes that he pins similar sentiments on others, for instance Franz Rosenzweig whose hope that *The Star of Redemption* is 'unfanatical' is translated, by Fackenheim, into the distinctly un-Rosenzweigian hope that it is an 'unfanatical system.' A. Cohen, "On Emil Fackenheim's *To Mend the World*: A Review Essay," *Modern Judaism* 3 (1983): 225-236, 227. Cohen proceeds to argue that when Fackenheim abandons the desire to systematize, in the wake of the Holocaust, he moves either into non-philosophical homiletics or into non-philosophical anecdote. On the "other side" of philosophy, "Fackenheim's book [*To Mend the World*] utterly collapses" (231). There, "where theology might have begun again, he surrendered intellection for the sake of moralizing examples of superlative human witness that are offered naked, without examination of their cognitive significance, their metaphysical situation, their ethical contribution either to the demolition of old views of God or to the construction of a new view of God formed in the aftermath of the Holocaust" (232).

²⁴³Richard Rubenstein and Arthur Cohen, like Levinas, speak of the death of God and mean by it the death of previous theologies or theology at large. But unlike Levinas, they see no resources in the tradition describing a way of life 'otherwise than theology,' and their arguments therefore emerge as props for modern secularism. See R. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) and A. Cohen, "Thinking the Tremendous," chap. in *An Arthur Cohen Reader*, ed. D. Stern and P. Mendes-Flohr (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 234-250. Jacob Neusner and others argue, like Levinas, that nothing can be learned from the Holocaust, for God had no hand in it. But unlike Levinas, Neusner and co. do not allow this understanding to challenge the notion of theodicy or providence at large (see Neusner, *Stranger at Home*). Eliezer Berkovits, Irving Greenberg and, as we have seen, Fackenheim, in complete distinction to Levinas, each find ways to fit the Holocaust into a providential framework. See E. Berkovits, *Faith and the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1973) and Irving Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1998).

than ever ready to understand the supreme ethical principle? And -- and this is the critical question -- if we are not ready to understand the supreme principle, have we ears to hear any of Levinas' prophecy at all? The critique of Fackenheim is not only an argument for Levinas' understanding of the Holocaust, it is a plea for a hearing of his entire philosophy.²⁴⁴

But we should expound more clearly the connection between the destruction of theodicy and Levinasian ethics in general. This is the intention of the remainder of this chapter.

II. The space of his ethics

Levinas' ideas do not arise directly from his experience of the Holocaust. His philosophy, as he often explains, is first and foremost the stuff of life lived, confirmed in encounter and desire, and the forum in which it arises is the life of the book -- for most of his ideas occur in the sphere of his relation to old philosophy or, as I have tried to show, his relation to the Jewish sources. Nevertheless, the track he lays down in "Useless Suffering" -- from reflection on the Holocaust with its rupture of certainties, to the supreme ethical principle -- functions, in part, as an intellectual autobiography. For though his ideas occur in his reading, it is the Holocaust which teaches him what and how to read.

At one point in "Useless Suffering" Levinas suggests that the notion of providential

²⁴⁴Not, of course, that what Levinas sees as the deficiencies in Fackenheim's understanding come as any surprise to him. It is common to reaffirm providence after reflecting on the destruction of theodicy at Auschwitz; Levinas is surely familiar with the tendency in both Judaism, as described in the previous note, and Christianity, as represented by for instance by François Mauriac who reaffirms providence in his foreword to Wiesel's *Night*. In addition, Levinas is familiar with the more dangerous deformations of modernity. Fackenheim is much closer to the supreme principle than the thinkers we saw Levinas take on in chapter four, Kojève and Lévi-Strauss, and a great deal less threatening to Levinas than they. It is only that because he comes so close to a repudiation of providence, his falling away is more to be lamented, or more worthy of address. Or perhaps we are too generous here; perhaps the only substantial difference is that Fackenheim's Hegelianism is better disguised than Kojève's and Lévi-Strauss's. In any case, the critical point is that the expressions in "Useless Suffering" that appear hopeful should be read carefully, in the understanding that they may constitute lament and call rather than prediction.

theology “is in a certain sense implicit in the Old Testament, where the drama of the Diaspora reflects the sins of Israel,” a teaching which he compares to the Christian doctrine of original sin (PL 161).²⁴⁵ However, in another essay, “Jewish Thought Today,” he claims that Jews who abandon providential theology in the wake of the Holocaust do not, in fact, abandon their own texts but the texts of Christian Europe. He explains that

the fact that the monstrosity of Hitlerism could be produced in an evangelized Europe shook within the Jewish mind the plausibility which Christian metaphysics could have for a Jew used to a long acquaintance with Christianity. This plausibility involved *the primacy of supernatural salvation with regard to justice on earth*. Has not this primacy made at least possible a great deal of confusion on earth, and this extreme limit of human dereliction? The famous incomprehension towards supernatural salvation shown by supposedly worldly Jews . . . appeared abruptly not as an example of pigheadedness but as a moment of supreme lucidity, and the Jews began to believe that their stiff necks were the most metaphysical part of their anatomy. (DF 161)

Jews turn away from Christian texts with their explicit providence -- and presumably also from the texts of secular modernity which express an implicit version of that providence -- back to their own books. But do they not find there a comparable theory of providence? To solve the problem it is only necessary to see that, in “Useless Suffering,” just before saying that providential theology is ‘in a certain sense implicit’ in the Bible, Levinas says that theodicy is as old as “*a certain reading of the Bible*” (PL 161, my italics). He thus slips in the suggestion that the entire Old Testament might be read without any conception of theodicy or providence appearing there. Such a reading, if one were to attempt it, would certainly have to be performed using the Talmud as a screen or an interpretive code; it would be a sustained example of the kind of desacralized reading we discussed in the last chapter. This is the kind of reading he means when he speaks, in “Jewish Thought Today,”

²⁴⁵This apparent criticism of biblical theology (and I argue presently that it is *only* apparent) is prefaced by two minor criticisms. First, in discussing one of the elementary ways pain can be made ‘useful’ and suffering overlooked -- by linking pain to wisdom -- he cites Ecclesiastes: “he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (1:18, PL 159-60). Then, in discussing a more abstract rationalization of pain -- the notion that a healthy society requires some suffering in the form of discipline -- he asks: “is not fear of punishment the beginning of wisdom?” (PL 160) -- a rhetorical question which functions as a critique of at least one interpretation of the biblical verse “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Pr. 1:7).

of studies which “aim to return to the rabbinic texts, which offer a true illumination of the Bible, the law and the prophets” (DF 161).²⁴⁶ For Levinas, the Holocaust not only takes the Jew back to the text but takes him there armed with a rabbinic hermeneutic and a new motivation to apply it; the Holocaust is both the Jew’s reason for reading and what shapes his reading, directing him to the anti-absolutist thrust in rabbinicism.

This is something Levinas knows from experience. For what Jews find when they return to their old books, according to Levinas in “Jewish Thought Today,” is ethics -- by which he means *my ethics* which *I* found when *I* turned back after the Holocaust to these texts. It is an ethics particularly fit to deal with the crisis of our time: an ethics given by a God who provides no source for static certainty in the worldly sphere, nor any conclusions about the ultimately good ends to which political evil is turned; an ethics of diversity which stands against the rigid claims and the commonalities of totalitarian ideologies; an ethics discovered by means of an ethical hermeneutics -- itself discovered -- in which ideas acquire and maintain authority by movement and debate in broken totality. This way of thinking is *there* in the old books, and is at the same time is arrived at *because of*, or *for*, the Holocaust. The double-cause is possible because Levinas’ readings of the Jewish sources are neither exegeses nor eisegeses but relations, because his interpretations are speakings which follow listenings, which is to say, responses. They exist in the space between Levinas and the text, a space which is defined neither by Levinas, nor by the text. The space exists because Levinas is reading, and Levinas is reading because of the Holocaust; the space is therefore predicated on the Holocaust, and its borders are, at least in part, defined by the Holocaust.

Insofar as his philosophical space is defined by the Holocaust, he reaches out not

²⁴⁶However, in a footnote in “Useless Suffering,” Levinas says that he is thinking of Job, and appears to suggest that to perform a non-providential reading would be to read the Bible back through this late book (PL 167n.8). During the 1980s, Levinas was inclined to say that he drew on the Bible more than the Talmud, as in “Useless Suffering” (1982) and the interview with the graduate students published in PL (1986). This may represent a shift in thinking away from the Talmudic emphasis of “Jewish Thought Today” (1961) and the earlier talmudic readings we discussed in the last chapter (50s and 60s). Or it may merely represent the way he addresses certain audiences.

only to the past, but also to the future. His thought, he says, in a much-quoted line, is “dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror” (DF 291). Presentiment *and* memory. Already in itself the statement plays with time -- perhaps conflating two times into one, perhaps splitting one time into two -- but one must see the statement as it is originally placed to understand its impact and its import. The essay, “Signature” -- which is presented as a short intellectual autobiography -- begins with a staccato catalogue, one paragraph in length, of the events of Levinas’ philosophical life. The verbs in this first paragraph are almost all in particle form, that is to say, the paragraph contains no complete sentence until its closing sentence -- “This disparate inventory is a biography” -- a sentence which has as its function only to close. The sentence, “It is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror” forms on its own the second paragraph, and is thus only the second complete sentence in the essay. Its succinctness and clarity, in stark contrast to the drone that precedes it, makes it shocking. And so does its solitude. Its context is a non-context; it is not explained; it is not referred to in the list that precedes it and has barely an echo in the extended account that follows. Why does it not appear in its place in the catalogue or the later account? Because the Holocaust has no time of its own in Levinas’ thought, no once-present; it is out of time; it does not ‘appear.’ However, its absence -- its pastness and futureness -- occurs throughout the essay, as it does throughout the life and the work. The image or dynamic here is the opposite of the messianic barber. For Levinas watching the barber, yesterday and tomorrow fade into today; for Levinas in “Signature,” the today of the Holocaust fades into yesterday and tomorrow. And yet the two images mean the same thing: *that yesterday and tomorrow are orientations in the soul today; that the past and the future are orientations in the soul in a broken now.* In “Signature,” Levinas takes the now of the barber’s apocalypse and uses it to orient himself to what was and what will be, to listen and speak to the dead and to those he has not yet met, that is, to us; the space of the relation that is defined by the Holocaust is the space of a

relation with a past and a future. Levinas' Judaism -- and Levinas' philosophy -- are thus not merely speech about non-useless suffering, or about the for-the-other. They *are* a non-useless suffering; they *are* a for-the-other or an act of compassion. They honour the martyred dead, and they offer those yet to come a consolation, albeit a difficult consolation. The Holocaust sends Levinas to the texts of tradition -- to the past -- but the tradition is one in which rethinking and reshaping -- the renewal demanded by the future -- is at all times a possibility. And the possibility of rethinking and reshaping, even unrealized -- indeed, the antithesis of the realized -- may be sufficient. In its plurality and plasticity, his Judaism and his philosophy may be adequate to the task of solacing a people who has suffered at the hands of a totalitarian movement.

*

Let us now take up the question of the way the peculiarities of the ethics which arises in Levinas' relation to old texts are driven and bordered by the Holocaust. The defining characteristic of Levinas' ethics is asymmetry. This has two aspects: *the differential of identity*, that is, the assumption that the other is unlike me rather than like me, and, following from it, *the differential of responsibility*, that is, the assumption that the other is higher than me so that my duties to him increase infinitely. I want to take up the relation of these aspects to the experience of the Holocaust at some length.

Let us begin by approaching the question of the differential of identity from the other side, asking: what kind of ethics might arise in the wake of the Holocaust, an ethics of commonality or an ethics of difference? We can begin by acknowledging the basic truth Plato expresses when he has the Stranger explain in the *Sophist* that everything has within it, as well as being, motion and rest, *same and different* (255c-e), and once again when he has Socrates suggest to Calicles in the *Gorgias* that if the two of them had nothing in common they could not speak to one another and if they had everything in common there would be no point in speaking to one another (481c-482c): that is, that human beings are in

part the same and in part unique. I believe that Levinas understands this, and that his emphasis of difference over commonality takes into account the fact that we are not utterly strange to one another in *all* respects, though we are *all* utterly strange to one another in *some* respects. He bases his ethics primarily on difference simply because an ethics of difference is more demanding. But the matter comes into better focus if the question of difference or commonality is rephrased, in light of the fact that we are all same and different, in a more sophisticated form, namely, should I believe that *what concerns me concerns the other*, or that *what concerns the other concerns me*? The first idea -- that what concerns me concerns the other -- expresses the basic truth of likeness or commonality but carries little authority and may be overlooked in a case where violence is deemed necessary; it may occur, for example, in the fellow feeling that arises at times between soldiers fighting for opposing armies, or in the empathy of the executioner for the executed. The second idea -- that what concerns the other concerns me -- expresses the basic truth of unlikeness or difference and carries complete authority; it is the shock of alterity, an invitation to discovery, and a command which may not be overlooked. Certainly, both were missing at Auschwitz. The Nazis were often almost without a sense that the Jews were like them, part of the common brotherhood of humanity; they attempted to dehumanize their victims until no feeling of brotherhood could grow up between them and their executioners. But the very fact that this was attempted, perhaps in part successfully, is reason to turn in the wake of the Holocaust to the command that cannot be refused, to the conviction that what concerns the other concerns me, that I am the other's keeper; in short, to the for-the-other or responsibility. Brotherhood or fellow feeling is not a sufficient definition of what was missing, or of what is now necessary.

To conceive of difference as the basis of our ethics -- and indeed as the basis of our humanity -- is necessary after the Holocaust for another reason as well. Levinas' main charge against Buber is that he over-emphasizes commonality. This may or may not be true

of Buber's thought generally, but it does seem to emerge in his attitude toward Adolph Eichmann, described by Hannah Arendt.²⁴⁷ Because Buber emphasizes what is common to the point where it becomes the mark of one's humanity, and because he has nothing in common with Eichmann, he comes close to refusing him the status of human being. It seems to me that what is wrong with this is not so much that it is ungenerous to Eichmann, but that, taken to its logical limit, it means that Eichmann cannot be tried in a human court. In order to put the Nazi on trial and condemn him we must recognize that he is not a different species, or an inexorably evil alien, but one of us. Because of the necessity of war trials, then, the Holocaust calls us to find a way of conceiving human beings that includes the Nazis. Not that it must understand them; indeed it must not even attempt it, both because the Nazis thought they could understand the plan of the whole and the human role in it, and also because, with Buber, we find it impossible to understand the Nazis. On the contrary, it must surely have as one of its premises that none of us can ever explain or understand another; it must be founded on difference. Only it must not exclude the Nazis from the ranks of human beings, and therefore, if it is not to account for their behaviour, it must in some way be accountable for it.

So much for the differential of identity. We move on to the differential of responsibility, the idea that the other is higher than me and that my responsibilities to him increase infinitely. The limit case of this phenomenon is expressed in the several passages in which Levinas says that I must be responsible for my persecutor and my persecutions, that

the non-indifference of responsibility . . . is responsibility for the very outrage that the other, who qua other excludes me, inflicts on me, for the persecution with which, before any intention, he persecutes me. (OB 166)

How are we to explain this?

²⁴⁷Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 251-2.

Let us first try out the explanation offered by Bernhard Waldenfels.²⁴⁸ Waldenfels argues that Levinas is speaking in the passages which treat responsibility for the persecutor in same way as Socrates speaks in Book II of the *Republic*. Socrates, we recall, begins Book II willing to defend ethics²⁴⁹ as something that is both good in itself and also good in its consequences, but this does not satisfy his young interlocutors, who insist not only that he defend ethics as something good in itself regardless of consequences, but that he reverse the consequences, attributing to the ethical man all the material circumstances that might be thought to accrue to immorality; in short, they demand that he prove that ethics is good in a case where the ethical man is friendless, abjectly poor, tortured and finally put to death. We should add to Waldenfels' argument the fact that Socrates does not take up the challenge explicitly in the *Republic*, although the vision of the good in Book VI and the vision of the heavenly spheres in Book X certainly offer between them an implicit answer. He takes it up explicitly, however, in the *Gorgias*, where he presents a most convincing argument that the tyrant is unhappy, more unhappy even than the tyrant's victim. Thus Levinas may be called Socratic when he suggests that we should pity the persecutor: that "the face of the neighbour in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful" (OB 111). More to the point, though, and returning to Waldenfels, Levinas' and Socrates' arguments are correlative insofar as, in both, what is defended is defended in every case; thus, in the view of Socrates, ethics that excludes the extreme case would be worthless and,

²⁴⁸Bernhard Waldenfels, "Response and Responsibility in Levinas" in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. Peperzak, 39-52.

²⁴⁹Socrates calls it justice. I have used ethics in this paragraph instead because, in Levinas' later thought, justice becomes a technical term distinct from ethics and meaning the symmetrical imposition of what once was asymmetrical ethics on a political body (see note #16 on PL 171). In distinction, justice, in the *Republic* is a fairly wide term covering moral behaviour in general; it is legitimate to translate it ethics here. Incidentally, Derrida has said in an interview that in his *Specters of Marx*, he tries to show that Socrates' "dike" or 'justice' implies "non-gathering, dissociation, heterogeneity, non-identity with itself, endless inadequation, infinite transcendence," i.e. is correlative to Levinas' 'ethics.' Derrida et. al. "The Villanova Roundtable" in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, J. Caputo, 3-28, 17. The distinction I make below between Levinas and Socrates could be called into question in fertile ways on the basis of Derrida's argument.

“in the view of Levinas, responsibility that excludes the extreme case would be worthless.”²⁵⁰ Levinas must include the extreme case if he is to have any case at all. A passage that illustrates the point can be culled from a section of *Ethics and Infinity*. (We will refer later to the lines omitted here.)

EL: I have previously said elsewhere . . . that I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo.

Nemo: You go that far!

EL: Since I am responsible even for the Other's responsibility. . . . [J]ustice only has meaning if it retains the spirit of disinterestedness which animates the idea of responsibility for the other man. (EI 99)

The excerpt makes it fairly clear that Waldenfels argument is sound. Levinas reaches the difficult position of bearing the responsibility for his own persecution because of the need to apply his ethics in all cases.

It is also worth noting, with Waldenfels, the difference between Levinas and Socrates. Without launching into a complex discussion of Socratic ethics, we can say that it does not involve the for-the-other to the extent that Levinas' ethics does. Socrates, like Aristotle, advocates treating equals equally and unequals unequally, while Levinas refuses to make such distinctions and insists on treating each other according to his needs and desires, that is, always unequally. His conception of responsibility makes his limit case different from Socrates' limit case; to say, with Socrates, that it is better to be persecuted than persecutor and that I should pity my persecutor, is not yet to say, with Levinas, that I am responsible for my persecution. This aspect of Waldenfels' argument raises a point which we have discussed previously in this thesis but which deserves to be stressed, that in Levinas' thinking the differential of responsibility arises directly from the differential of identity. If I am truly to respect what is unique in the other, I must allow him to continue to be unique. The very meaning of my responsibility is not to compromise the other in any way, and in order to leave him free I must bear his responsibility for him -- whatever he

²⁵⁰Waldenfels, "Response," 48.

does. Thus if the Holocaust demands the differential of identity, it also demands the differential of responsibility. The Holocaust itself teaches that I must bear responsibility for what the Nazi does to me, for it teaches not only the uniqueness of the other but also the necessity of allowing that uniqueness to exist unrestricted, of removing all checks from the other's path, in short, of bearing his responsibility.

Thus Waldenfels argument is evocative, as well as sound. But by itself it is inadequate. It depends on the idea that when Levinas speaks of persecution he uses that term in the common sense, referring to a case where the other torments me in some fashion or other. But -- pace Waldenfels -- persecution, as Levinas uses the term, is never explicitly connected to a particular set of circumstances; and thus it cannot refer particularly to a Socratic limit case. It would be more accurate to the thrust of Levinas' thought to begin with Waldenfels and extend him; in other words to say that Levinas uses the term persecution precisely to show us that *every ethical encounter is a limit case*. For persecution, as Levinas uses the word, is an aspect of any encounter with another.

To begin to explore this usage, let us recall our discussion in chapter one of Levinas' ontic levels, and re-describe them, following Edith Wyschogrod, as levels of violence. We may divide 'Levinasian violences' into the violences of the human being alone, the violences of relation, and the violences of society or politics: this is to say, the violences of the one, the two and the three. (1) The human being alone faces the primitive violence of the *il y a*, that is, undifferentiated being, existence which is prior to or underlies separate existents, the absolute neutral 'it is' of 'it is raining' or 'it is night' in which the 'it' has no referent except the "rumbling silence" the human being feels when she thinks that "even if there were nothing, the fact that 'there is' is undeniable" (EI 48).²⁵¹ The utter impersonalization of the

²⁵¹Incidentally, some pages after Levinas illustrates the *il y a* with the phrase, 'it is raining' (EI 48), he mentions the rain again, in the context of one of his most compellingly quotidian descriptions of how one enters into relation with the other (EI 88):

It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence; this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever is the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of

il y a is the first violence; it evokes “horror and panic” (EI 49). But it is evaded through another act of violence, the “wrenching free from undifferentiated being” which is the development of the subjective consciousness of the separated self.²⁵² In addition, the human being alone lives in the element -- a kind of beneficent lack of differentiation -- from which she wrenches herself by means of the violence of work. These are violences of one. Levinas sometimes calls them pagan, since they are the violences of being itself, and those of nature and of the mastery of nature. (2) The separated self, separated from violence by violence, is now able to meet another existent in relation. Here, new violences take place, arising both from the self and from the other. She desires to kill him, but is called into question by the command coming from his height and destitution, ‘thou shalt not kill;’ her desire vies with her totalizing consciousness; her discovery that she is accused by the other vies with her self-affirmation as a separated being; and in the speech called forth from her by the other, the saying and the said vie with one another. These are categorically different from the violences of the one alone: the violence that the face of the other does to the subject is not the violence of being or nature but transcendence rupturing the subject’s being, and the subject’s impulse to kill the other is not subjectivity or mastery but an impulse to murder, which is the name given to an attack on transcendence. The dynamic of violence at this ontic level can also be described as a dynamic of power: murder is a power over power, but the other has recourse to further power, a power which “paralyses the power of power” (TI 198). But the truest name for the violence of the other’s face is authority. (3) With the entry of the third, we find the new violences of justice, calculation, knowledge,

the rain and fine whether, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him.

Thus in the phrase ‘it is raining’ there is horror. But the horror is overcome if one turns to the other and says it is raining; the horror is overcome by the quotation marks I have put around the phrase.

²⁵²Edith Wyschogrod, “Derrida, Levinas and Violence,” 183. I should mention that I have not dealt in this thesis with Levinas’ conception of consciousness, which is in itself complex, but see “God and Philosophy” in GCM for an analysis of the movement from the first ontic level to the second as a development in consciousness, and of the subsequent play of consciousness on the second level.

writing and philosophy which we have discussed at length in this thesis, and also those of bad regimes, of force as opposed to authority. This is the sphere of war and provisional peace, and of the non-provisional peace which is the resurgence of the relation between two in the relation between three. Here, the violences are those that politics do to ethics, and those that ethics, in turn, do to politics. The violence of the logos or said which emerges at the level of the second ontic framework and is mitigated in the saying is recompllicated at this level when the address is made not to the other but to the many; the solution offered by Levinas is the preservation of the saying by means of yet another violence, that of abusive speech or scepticism.

Violences upon violences; breakings upon breakings. Some are unmitigatedly evil, like the *il y a*, or murder, or a certain kind of politics, and at least one is unmitigatedly good, the transcendent command of the face. But where does persecution fit in to the scheme? The answer seems to be that persecution is applied not, as might be expected, to a violence on the third ontic level, to a political or social phenomenon in which a group persecutes a group, but rather to the second-level command of the other.²⁵³ The face persecutes me; at any rate, its command can be described as a persecution. We recall that in the passage cited above it was not ‘the other qua Nazi’ who persecuted me, but the “other qua other.” In another passage Levinas writes that passivity, which is the characteristic of ethical subjectivity

deserves the epithet of complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for his persecutor. The face of the neighbour in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful. . . . In the trauma of persecution [passivity] is to pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the

²⁵³This issue is raised by Robert Bernasconi, who objects to Levinas’ use of the term persecution for what we have called a second-level violence when it is almost always experienced as a social or political phenomenon. Bernasconi, “‘Only the Persecuted . . .’: Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. A. Peperzak, 77-86, 82. Bernasconi’s article as a whole, however, deals mainly with the question of whether persecution, understood as an aspect of the encounter with the other-qua-other is a formal notion which defies what is particular. I take up this question at length, though with reference to an article by Jeffrey Kosky, rather than to Bernasconi.

persecutor, and in this sense from suffering to expiation for the other. (OB 111)²⁵⁴

“The persecuted one” is “the self,” the one who “is accused beyond his fault before freedom”; “persecution is the precise moment in which the subject is reached or touched without the mediation of the logos” (OB 121). Persecution, in Levinas’ usage, is simply the command from the other.

Before we begin to try to explain this usage, we should note the problem that arises from it, namely, that when Levinas uses the word persecution for the command of the other, it becomes difficult or impossible, within the bounds of Levinasian thinking, to tell the Nazi from the widow or the orphan. Levinasian ethics does not seem to provide criteria for such distinctions, in spite of the fact that it might well be supposed that the very mandate of an ethical theory was the provision of such criteria. And the problem is larger than the uses of the word persecution. A reader of Levinas will probably encounter it first in the concatenation of violences we have just discussed. How can we tell which violences open on transcendence and which seek to destroy it? Or a reader may encounter the problem in Levinas’ reflections on suffering or the Holocaust. Both suffering and the idea of the infinite are described in Levinas’ works as ‘passivity of passivity’ or ‘passivity more passive than any passivity’ (PL 157, GCM 64). The Holocaust, as suffering par excellence, ruptures certainties and renders those who experienced it or reflect on it open to the supreme principle; it functions, effectively -- ‘traumatically’ -- in the same way as the command from the other. How are we then to distinguish, on Levinasian grounds, the malignant rupture from a divine one?²⁵⁵ Finally, a reader may encounter the problem in the

²⁵⁴The idea appears Christian, which is perhaps why Levinas brings in both a biblical reference and a rabbinic reference to illuminate it: “to tend the cheek to the smiter and to be filled with shame” (Lam 3:30, OB 111); and, from the previous chapter in *Otherwise than Being*, “responsibility ‘...to the point of being delivered over to stoning and insults’” (Rashi’s Commentary on Numbers 12:12, OB 192n.24).

²⁵⁵Susan Shapiro writes, in terms borrowed from Lyotard, that “Levinas does not skip over the Shoah, [but] he does not -- in my opinion -- focus sufficiently on its immemorial character or on its difference from and relation to the transcendental Immemorial.” Susan E. Shapiro “Towards a Postmodern Judaism: A Response” in *Reasoning After Revelation* ed. Kepnes, Ochs and Gibbs, 77-92, 86.

difficulty of distinguishing illeity from the *il y a*. This is the form given the problem by Jeffrey L. Kosky, whose argument we take up now.²⁵⁶

Kosky begins his article by noting what we described in the first half of this chapter, that “according to Levinas, after the death of God, philosophy is open to the significance of God only insofar as it describes the ethical situation of the responsible self.”²⁵⁷ He does not link the death of God to the Holocaust, but to the demise of metaphysics, that is, the demise of ontology and the modern conception of the autonomous subject; nevertheless, he traces Levinas’ movement in the same order as I have traced it above, namely backwards, as it takes place in the mind, from the collapse of philosophy, into the ethics which is prior -- in support of which ordering he cites Levinas: “after the death of a certain God inhabiting the world behind the scenes, [responsibility] discovers the trace” (OB 185).²⁵⁸ But, Kosky asks, how can this trace be identified as God’s trace? “How . . . can that which survives the death of God be identified with or determined as God?”²⁵⁹ The problem, more specifically, is that the trace signifies God’s absence, and is thus difficult to distinguish from the absence which constitutes the *il y a*. In fact, there are a number of points of possible confusion. The trace is the trace of illeity -- the pronoun-for-a-pronoun with which Levinas designates the divinity. Illeity and *il y a* are constructions of *il*; which is to say that both seem to describe an anonymity, a neutral, that takes place in the midst of -- or above or below -- relation. But it is the essence of anonymity to oppose the uniqueness of the other qua other, and thus an anonymity in the midst of relation would seem to undercut the subject’s attention to that uniqueness. Moreover, both illeity and the *il y a* are violent; both

²⁵⁶Jeffrey L. Kosky “After the Death of God: Emmanuel Levinas and the Ethical Possibility of God” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24.2 (1996): 235-259.

²⁵⁷Kosky, “After Death,” 237.

²⁵⁸Kosky, “After Death,” 253. So Kosky and I agree that Levinas begins in rupture, but not quite in the nature of the rupture. We agree that if ontology collapses, God dies, and vice versa (cf. Kosky 237: “God [conceived as the metaphysical ground of ontology] loses his place and function when [ontology] collapses on itself”), but disagree as to which collapses or dies first.

²⁵⁹Kosky, “After Death,” 253.

are inflicted on the subject and rupture her being. The *il y a*, writes Levinas at one point, is “an obscure invasion [before which] it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one’s shell. One is exposed” (EE 59). Illeity, he suggests elsewhere, bespeaks “the impossibility of escaping God [which] lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity. . . . [It is] the impossibility of slipping away, absolute susceptibility” (OB 128).²⁶⁰ The potential confusion between the two strikes Kosky as a critical problem in Levinas’ thinking:

For Levinas, then, everything hinges on distinguishing two types of anonymity. Without distinguishing these two forms of anonymity, responsibility can hardly be distinguished from the menace of the *il y a*. . . . The self may be a witness, but it is a witness who cannot say or identify, and so cannot testify to, that to which it is a witness. Is it God or the *il y a*? . . . Why is the trace a trace of God and no other?
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I want now to propose two solutions to Kosky’s problem, one which arises in the context of ethics and the other in the context of politics. I will take up the first at some length, since it is, I believe, the key to Levinas’ ethics as an entirety. Very broadly: one *cannot* be called, in the moment of ethical decision, to distinguish between illeity and the *il y a*, and this is because one *actively refuses* in that moment to distinguish between a good violence inflicted upon oneself and a bad violence, or between the persecution inflicted on oneself by the orphan and the persecution inflicted on oneself by the Nazi. Kosky notes that Levinas himself describes God as “transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of his possible confusion with the agitation of the *il y a*” (GCM 69) and thus that he may intend to invoke a certain confusion, but he does not see that this confusion, understood as a refusal to judge the other, is Levinas’ central ethical criterion. For in one’s daily life -- say, on the street -- one does not run across illeity or the *il y a*; one runs across the other. The other may caress one, or punch one in the face; quite likely the other will ask one for money. But

²⁶⁰For both passages and others which reveal the same correlations, Kosky, “After Death,” 255.

²⁶¹Kosky, “After Death,” 256-7.

one does not stop to ask oneself whether the command issuing from his mouth -- or only from his face -- has as its ultimate source illeity or the *il y a*. Rather, one offers oneself, body and soul; one is the other's hostage; one is the other's martyr; one is the other's expiation; one suffers for him and bears his suffering. To ask to know the source of his command is first of all an unnecessary hesitation; more importantly, it would deny the foundation of the Levinasian ethic by seeking to define the other and thus to compromise his alterity.

One could only define and catalogue the command of the other as good or bad if the command were a facet of the other; one could only define the source of the trace if the trace were *there*. But the command, and the trace, and even the face, are not facets of the other or *there*; they are not phenomena. The command, which is the mark of the trace, takes place in the subject's response to the other; the other is the face insofar as he elicits that response. The movement which is analyzed in Levinas' ethics takes place in the subject's soul. She is utterly passive, commanded, persecuted, and she suffers what is done to her; but it is she who is ethically in question, not the one who commands her. Now it is, in fact, possible to distinguish illeity from the *il y a*, as long as both are understood to appear only in response. One can say, broadly, that if the subject responds by offering herself, she responds to the trace of illeity, but if she slits the other's throat, her actions are correlative with the workings of the *il y a*. But practically this serves only to bring us back to the critical point: that one distinguishes between illeity and the *il y a* only after the fact on the basis of a refusal, in the ethical moment, to distinguish between various types of others, or to rank them on a level of worthiness.

Kosky's desire, as I see it, is precisely for criteria which will allow him to make distinctions between types of others; moreover, he seems to hold that such criteria are utterly necessary to an understanding grounded in the differences between people. He implies that the only way to distinguish God, understood as alterity, from the *il y a*,

understood as the lack of alterity, is to re-erect ontology; in other words, that only an ontological structure, a structure which classifies, will keep us from blending into the all-in-all of the *il y a*. But this idea depends on his critique of the anonymity of Levinas' God, a critique which seems at first glance to be well taken, but which does not ultimately hold up. The critique arises because, in Levinas' descriptions of the face or of the trace of illeity, uniqueness often seems to give way to the idea of the face qua face, or the trace qua trace, an idea which seems to describe a diversion of the attention away from the needs and commands of the particular other. To put the matter as clearly as possible: it sometimes seems as if the subject is responding to the same thing in every other, 'the trace' or 'otherness,' and not to the particular person at all. But this, I believe, bespeaks a flaw in philosophical language rather than a flaw in Levinas' ethics; he cannot describe the effect of the face without generalizing, even though the effect of any particular face is never general. The need to generalize in language extends into the further need to speak of a God who is One and Whole but somewhere else than here, and thus absent and anonymous. In reality, however, Levinas' God is not encountered as One or as Whole because infinity appears precisely as plurality and as difference; and God is not encountered as anonymous, because he is only encountered in the face and the trace, which are personality or alterity. Indeed, the concept of absence employed by Levinas in his description of God in human relation functions not to add an element of anonymity or sameness, but precisely to mitigate, or to lift entirely, the anonymity and sameness which would be imposed on the other were God present in the relation. When the absence of Levinas' God appears, and because it appears only as absence, it is not at all anonymous or same-making; and therefore, while God may be confused with the *il y a* in a reading of Levinas' philosophy, the confusion cannot occur in experience. Thus it is not necessary to parachute ontology back into the picture to protect alterity. And, of course, for Levinas, such a move is not merely unnecessary. We have discussed at length the fact that, for Levinas, ontological structures, far from supporting

difference, compromise it, either by allowing us to believe that we are all equal under God and thus undercutting the asymmetry -- the *you* are higher than *me* -- in which God's absence resonates, or else, as we may perhaps see in Kosky's case, by allowing us to commit the error of ranking human beings as unequal on an objective rather than a subjective scale, defining some as more godly than others. While Kosky's desire for criteria with which to prove the source of the trace seems to represent a desire for criteria with which to define the moral status or standing of the other with respect to transcendence, the Levinasian subject, in distinction, asks only about her own moral standing with respect to transcendence.

At the core, what I am saying here is something that has been said many times by Levinas and Levinasians, that the asymmetrical nature of his ethics means that the ethics cannot be presented as a set of rules that could be applied universally. But in light of our examination of the nature of Kosky's desire for a universally applicable ethics, it may be possible to add another element to the discussion, namely, that because Levinas' ethics is not a set of rules, it does not provide any grounds by which human relations can be made smoother or easier. Levinas is frequently asked in interviews what happens if the self or the other, instead of responding to the encounter ethically, responds with physical violence or murder.²⁶² Behind the question lies one of two ideas, either (a) that Levinas' ethics suggests that we *always or often* respond to one another with responsibility, and that the truth of the ethics is therefore compromised by the mundane fact of murder, or (b) that Levinas' ethics suggest that we *should* respond to the other with responsibility, and that the ethics ought therefore to offer a set of objective rules. In other words, the question presents one of the central scholarly dilemmas about the ethics: that they seem to be insufficient as description and insufficient as prescription. Levinas almost always answers the question by

²⁶²Eg. EI 89; PL 175; RM 21.

dismissing the first consideration immediately. To Phillipe Nemo, in 1981, he says something close to 'I thought you'd ask me a harder one,' changing the subject as soon as it is decently possible to do so,²⁶³ and to the group of students who interview him in 1986, he says simply that he is fully aware that murder is a common occurrence or even that "the law of evil is the law of being" (PL 175). With these dismissals, he suggests that insofar as his ethics are descriptive they are not intended to describe every case from start to finish; as we have discussed in chapter one, the descriptive element of the ethics refers to a prior shouldering of responsibility and does not at all preclude the fact of murder. After these dismissals, Levinas sometimes invokes Auschwitz. By this he means not only to play trump, reminding the questioner that he understands first hand the most inhuman of violences, but, more than this, to shift to an address of the second idea that underlies the question and to explain why it is that he cannot provide an objective set of rules. For Auschwitz does not only destroy theodicy and totalities of the good -- that is, any ideology that assumes that all will come out right in the end -- it also undermines any theory of justice or practical ethics which suggests that humanity in general can be forced or coaxed or taught or even encouraged to do what is right in the here and now. To the students he says that Auschwitz repudiates the 'Happy End' in every sense, that it leads us to an ethics or "a piety without reward" (PL 176); and to Ralph Mortley he explains that "living through Auschwitz" teaches us that "we must still take account of the other man, even if taking account of him is not recompensed" (RM 21). Even *if* taking account of him is not recompensed -- to this we may add, drawing on the description of the encounter with the other as a persecution: *even though* taking account of him is not recompensed. What Levinas points to here is surely the single most radical aspect of his ethics: because Auschwitz almost succeeded, our ethics after Auschwitz must be one which fails; because

²⁶³His words are rendered less colloquially by Richard Cohen: "I feared a much graver objection" (EI 89). Before saying this he does, however, take up briefly the question of his ethics as description, asserting that they are prior to hatred and ground it, a matter we have discussed in chapter one.

Auschwitz ‘worked’ so efficiently, our ethics must be one which does not ‘work.’ Levinas’ ethics does not show us a way to avoid an Auschwitz, for a society inured against Auschwitz is another Auschwitz. For the same reason, it does not show us any sure way to moderate our Auschwitz-causing impulses, pitting them against one another in an effort to create a ‘harmony,’ or to twist out of Auschwitz a political theory of force against force. On the contrary, because of Auschwitz, Levinas’ ethics is an unworkable ethics, as an ethics must be if it is to speak only for ‘me’ and never for the other. The second intention behind the question put to Levinas by the students, and Nemo, and Mortley -- where in your ethics is the criteria by which I can judge the one who persecutes me? -- is the same as Kosky’s question. The questions bespeak the desire for certainty on a worldly level or a cosmic level, the desire for criteria to distinguish good and bad. These criteria can no longer be provided, if they ever could.

‘Unworkability’ as the critical aspect of Levinas’ ethics is thus the first answer to Kosky’s question about illeity and the *il y a*, and also a first answer to the correlative question about the orphan and the Nazi, or why Levinas calls any encounter with the other a persecution. Levinas makes room for these confusions at least in part to preserve the uncertainty that grounds an unworkable ethics. Kosky -- and all of us with him -- must stop looking for an ethics that tells us how to act by putting things in their proper places or seeking out the true nature of their sources. And unworkability -- while it has precedent in all the Jewish sources which repudiate the idea of the plan of the whole, and in all the sources which speak giving without expecting to receive or suffering for the suffering of the other²⁶⁴ -- takes its place as the critical characteristic of the ethics because of, or for, the Holocaust. This can also be said of the second answer to Kosky’s question, the political answer, which is simply that although I do not distinguish, for my own part, between Nazi

²⁶⁴In the notes to “Useless Suffering,” Levinas refers to the Song of Songs 5:8 “I am sick with love,” and also to Tractate Brachot of the Babylonian Talmud, 5b (PL 166n.5, n.4).

and orphan, I do make such distinctions on behalf of what might be called the other's other other, that is, the orphan's other (not me) or, more pertinently, the Nazi's other (not me).

On their behalf, I must step outside the bounds of ethics and make a claim for justice.

Earlier we discussed the fact that it is necessary to regard the Nazi as human in order to put him on trial; now we may add that the fact that one must put him on trial, despite being responsible for his responsibility is the distinction between ethics and politics -- a distinction which we have discussed throughout this thesis. To illustrate the way the Holocaust bears on the ethics/ politics distinction, we look again at the passage from the interview with Phillipe Nemo, cited above, this time including the lines previously omitted:

EL: I have previously said elsewhere -- I do not like mentioning it for it should be completed by other considerations -- that I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo. But only me! My 'close relations' or 'my people' are already the others and, for them, I demand justice.

Nemo: You go that far!

EL: Since I am responsible even for the Other's responsibility. These are extreme formulas which must not be detached from their context. In the concrete, many other considerations intervene and require justice even for me. Practically, the laws set certain consequences out of the way. But justice only has meaning if it retains the spirit of dis-interestedness which animates the idea of responsibility for the other man. (EI 99)

That the ethics/ politics distinction plays such a large role in Levinas' thought surely arises from the need to make an unworkable work. In the wake of the Holocaust, Levinas must present an ethics of service, an ethics that pays no attention to what is successful or what is smooth, but he must also present an ethics which makes room for punishment. These two requirements do not sit easily with one another. In experience, it is difficult to tell when one should serve, and when punish. But the dilemma of the Ezekiel's judgment dispensing prophet is, if not unsolvable, at least beyond the bounds of this thesis. We need only note that Levinas speaks more often of ethics than of politics, and more often of inequality than of the need for an equalitarian society; the primacy of ethics over politics is demanded by Auschwitz. Indeed, the fact that Levinas uses the word persecution for any encounter with

the other rather than for a phenomenon occurring on the third ontic level -- and that he thus compels us to think first of everything, even politics, in ethical terms, rather than, as we have been inclined in recent decades to do, to think first of everything, even ethics, in political terms -- de-politicizes our thinking, drawing us away from the dilemma of the justice dispensing prophet and towards self-sacrifice. In any case, it is certain that Levinas' reflection on the complex relation between rupturing ethics and structuring politics -- ethical love and the delicate judgments of halachah -- become more urgent in light of the need to try and execute judgment on the Nazi for whose responsibility one is responsible.

That ethics is prior to and regulates justice -- that the for-the-other rules the for-the-other's-other -- is manifest in another set of reflections called up in Levinas for the sake of the Holocaust, a set of reflections which lie under everything I have so far written. In the same way that it is not legitimate to attempt to account for the Holocaust, it is also, according to Levinas, not legitimate to draw a 'lesson' from it. The Holocaust, as the event that ruptures all theories, is also the teaching that ruptures all teachings, for any edification one draws from it would act only to justify or give meaning to suffering, while the Holocaust repudiates such impositions. Levinas writes:

Accusing oneself in suffering . . . [or] the for-the-other . . . is the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy. But this intimacy can only be discreet. It could not be given as an example, or be narrated as edifying discourse. It could not be made a prediction without being perverted. (PL 163)

And yet what Levinas says elsewhere in "Useless Suffering" about the supreme principle does look like an edifying discourse, or even a prediction. The difficulty cannot be overcome, but it can for the most part be avoided: since Levinas cannot talk about the Holocaust for fear of sacralizing its commanding voice after the manner of Fackenheim, he seldom speaks of it. He does, however, occasionally retell its stories, which he can describe as "true as only fiction can be" (DF 142), because in them, character and author

speak for themselves as we all must do.²⁶⁵ And he reads in its wake, drawing from the sources of Judaism every available image of alterity, discourse, difficulty, and error -- every image which will allow him to show the fixed structures of modern totalities as broken and incoherent at the core. "Useless Suffering" is unique in Levinas' corpus in its explicit, discursive account of the turn after Auschwitz to the supreme principle, and it may have been written with the sole purpose of disassociating himself from Fackenheim's conception of Judaism, or critiquing it.²⁶⁶ However, what Levinas wants to say -- that after Auschwitz, in the absence of all lessons, stripped of edification, one reaches out -- emerges in *his* reaching out, in all his work, *to* the future *for* the past.

²⁶⁵R. Gibbs, in "Unjustifiable Suffering," asks how Levinas can speak of suffering at all without engaging in justification by the very act of inscribing it in a discourse. He answers that Levinas can only speak of his own suffering for suffering, that is, only of what *he himself* feels, and, more importantly, only of what he himself feels *for the other*. This does not, however, solve the problem of "Useless Suffering," which appears at least to some extent as a call to others to feel the same way (3-4).

²⁶⁶Another piece that gives an account of the Holocaust and 'draws truths' from it is the essay "Nameless" (1966) which appears at PN 119-123, and from which the epigraph to this chapter is taken. Here Levinas suggests three things that can and must be taught in the wake of the Holocaust: (a) that our material needs are very few, (b) that we should continue to hope in evil times for restoration, and (c) that, rather than pinning everything on this hope, we should always be strong in isolation. This essay may possibly be understood as a trial run for "Useless Suffering," but is perhaps better understood as a non-philosophical presentation of 'home truths' addressed to people who will not read many of Levinas' writings.

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