Making ethics "First Philosophy": ethics and suffering in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Elie Wiesel, and Richard Rubenstein

Anderson, Ingrid Lisabeth

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Boston University
MAKING ETHICS “FIRST PHILOSOPHY”: ETHICS AND SUFFERING
IN THE WORK OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS, ELIE WIESEL,
AND RICHARD RUBENSTEIN

by

INGRID LISABETH ANDERSON

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M.A., Boston University, 2005

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Shaun Wolf Wortis whose patience, love, and strength support and sustain me, and to our children, Isabella Charlotte Wortis and Ezekiel Wolf Wortis, who bring us great joy. Thank you, thank you, thank you.
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This dissertation examines the ethical systems created in response to the crisis of the Holocaust by Emmanuel Levinas, Elie Wiesel and Richard Rubenstein. Prior to the Holocaust, European Jewish philosophers grounded ethics in traditional metaphysics. Unlike their predecessors, Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein all make ethics “first philosophy” by grounding ethics in the temporal experience of suffering rather than ontology or theology, deliberately rejecting ethical views rooted in traditional metaphysical claims. With varying degrees of success, they all employ Jewish texts and traditions to do so. Their applications of Jewish sources are both orthodox and innovative, and show how philosophical approaches to ethics can benefit from religion. Suffering becomes not only the first priority of ethics, but an experience that simultaneously necessitates and activates ethical response.

According to this view, human beings are not blank slates whose values are
informed exclusively by culture and moral instruction alone; nor is human consciousness
awakened or even primarily constituted by reason, as argued by deontologists. Rather,
consciousness is characterized by affectivity and sensibility as interconnected faculties
working in concert to create ethical response. This dissertation argues that if what makes
ethical response possible is located in human consciousness rather than in metaphysics or
culture, a re-orientation of philosophy toward the investigation of human affectivity and
its role in ethical response is in order. All three thinkers examined actively resist
categorization and repudiate claims that a single philosophical system can be successfully
applied to all aspects of life, and this dissertation does not choose one of the three
projects examined here as the most persuasive or significant. Instead, it explores how the
work of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein might be combined, built upon and expanded to
form an ethics that is deeply informed by human experience and makes human and non-
human suffering our greatest priorities.
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Introduction

For many, the Holocaust made thinking about ethics in traditional ways impossible. It has been argued convincingly that Western thought, especially as it developed in nineteenth century Europe and the United States and culminated in the work of Heidegger, tends to privilege speculative ontology at the expense of ethics.¹ According to this point of view, the concurrent political, cultural and philosophical inattention to universal ethics in particular was both a cause and an effect of European civilization's collapse in the twentieth century; only a complete disintegration of ethical norms and mores could have allowed a catastrophe so cataclysmic and abysmal as the Holocaust.

Emmanuel Levinas, Elie Wiesel and Richard Rubenstein respond directly to this problem by insisting that ethics must be Western thought's first concern. Unlike previous thinkers who claimed that a universal ethic requires a traditional metaphysics, Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein locate humanity's source of universal ethical obligation in the temporal world of experience. According to this model, suffering in all its forms is the most powerful shared human experience and provides the ground for ethics and makes ethical engagement possible. Such an ethics emphasizes intercession on behalf of our fellow man, especially when he is suffering unjustly. The ethics these three thinkers

¹ Heidegger, the philosopher hailed by many as the most important thinker of the twentieth century, was unapologetically a dues paying member of the Nazi party until its eventual collapse. Yet Husserl, his own teacher, was born into an assimilated Jewish family, although he and his wife both converted to Christianity before their wedding in 1886. It is likely that Husserl converted in order to be eligible for faculty positions in German universities, although it could be that he converted for reasons of faith. Many of any of Heidegger's most successful students, including his lover of many years, Hannah Arendt, were also Jews: Leo Strauss, Emmanuel Levinas and Karl Löwith are the most notable examples.
develop are neither relativistic nor universal in the Enlightenment sense since they reject the notion that traditional metaphysics provide sufficient ground for ethics. Instead, their ethics derive universality from humanity's shared lived experiences.

Although they reject traditional models of ethical obligation, all three thinkers, with varying degrees of success, use Judaism to develop a contemporary ethics that could operate with or without God. Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein all contend that Judaism's most important lesson is that our fellow human is our responsibility, regardless of her race, creed, culture, or preferences. Moreover, this responsibility is non-negotiable, even if concrete answers about the existence of God, the nature of the man and the universe, and the source of human knowledge are not forthcoming. All three thinkers urge us to spend more time asking questions about how we should behave toward fellow humans who are suffering instead.

This project explores selected works of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein for practical applications of their ethics and asks the following questions of them: Why should suffering be central to ethics? What is the source of our obligation to our fellow man? How does our own suffering help us to connect with others when nothing else will? What does each thinker suggest we do when we are faced with human suffering? And finally, does an ethics grounded in suffering provide useful directives with regard to problems that have nothing to do with suffering?

Since Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein also use Jewish sources to create a universal ethics, this dissertation also explores how they propose to do so without ultimately grounding ethics in theology, or alternatively devolving into relativism. Each
thinker's use of Judaism and Jewish sources will also be explored in order to discern whether their applications can be understood as legitimate and authentic, recognizing that these terms, themselves, need to be explained and investigated. In addition, I examine each thinker's philosophical methods and the assumptions that they employ, and consider the advantages and the disadvantages of deriving universal ethics from sources and traditions particular to Judaism. Finally, I suggest how the work of Jewish thinkers living in the wake the Holocaust and the thought and values of minority communities in general can be of unique value to those interested in the problem of ethics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Context

In 1977, Richard Rubenstein wrote that the Third Reich had "successfully overcome...a hitherto unbreachable moral and political barrier in the history of Western civilization...[As a result, the] systematic, bureaucratically administered extermination of millions of citizens...will [henceforth] forever be one of the capacities and temptations of government." In the context of fascist Europe, the inherent problems of Kant's deontological ethics on one hand and Heidegger's assertion that grounding ethics is impossible on the other become increasingly apparent. In l'\emph{univers concentrationnaire}\footnote{Richard Rubenstein, \emph{The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future} (New York: Peter Smith Publisher, 1975), 2.}

\footnote{\textquoteright{}The universe of the concentration camp,\textquoteright{} a term Wiesel used often to describe the abject nature of life in the concentration camps of the Third Reich. The term is particularly apt here because the world of the camps turned all ethical and social expectations upside down. Camp hospitals at best made camp victims sicker, children and the elderly were considered useless, and people who were thugs and prisoners in pre-war Europe were given positions of power. The whole purpose of the camps—to use up}
especially, victims' desires to adhere to pre-war “categorical imperatives” was expected, and such behavior was perversely antithetical to victims' survival. The Nazi war against the Jews was designed to turn society upside down, so that black became white and immorality became morality.\(^4\) Claudia Koonz points out that the Nazi conscience\(^5\) considered murdering Jews and other “inferior races” ethical. According to Nazi “moral” codes, murdering the Jews of Europe was a justifiable means to a worthy end: ridding the continent of dangerous parasites who would enslave innocent Germans. The Third Reich claimed that by prioritizing “racial hygiene” it “put collective need ahead of selfish need.” When the Nazis placed Jews and others outside their community of moral obligation, they meant to expel them not only from Germany but also from the human family. This made it ethical to murder with impunity even Jewish children and Jewish women who might some day give birth to more Jewish children. “Racial purity” was the moral imperative that trumped all others, the desired end of all social and political

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\(^4\) The notion that the Reich developed an intricate and relentless psychological assault on its targeted victims is well documented. See David Redles' work on the Reich as a messianic movement listed in the bibliography of this dissertation, Lucy Dawidowicz's work *The Nazi War Against the Jews: 1933-1945* (Claremont, FL: Paw Prints Publishing, 2008) and Steven T. Katz's encyclopedic three volume work *The Holocaust in Historical Context: The Holocaust and Mass Death Before the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). The Reich used psychological warfare on its own “Aryan” people, as well, with the express intent of changing moral codes and expectations; see Claudia Koonz (details in the following footnote) and David Redles for more on this.

\(^5\) See Claudia Koonz's excellent examination of Nazi ethics in her 2003 book *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Koonz explores the notion that the Nazis were radicals with a traditionalist theme who believed all moral obligations were owed only to one's own ethnic group. In fact, moral behavior toward a person outside of one's ethnic group was not only weak, but immoral.
activities and allegiances. This approach to ethics views norms and directives as relative to particular culture, an assertion supported by the philosophical systems of Heidegger and others of the time.

Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein faced the ethical challenges posed by Nazi Europe as Jewish thinkers who either survived the Holocaust, like Wiesel and Levinas, or were profoundly affected by the realities of American Jewish life and practice in its wake, like Rubenstein. In response to this crisis, Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein did what many Jewish thinkers before them did: they used the sources of Judaism to contribute to the wider Western conversation about ethics, universalism, and politics. They inherit a dual tradition: that of general philosophy, and that of Jewish thought. Jewish philosophical tradition spans approximately two thousand years, and most Jewish thinkers did not begin their investigations with the assumption that Judaism and philosophy were at ultimately at odds. In fact, bridging of the particularity of Judaism and the perceived universality of the dominant cultures in which Jews live has been one

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6 The embrace of racial purity as an ethical imperative of the highest order implies that ethical systems are entirely relative to culture and cannot be universally applied. A regime such as the Reich could enforce adherence to legal systems that enabled adherence to this ethic, but there is a difference between forcing subjects to comply and coercing them to agree.

7 I use the term “Jewish thought” here to encompass multiple genres: Jewish philosophy, Jewish religious thought or theology, and Jewish political thought. Historically, the term “theology” has been problematic for many Jewish thinkers. This is slowly changing, however. For more on this see David Novak’s “Jewish Theology,” Modern Judaism 10, no. 3 (Oct., 1990), 311-323.

8 See Hermann Cohen's Ethics of Maimonides, translated into English for the first time in 2004 by Almut Sh. Bruckstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). Also, see Emmanuel Levinas, “On Jewish Philosophy,” in the Time of the Nations, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Continuum, 2007), 152-153. “…Jewish texts have always been understood as constantly accompanied by a layer of symbolic meaning, apalogues, new interpretations to be discovered: in short, always lined with midrash…But one day it is discovered that philosophy is also multiple, and that its truth is hidden, has levels and goes progressively deeper, that its texts contradict one another and that its systems are fraught with internal contradictions.” Levinas restates his opinion on the relationship between religion and philosophy again when he claims that “philosophy is derived from religion. It is called forth by religion adrift, and religion is always adrift…” From ibid., 157.
of Jewish thought's most important concerns. Many Jewish thinkers have made careful marriages between Judaism and philosophy because they felt Judaism offered something unique to general thought and culture, and that Judaism might prove its most basic tenets compatible with, or even identical to those of classical philosophy. In this respect, Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein's respective projects are no different. They engage with modern philosophy while making use of traditional Jewish sources and methodologies to respond to contemporary problems; like their predecessors, each thinker locates within Judaism something they contend Western philosophy lacks.

Jewish intellectual response to the Holocaust, however, is far from monolithic, although it also tends to make use of multiple traditions in order to understand contemporary problems. Some have argued that the Holocaust necessitates significant changes to Jewish theology and practice. Primary topics of debate include but are not limited to: the validity of the covenant after Auschwitz, the presence or absence of God during the destruction and the problem of theodicy in the light of the systematic murder of 4 million Jewish adults and 2 million Jewish children. For example, some claimed that the Holocaust shows us nothing particularly new about the God of the Jews. In 1952, for example, Martin Buber wrote:

We do not accept the world as it is but rather struggle for its redemption, and in this struggle appeal for help to our Lord, who on His part is once more, and still, One who hides. In this condition we await His voice, whether it comes out of the storm or the stillness that follows it. And although His coming manifestation may
resemble no earlier one, we shall nevertheless recognize again our cruel and merciful God.\textsuperscript{9}

Some ultra-orthodox thinkers have chosen to see the Holocaust as punishment for Zionism or assimilation, but the vast majority claim that no sin is deserving of such a punishment. Some thinkers suggested changes to Jewish thought and practice in response to the radical suffering and destruction wrought by the Nazi war against the Jews. Emil Fackenheim, for example, called for the creation of a 614th commandment: “Thou shalt not grant Hitler posthumous victory.” Response to Fackenheim's suggestion was mixed.\textsuperscript{10}

The American theologian Irving Greenberg argued that the covenant between God and the Jews is now voluntary. Greenberg asserts that the Holocaust is “a fundamental watershed in Jewish and human history after which nothing will ever be the same. It is one of those reorienting moments of Jewish history and religion when basic conceptions of God, of humanity and of Jewish destiny shift.”\textsuperscript{11} Greenberg also famously claimed that “…no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”\textsuperscript{12} These varying responses have enlivened Jewish

\textsuperscript{9} Martin Buber, \textit{At the Turning} (New York: Schocken Book, 1952), 61ff.
thought and practice, and provided multiple options for how Jews and Judaism might respond to the Holocaust, and Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein have each contributed significantly to that process.

Richard Rubenstein's rejection of the theological claim that the Jews were elected by an omnipotent God of history to be His chosen people was more radical than the suggestions made by his cohort, however. He was the first Jewish theologian to have openly asserted that accepting theological stasis in Judaism meant affirming that 6 million innocent Jews deserved to suffer and die, and it was therefore no surprise that much of Jewish intellectual response to Rubenstein's project was blistering.13 Jewish thinkers often insist that Judaism remain a living system in touch with demands of its particular community of practitioners while simultaneously contributing to wider mainstream culture in meaningful ways. But in 1966, many Jews felt that Rubenstein had pushed Judaism too far, particularly because he was not a Holocaust survivor, but an American rabbi who had never experienced the virulent anti-Semitism of twentieth century Europe (and had nearly converted to Christianity at that). Rubenstein nonetheless argued doggedly that the Holocaust necessitated radical changes to both Judaism and to the Western tradition in which it is situated. Still, like Levinas and Wiesel, Rubenstein emphasized Judaism's embrace of righteous defiance on behalf of innocent suffering. For

13 See Zachary Braiterman's essay “Hitler's Accomplice?: The Tragic Theology of Richard Rubenstein,” Modern Judaism 17, no. 1 (February 1, 1997): 75-89 for an excellent examination of the response to Rubenstein's project. Because Rubenstein was the first Jewish thinker to claim Judaism must fundamentally change in response to the Holocaust, the importance of Rubenstein's questions was, unfortunately, overlooked by most critics. Steven Katz’s essay on Rubenstein’s After Auschwitz in his 1982 Post Holocaust Dialogues is an exception. Katz clearly states that he likes Rubenstein’s questions but does not agree with his answers. See his essay “The Issue of Confirmation and Disconfirmation in Jewish Thought After the Shoah,” The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology (New York, NYU Press, 2007), 13-60.
this and other reasons, Rubenstein's project, although it is in some ways antinomian for its time, is not as far apart from those of his peers as it may seem regarding ethics, and should be re-examined in conjunction with the work of other major Jewish thinkers concerned about ethics after the Holocaust.

Significantly, Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein have each successfully engaged Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike, and are therefore uniquely positioned to reach a wider audience than many of their peers. Levinas' work has had significant impact on philosophy, theology, literary studies, linguistics, psychology, social work and the social sciences, such that response to and application of Levinas' work almost constitutes an industry of its own. Levinas is influenced by the dialogical theologies of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, and his Jewish writings attempt to show how his approach to Judaism's multiple understandings of ethics, revelation, justice, and transcendence could enrich and improve the Western philosophical tradition. Levinas was also profoundly influenced by Husserl's work, but he was most enthralled with Heidegger, especially after the publication of Being in Time. In 1932, Levinas discovered that Heidegger had become a member of the Nazi party, and immediately abandoned his Heideggerian project. As Levinas developed his own philosophy, he specifically positioned himself

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14 Many Levinas scholars know little or nothing about the Jewish thought and traditions upon which Levinas so heavily relies. The failure to take into account the degree to which he makes use of Jewish sources and methods has arguably led to misinterpretations and misapplications of his work.

15 Levinas' first three books were heavily influenced by Husserl and Heidegger, and he became well-known in France for his translations of their work. Levinas' first three books are: The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology in 1930, Existence and Existent in 1947, and En Découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger in 1949.

16 In 1939, Levinas served as an officer in the French military, and was captured as a prisoner of war. His parents and his brothers were murdered by the Nazis. See The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. xv.
against Heidegger when he stated that “ethics is first philosophy.” Levinas always claimed that his method was phenomenological, but he took issue with Husserl's project in significant ways, as well. First and foremost, Levinas felt that Husserl overemphasized the centrality of the thinking subject and, as a result, neglected the importance of intersubjectivity. For Levinas, ethics should be our first priority because human potential for ethics and our subsequent awareness of our obligation to the other both precede our ability to reason.

In a short 1934 essay entitled “Reflections of the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” Levinas placed the blame for Nazi ideology squarely on the shoulders of western philosophy when he claimed:

...the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental misunderstanding. [The] source stems from the essential possibility of elemental evil into which we can be lead by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself. 

Levinas' wife and daughter were hidden in a convent and survived the war, however. Levinas fought for the French and was taken prisoner by the Germans. Interestingly, most of Levinas' professional life was spent as the administrator for the Normale Israelite Orientale, a teacher training school founded by the Alliance Israelite Universelle. He was responsible for the Talmudic study sessions at the ENIO and apparently “fostered a vision of Judaism that [he] would defend with increasing vigor after the war years: rigorously intellectual, rooted in textual study, rationalistic, anti-mystical, humanist and universalist” (ibid., xx). Levinas and Wiesel both study Talmud with Monsieur Chouchani from 1947 to 1949. Both men claim Chouchani was one of their most important mentors. See Wiesel's All Rivers Run Into the Sea, (New York: Schocken Press, 1995), 121-130 for Wiesel's description of his relationship with Chouchani. Levinas' own Talmudic Readings are a result of his study with Chouchani. Here we see the influence of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, especially in his exploration of dialogical, “face-to-face” encounters with “the other.”

Emmanuel, Levinas, Sean Hand, trans., “Reflections of the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” Critical Inquiry 17, no. 1 (Autumn, 1990): 63. Again, Levinas writes, “[It is] dangerous when we think that the logical forms of knowledge—in which all philosophy is indeed expressed—are the ultimate structures of the
According to Levinas, Western thought, and German idealism in particular, placed too much faith in reason and could therefore be convinced by formal logic to commit evil. In fact, reason had displaced intuition so completely that man was no longer in touch with the mechanisms that endow him with ethical potential in the first place.\footnote{Note that the claim that ethics is reliant on man's intuition rather than his reason is antithetical to Kant's claims that ethics is grounded in reason.} Yet of Judaism, Levinas wrote, “Judaism is...conscience [and] testimony...where the burning of my suffering and the anguish of my death [become] the dread and concern for the other man...a thought which...untiringly denounces...cruel[ty], excesses of power, and all arbitrary rule.”\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas, “Demanding Judaism,” \textit{Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures}, Gary D. Mole, trans. (London, Continuum, 2007), 4.} For Levinas, Judaism's methodology and teachings could transform suffering into empathy, and empathy into shared responsibility for the other. More broadly, the ground for human ethics in general was the shared human experience of suffering, especially since our first experience of suffering is, for Levinas, the suffering caused by the pre-reflective discovery of one's own alterity.

Wiesel, whose literary efforts are known worldwide, has used his fame to, among other things, highlight the dangerous role bystanderism plays in the successful perpetuation of fascism, persecution and genocide. Of the three thinkers examined here, Wiesel's efforts enjoy the most sizable mainstream audience, and his impact on public school curricula in the United States and in Europe is significant. Millions of school

\textit{meaningful.” From In the Time of the Nations}, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Continuum, 1994): 159. And again, “Behind reason with its universal logic there is the wisdom that has neither method not fixed categories...Wisdom as the freedom of reason, if not freed from reason. This wisdom is incumbent precisely upon the the uniqueness of the one who thinks...” Found in ibid., 160.
children read *Night* each year as part of a wider study of genocide and intolerance. His work with *Facing History and Ourselves* and his commitment to human rights in general are practical applications of his ethics. Wiesel uses more traditional approaches to rabbinic and biblical sources as well as more obscure aspects of *hasidut* in much of his work to suggest that interest in one's fellow man in general and dialogue with the other in particular are lacking in mainstream Western thought and culture.

Since the publication of *Night* in 1958, Wiesel has been a prolific writer. Of particular interest for this project is *The Trial of God*, a play wherein God is placed on trial for crimes against humanity. Wiesel's humble trial has no designs on ending human suffering. At best, it aims to impact human response to undeserved suffering. God is not even expected to show up and bluster about as He did when Job accused Him so long ago. *The Trial of God* relates the horror of the Holocaust by exploring both the history of anti-Semitic violence specifically and pointless suffering in general. In so doing, Wiesel insists that there have always been bystanders and massacres of innocents in human history, even if the Holocaust is a unique “mutation.” In other words, although God is the defendant in Wiesel’s trial, *The Trial of God* is really about man, the creature made in God’s flawed image. The trial is not concluded at the end of the play because the reader is to have no delusions that the real-world conditions that warranted the trial will

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21 The original manuscript, written in Yiddish, was published in Buenos Aires in 1955. The Yiddish text was 862 pages long.

22 The trial is a re-telling of a real “trial of God” Wiesel witnessed while in Auschwitz. He was asked to serve as “witness” in a *din-Torah* held by several rabbis who found God guilty of crimes against humanity. Wiesel tried telling the story in many different forms; he finally decided to write the play as a kind of *Purimshpiel* set in 16th century Poland.

disappear. The trial’s value lies not in its conclusion but in the fact of its having happened at all. The dialogue of the trial must, in the end, be enough to help humanity survive the next Holocaust. Dialogue that happens in spite of everything is at the very heart of Wiesel’s ethic.

Rubenstein's work opened the doors for interfaith dialogue a mere 20 years after the Holocaust, despite the largely negative response his constructive theology garnered from his co-religionists. His refusal to vilify Christianity even as he criticized it extensively has helped make productive dialogue between Judaism and Christianity regarding the Holocaust possible. Rubenstein paved the way for thinkers like Emil Fackenheim and Irving Greenberg, and perhaps his demands were so radical that the ideas of others who came after him seemed significantly more reasonable than his. In any case, Fackenheim and Greenberg were not, like Rubenstein, accused of posthumously colluding with Hitler. Rubenstein's project failed to resonate in any significant way with most of his fellow Jews, even as his Christian contemporaries applauded his efforts. Yet Rubenstein's project, although in some ways heretical, was less antinomian than his critics—and perhaps even Rubenstein himself—would have us believe.

Most importantly for this project, all three assert that Judaism's emphasis on

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24 See Brown, *Messenger to All Humanity*, 163 for Wiesel’s assertions about the impossibility of “easy denial” and “easy belief” for people who live consciously. Wiesel often claims, as he does here, that the best questions don’t have answers. Here Wiesel positions himself as post-modern—more interested in eternal questions than in eternal answers.

25 While Wiesel specifically draws on *halakhic* proscriptions for court proceedings, Maria the Gentile’s loyalty to Berish and his daughter shape a significant part of the landscape of the play. That she is considered a moral character whom herself was wronged in love by a Jewish man suggests that Wiesel hopes for a human ethic grounded firmly in the best Judaism has to offer and to which Judaism—as well as other traditions—could continue to contribute. This ethic emphasizes governing of diverse communities who agree to abstain from abusing one another in exchange for the right to practice their particular religions and philosophies unmolested.
dialogue and invention on behalf of those who suffer unjustly can be useful whether one believes in God or not or, most importantly, whether one is Jewish or not. Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein try to resist the temptation to create traditional philosophical “systems” through which all reality and all human interactions should be viewed, since this would result in universalization that, in their opinion, results in fanaticisms. Instead, they hope to point toward the few ethical imperatives that believe most cultures already share—even if they don't share them for the same reasons—in hopes that we can be persuaded to intervene on behalf of our suffering neighbor, even if we don't like her very much. So long as we intervene on behalf of our neighbor, our reasons for doing so are less important.

Methodology

This project necessitates a multidisciplinary approach26 primarily because the respective work of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein is all technically multidisciplinary. All three, in different ways, remain firmly planted in the dual tradition of Jewish thought—itself a multidisciplinary genre—but they also make use of and are deeply

26 The term “multidisciplinary” refers to the practice of using multiple methodologies from multiple fields in order to shed light on a single project. I intentionally use the term “multidisciplinary” rather than the term “interdisciplinary” for the following reasons. First, the term “interdisciplinary” implies that the outcome of interdisciplinary is additional disciplines constituted by a fusion of extant disciplines. I have no interest in trying to create any new disciplines. Most importantly, the term multidisciplinary implies that one need not create new disciplines in order to successfully make use of multiple methodologies and multiple areas of expertise. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach for this project, I assert that the knowledge and expertise of multiple disciplines contributes to the greater purpose of understanding ethics and ethical systems in a deeper, more meaningful way.
influenced by literature. The relationship between philosophical ethics, literature and theology has long been enmeshed, despite post-Enlightenment efforts to separate them into distinct disciplines. Because theology offers “God-talk” as well as guidance on how to make the proper ethical choices in accordance with religious belief and practice, the relationship between ethics and theology is in many ways taken for granted. In fact, as David Novak points out, for some Jewish philosophers and theologians of the early twentieth century, rational Judaism's inversion of philosophy's “priority of metaphysics over ethics” suggested that Jewish theology in particular had something “unique to offer philosophical ethics in general.” Generally speaking, theology offers moral teachings based on its sense of God and His relationship to creation, and while much of modern philosophy approaches ethics in non-religious terms, it is nonetheless accepted that theology is a viable source of moral imperative. Novak asserts that Jewish religious thought before the Enlightenment was usually defined as either grounded in rationalism (and reliant on Aristotelian methods) or grounded in Kabbalistic inquiry and practice. Either way, Novak points out, Jews were indeed engaging in theology, even if they didn't use the term to describe what they were doing.

Yet literature's relationship to modern philosophical ethics has not been so straightforward. Literary fiction and ethics, sometimes considered dichotomous after the Enlightenment, are also allies in the dissemination of moral messages. Literature scholar Adia Mendelsohn-Maoz points out that the growth of analytical philosophy in the early

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twentieth century, along with various attempts to make the study of literature a “science,” have contributed to a perceived divide between literature and ethics. Deconstructionist and post-colonialist literary theorists, however, inspired by philosophers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Levinas have suggested that claiming literary study is a “science” as many mid twentieth century New Critics did, for example, was not only arbitrary but immoral, since the New Critics tended to focus on the formal procedure of reading, rather the social, political, and ethical aspects of the content; moreover, they often considered content in general less important to the over all value or meaning of a text. Authorial intent or the ways in which different audiences respond to the texts they read were also not of interest to most New Critics. According to postmodernist literary theorists, however, the formal aspects of texts should not be separated from the time and place in which they were written if we want to understand them in any meaningful way. The impact of these ideas on philosophers, writers and theologians in the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. Literature has long been considered a friend of the ethicist, since literature can “illustrate philosophical ideas and illuminate actual moral life,” and animate “the actual performance of certain ethical issues” while putting “complex situations under a new light.” This project proceeds on the “postmodern”

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29 The work of literary scholar and critic Edward Said is indeed founded on this vary claim. Adia Mendelsohn-Maoz, “Ethics and Literature: An Introduction,” *Philosophia* 35 (2007):111. Mendelsohn-Maoz's article is a useful exploration of how the relationship between literary fiction and ethics were considered dichotomous after the Enlightenment in some circles. The fiction of Camus and Sartre had considerable impact on Wiesel and Rubenstein in particular.

30 Ibid. Also, literary theorist Michael Eskin points out that “our moral education has not, fundamentally, been entrusted to [philosophical] ethics. Nursery rhymes, stories, plays, verbal and filmic narratives pursued from early childhood have been supposed to ensure...the formation of the variously conceived good person.” See Michael Eskin, “On Literature and Ethics,” *Poetics Today* 25 (4), no. 573 (2004): 573-594.
assumption that it is useful to be academically trained in philosophy to study ethics in the
academic sense, but it is not necessary to use traditional philosophical methods or to
write philosophical treatises in order to experiment with and create new and viable
approaches to ethics.

Examining the work of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein for common themes and
concerns requires a willingness to relinquish traditional expectations of firmly ensconced
disciplines that present form and content in predictable ways. Though Levinas' approach
is the most traditionally philosophical of the three, the themes he treats—and the way in
which he treats them—indicate that his project is, in some ways, altogether new. Levinas
disrupts traditional paradigms by using language that is often more poetic and literary
than philosophical, and by making philosophy's first concern ethics rather than being or
ontology.32 This dissertation examines whether Levinas' project offers enough to build a
new ethics, or simply points to the possibility of ethical action that relies neither on
reason alone nor traditional metaphysics. The most well-read of Wiesel's texts, on the
other hand, are “philosophical literature”—novels, plays and memoirs devoted to
exploring the nature of man, God, society, ethics, and other matters typically understood
as philosophical and theological in nature.33 Recurring themes and images in Wiesel's

32 See Bettina Bergo’s “What is Levinas Doing? Phenomenology and the Rhetoric of an Ethical Un-
33 While there is no universally accepted definition of the “philosophical novel,” more than a few
examples of the genre continue to make a significant impact on the dispersal of philosophical ideas to a
wider audience than that typically enjoyed by texts traditionally considered philosophical. Some
examples are Voltaire's Candide, Tolstoy's War and Peace, and Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha. Of
particular importance for Wiesel, however, were the literary works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert
Camus. Like Sartre, Wiesel wrote both novels and plays that made use of absurdist themes, but had
more in common philosophically with Camus, whose work had a significant impact on him.
center of his ethics. While it is true that Wiesel devotes considerable time to exploring the continued importance of man's relationship with God, it is a mistake to see Wiesel's work as strictly theological in nature because he takes great pains to construct an ethics that does not require belief in God. After all, when Wiesel imagines a bound God unable to rescue His suffering people, he is claiming that man cannot wait for God to save our neighbors for us; that, he insists, is our job. Ethical action is set in motion by man's intervention in worldly affairs, not God's. This project examines whether Wiesel's project, more steeped in traditional Jewish sensibilities than Levinas and Rubenstein's, is really inclusive enough to operate as a shared ethic for Jews, non-Jews and atheists alike.

Mainstream Judaism has not adopted Rubenstein’s prescriptions for Jewish theology, but his work has much to offer any modern conversation about the possibility of shared ethics after the Holocaust, and has contributed significantly to Christian theological conversation regarding the necessity of a global change the West's approach to God, identity and its failure to truly prioritize ecumenical engagement. This project examines whether Rubenstein's project seen as antinomian at its conception, nonetheless makes significant contributions to philosophical ethics after the Holocaust. Like Wiesel's ethics, Rubenstein's ethics does not require God, but does not exclude Him. Yet while Orthodox and Reform Jews alike have embraced Wiesel’s project, Rubenstein's has proven less attractive. Does Rubenstein's contention that the existence of undeserved suffering renders life absurd leave us with enough impetus to intervene on behalf of our

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34 David Novak rightly describes this as the central concern of post-World War II Christian and Jewish theology. Even Jewish thinkers like Wiesel and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who do not identify as theologians used “theological categories” in their work. See Novak, “Jewish Theology,” 314.
fellow man? This dissertation will explore whether Rubenstein's project, with its radical revisions of Judaism, could be as appealing to Jews as it has been to the Christian theologians he attempted to connect with forty years ago.

Lastly, since each thinker's ethic also makes use of Jewish sources—the Bible, rabbinic literature, and in the case of Wiesel, the largely oral tradition of post-eighteenth century *hasidut*—this project also explores what kind of theological assumptions they make that directly or indirectly inform the creation of their ethics. Do they each appear to make use of Jewish sources without reifying ethical systems that require shared belief rather than shared experience? If we see “universalism” as nothing more than a “dominant particular” that, at worst, obliterates the other, changes suggested by individuals from victimized communities could provide mainstream societies with much needed insight.

Since all three use philosophy, Jewish scripture and commentary, literature, and postmodern literary criticism, any in-depth analysis of their projects requires taking each one of these influences into account without finally categorizing their efforts in ways the thinkers themselves would not consider authentic. For the purposes of this project, a careful reading of the selected works of all three thinkers is required. Full appreciation of their respective projects requires the understanding that each is partaking in both ancient and contemporary, and Jewish and non-Jewish conversations simultaneously. Form and content are often of equal import and may be concurrently derived from traditional philosophical, Judaic, or literary models, since Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein all find that traditional Western philosophy alone is ill-equipped to answer the questions they ask.
Some of these questions are:

1. In what ways is traditional Western thought flawed in its approach to ethics, and can grounding ethics in suffering help correct those flaws?
2. How can we ease human suffering, especially the suffering of survivors of trauma, and how can we help prevent suffering?
3. What kind of human engagement might encourage a potential bystander to intervene on behalf of his suffering neighbor, even if he doesn't like him very much?

The answers each thinker provides to these questions will then be subjected to a series of questions:

1. Does each thinker indeed offer an ethics that is not grounded in traditional metaphysics or theology but in the experience of suffering?
2. Does each thinker suggest an ethics that avoids the systematization and inauthentic universalization they associate with the Western philosophical tradition and so vehemently reject?
3. Does the suggested ethics make use of Jewish sources in way that is legitimate and authentic?
4. Which of the three thinkers offer an ethics that is most likely to impact the wider audience—consisting of Jews and non-Jews—they hope to reach, and how might the
ethics offered by each thinker be combined to produce something useful to
philosophical ethics?

While the Holocaust is arguably the most unique attempted genocide in history,\textsuperscript{35} it is not even the first genocide of the twentieth century. Over 100,000 Herero and Nama tribes were systematically exterminated and forced into concentration camps by German colonists at the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{36} As many as 1 million Armenians were murdered by the Ottoman Empire near the end of World War I, and the abject horror of genocide and mass murder is still with us. The atrocities in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and the Darfur region of Sudan\textsuperscript{37} are a few examples of post-Holocaust mass murders and


\textsuperscript{36} Women and children were sent to work camps and forced to work as sex slaves. Many Herero and Nama women gave birth to the children of German colonists. A man named Eugen Fischer, who was interested in genetics, came to the concentration camps in which they were held and studied them. He also carried out medical experiments on the children. He concluded these children were inferior to their German fathers and published his ideas in a book entitled \textit{The Principles of Human Heredity and Race Hygiene}. There are no scientific foundations for his findings. Hitler read this book while imprisoned during 1923 and referred to it occasionally in his own publications and lectures on “racial purity.” In 1933, Hitler appointed Fischer rector of the Frederick William University of Berlin (now Humboldt University). His theories about miscegenation influenced not only the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 but also the attitude of the Nazis toward “non-Aryans” in general.

\textsuperscript{37} Although Sudan, Rwanda, Namibia and Armenia are all geographically “non-western,” in each location, the attempted genocide was carried out by representatives of European powers or by groups profoundly influenced and effected by their own encounters with the west. Even in the case of Darfur, the Northern Sudanese identification with Muslim Pan-Arabism has been a primary source of conflict; Northern “Arabs” who took part in the conflict saw themselves as racially superior to the Southern “African” Sudanese they victimized. The Pan-Arabist movement itself was influenced by, among other things, the ideology of the Nazi Party. Nazi influence on Pan-Arabism was both ideological and practical. Nazis who fled war tribunals were given refuge in cities like Cairo and Damascus, where they
attempted genocides that plague the West and those countries once controlled by Western colonialist powers. The search for an approach to Western ethics that confronts and eradicates genocide is as pressing as it ever was. With its history of bridging the distance between perceived universals and particular cultures, Jewish thought is positioned to offer meaningful—if not invaluable—suggestions for how we continue that search.

Chapter 1

I. The Conversation in Inter-War Europe: The 1929 Davos Disputation

Levinas is not alone in blaming Western thought for the Holocaust. The tradition of Western thought is typically thought to begin with Socrates, and includes in its trajectory many more thinkers than those at whom Levinas' work takes aim. But Levinas does not reject the whole of Western thought; instead, he rejects the way in which much of the tradition took shape after the Enlightenment, especially in Europe. To understand on what grounds Levinas, Wiesel, Rubenstein and others blame Western thought for the Holocaust and other mass murders and genocides, one must examine the climate of thought and politics in the pre-World War I and interwar periods not only in Germany, but in Europe and America in general. The social climate of Europe in particular changed radically during these two periods, and in ways that shaped the philosophical, theological, and political movements Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein take part in; and while we can, in some ways see their work as a continuation of the values of the Enlightenment, each thinker also pushes back against the universalizing tendencies of Enlightenment thought. They are suspicious of its marked reliance on reason, which they feel is dangerous and misguided, regardless of adherents' good intentions. Thus, it is perhaps even better to see each thinker's project as, first and foremost, opposing the reactionary campaigns of National Socialism and other modern forms of violent fanaticism which they perceive as preoccupied with theoretical (and politically convenient) speculations about the nature of
Most importantly, they oppose these modern fanaticisms not by blindly returning to Enlightenment ethics as they had been previously imagined—that is primarily universalizing and dependent on reason as man's best and most reliable shared trait—but by claiming that we should do something altogether new.

The 1929 public conversation between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger in Davos, Switzerland is often considered a watershed moment in Continental philosophy specifically and in Western thought in general, and so we begin our examination here, particularly because the crux of Cassirer and Heidegger's philosophical differences lies in their estimation of the role of ethics in philosophy and politics. As Peter E. Gordon recently pointed out, “scholars of a variety of disciplines and ideological camps are tempted to regard it as a final moment of rupture—between humanism and anti-humanism, enlightenment and counter-enlightenment, or rationalism and irrationalism—as if the defining struggles of twentieth century thought were crystallized within this single event.”

The tendency to attribute considerable allegorical and political significance to the Davos disputation is amplified by the anecdotal accounts of those in attendance. Newspapers and academic journals of the time described the encounter in generational

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1 All three thinkers see the problem of ethics as having increased exponentially, in part because of the growing trend toward universalism, but also because of the declining role of religious values as they might be applied to public life. Modern life in the West, according to them, places greater value on the integrity and survival of overarching systems, rather than on the preservation of human life, community and culture. Rubenstein in particular expresses a distrust of technology and bloated bureaucracies, which he sees as both the cause and result of modern atrocities like Auschwitz.

terms as a kind of altercation between “the old and new thinking.” Heidegger's student, Otto Friedrich Bollnow stated grandly that he “had the most sublime feeling, to have...witnes[ed]...an historical moment...like that of which Goethe had spoken in his 'Campagne in Frankreich': 'From here and now a new epoch of world-history begins,'--in this case, of philosophical history.”

Leo Strauss, who wrote his dissertation under Cassirer and was not even in attendance at Davos nonetheless proclaimed that the disputation had proven that Heidegger was the “only great thinker of our time.” He alleged that Cassirer had “silently...transformed” his teacher Hermann Cohen's philosophical ethics into a “new system” from which ethics had “completely disappeared.” According to Strauss, Cassirer's failure to acknowledge this alleged disappearance meant that he had also failed to “confront the problem of ethics,” while Heidegger, the hero of the day, had “faced the problem” by declaring that “ethics is impossible.” According to Strauss, “Heidegger's whole being was permeated by the awareness that this fact opens up an abyss...”

3 Hermann Herrigel, “Denken dieser Zeit: Fakultäten und Nationen treffen sich in Davos,” FZ, Abendblatt: Hochschulblatt, April 22, 1929, 4. Franz Rosenzweig also referred to the Davos conversation between Cassirer and Heidegger as encounter between “the old and new thinking” in his 1929 essay entitled “Exchanged Frontiers,” wherein he claims that Heidegger's rejection of idealism was in line with Cohen's later work, and, as such, was the rightful inheritor of Cohen's chair at Marburg. See Karl Lowith's “M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig or Temporality and Eternity,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 3, no. 1 (Sept., 1942): 53-77.


5 Leo Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” in The Rebirth of Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss, ed., Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 28. Given Strauss' propensity for crafting artful polemics disguised as mere descriptive narration, his assertion that Cassirer had “dropped” ethics while re-cycling Cohen's neo-Kantianism is dubious, particularly since Cassirer felt Heidegger's emphasis on “destiny” led to an ethical stalemate. In Cassirer's own words, “...a philosophy [like Heidegger's] whose whole attention is focused on the Geworfenheit, the Being-thrown of man, can no longer do its duty.” See Ernst Cassirer, Symbol, Myth and Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 230. For Cassirer, man's duty was to take part
Regardless of whether Strauss' understanding of either Cassirer or Heidegger is accurate, it appears that Strauss and several of the graduate students who actually attended the Davos symposium found Cassirer’s neo-Kantianism insufficient, unconvincing and out of touch with lived human experience. Cassirer and Heidegger disagreed most regarding how we should understand Kant's project concerning the nature of metaphysics. Heidegger averred that neo-Kantianism created an “embarrassing dilemma” by misunderstanding the very role of philosophy. Furthermore, he claimed that neo-Kantianism incorrectly argued that questions of ontology should be supplanted by questions regarding the “knowledge of science.” Neo-Kantians (and here Heidegger names Cohen, Wondelband, Richert, Erdmann and Riehl as prime offenders) failed to understand Kant, who Heidegger asserts “did not wish to provide a theory of science, but to show the problematic of metaphysics, more specifically of ontology.” In one deft statement, Heidegger dismissed Cassirer and neo-Kantianism as an embarrassment to philosophy and suggested that Kant, understood by many as having been primarily concerned with, in the words of Cassirer, “the problem [of the possibility of] freedom,” was actually preoccupied with “ontology.” And certainly if this were the case, Heidegger

in the shaping human ethics and culture, and, first and foremost, to foster ethical responsibility by means of independent ethical decisions. In this Cassirer was in fact quite a bit like Cohen, even if his corpus lacks the pronounced ethical theory one finds in that of his mentor. For a helpful analysis of Cassirer's criticisms of Heidegger's thought, see John Michael Krois, “Cassirer's Unpublished Critique of Heidegger,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 16, no. 3 (1983): 147-159. See also Strauss' critique of Cassirer's The Myth of the State in What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies (Glencoe, IL:McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1959), 292-296. As another means of placing Strauss' description of Davos in perspective, it is worth noting that although Strauss completed his dissertation with Cassirer, he had attended university with every intention of completing that work under Cohen whose work could hardly be more antithetical to Heidegger's, especially with regard to ethics.

could consider himself, rather than Cassirer, Husserl, or any of his contemporaries, the true inheritor of the Kantian mantle.

Cassirer agreed with Heidegger's claims that Kant saw man's capacity for knowledge as finite, but insisted that Kant “stood for...complete objectivity...[and] absoluteness...in the realms of the ethical and the theoretical.”\(^7\) In other words, Cassirer felt that Kant wanted to understand how man, in his finitude, seems nonetheless able to connect with and make use of that which extends beyond the finite—which, for Kant, the categorical imperative. Yet Heidegger, at least at Davos, shows no interest in Kant's assertion that the categorical imperative is evidence of man's connectedness to the infinite. During the disputation, one of Heidegger's main objectives was to argue that Kant, understood for decades as connecting a universal system of ethics with an \textit{a priori} acceptance of man's ultimate freedom, was \textit{not} a foremost progenitor of European Enlightenment, but rather, privately aware that the core beliefs of the Enlightenment, particularly those related to ethics, were a sham.

Levinas, who was living in Germany at the time, is the most well known attendee of Davos today. He was Husserl's \textit{other} now-famous student. Years later he, too, would recall that Cassirer's performance seemed to indicate “the end of a particular type of humanism.”\(^8\) Levinas, who was present at Heidegger's request, \(^9\) went on to say that he “thought for a long time—in the course of those terrible years—that I had felt it then, in spite of my enthusiasms. The value judgments of [these enthusiasms] have necessarily

\(^7\) Slade, “A Discussion,” 194.
\(^8\) François Poirié, \textit{Emmanuel Lévinas: Qui êtes-vous?} (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), 78.
\(^9\) Megan Craig, \textit{Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 49.
changed over time. And during the Hitler years I reproached myself for having preferred Heidegger at Davos.” He regretted his treatment of Cassirer for the rest of his life, and bitterly admitted, “I did not even pity Cassirer. For years afterward, the scene haunted me.” He remembered, too, feeling that “Heidegger announced that a world that was going to be turned over...” even though “one would have to have had the gift of prophecy to sense this already at Davos.” Heidegger joined the Nazi Party on May 1, 1933, and was a dues-paying member until the party collapsed in 1945. Heidegger's embrace and facilitation of Nazi ideology affected Levinas and his burgeoning approach to philosophy profoundly.  

Strauss and Levinas' perceptions on the nature and outcome of the Davos disputation are instructive, since both thinkers acknowledge that, at the very least, it highlighted modern Western thought's movement away from an interest in universal

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10 Poirié, Emmanuel Lévinas, 78.
11 Craig, 49. The “scene” to which Levinas refers is likely the mock cabaret performed by some of the graduate students who attended the disputation. Levinas performed the role of Cassirer by dusting his hair with flour (to mimic Cassirer's white hair) and repeated the phrase “Ich bin versöhnlich verstimmt” in response to everything Heidegger (played by Bollnow) said. From Geoffrey Waite's “On Esotericism: Heidegger and/or Cassirer at Davos,” Political Theory 26, no. 5 (Oct. 1998):635. Levinas's parody indicates that the graduate students felt Cassirer had not rallied well against Heidegger's attacks on neo-Kantianism and had focused on appearing more intellectually amicable than Heidegger instead.
12 Levinas often argues with and against Heidegger, especially with regard to rightful position of ethics within philosophy. And it is arguably Levinas' sense of the betrayal with regard to Heidegger that leads him to critique the weakness of philosophical inquiries against brutal immorality when we are armed only with reason. But Levinas also engaged in subtextual arguments with and against other thinkers of his time, as well. Myriam Bienenstock argues convincingly Levinas argues against thinkers like Alexandre Kojève, Franz Rosenzweig and Hermann Cohen in a similar fashion. Her three part lecture series on Levinas in context delivered at Boston University and broadcast on radio station WBUR. The three lectures were: “Levinas in Context: The French Connection” (lecture, the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies at Boston University, Boston, MA, April 10, 2013); “Levinas in Context: The German Connection” (lecture, the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies at Boston University, Boston, MA, April 17, 2013); and “Levinas in Context: The Jewish Connection” (lecture, the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies at Boston University, Boston MA, April 24, 2013). Podcasts are available here: http://worldofideas.wbur.org.
ethics. Davos provides us with a useful snapshot of the philosophical and political landscape of the interwar period in Europe—defined largely by the dominance of Enlightenment ideology and the subsequent backlash against it. It also reflects the magnitude of the increasingly passionate and bloody stand off between two radically different political orientations. After all, philosophy's most pressing and timeless questions are the same as those asked in times of political turmoil: What is the nature of man? What is the best form of governance for him? What are man's obligations to himself and his fellow man? And most importantly, who is his fellow man: The members of his faith community? The members of his ethnic or national group? All of mankind? It was precisely these questions that divided post-Enlightenment “liberalism” from the growing romantic nationalist revolt that culminated in National Socialism and other totalitarian regimes in Europe.

Let us return to Levinas' “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.” In 1934, six years after Davos, Levinas blamed the existence and popularity of Nazi ideology on what he felt were fundamental flaws in Western thought:

...the bloody barbarism of Nationalism Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reason, nor in some accidental misunderstanding. [The] source stems from the essential possibility of elemental evil into which we can be lead by logic and against which
Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself.\textsuperscript{13}

While Levinas is referring most obviously to Heidegger here, he is making a much deeper claim than that. According to Levinas, fascism, genocide and totalitarianism are not primarily manifestations of innate human brutality. They are the inevitable results of what he perceived as the inherent violence of totalizing thinking that perceives other human beings as objects to be brought in line with and subsequently categorized within the thinking subject's expectations and assumptions about the world. According to Levinas, this ideologically sanctioned obliteration and objectification of the other made brutes of the people of Europe, and rendered those who might otherwise have rejected National Socialism, fascism and bystanderism helpless against the calculating, philosophically buttressed blitzkrieg of Hitler's Germany. To get a better sense of the philosophical, political and cultural movements against which Levinas feels “philosophy”—and perhaps all of Europe—“had not sufficiently insured itself,” it is best to start with the ideas and thinkers who shaped not only Heidegger, but Hitler, his henchmen, and the romantic nationalist ideology that culminated in a Europe dominated by fascism.

II. Against the Enlightenment: Cultural Criticism and Conservative Revolution in the Nineteenth Century

Because fascism was ultimately most successful in twentieth century Germany, we begin with Germany proto-fascism. As early as 1853, theologian Paul De Lagarde claimed that Germany's “destiny” lay “in the east.” In his very first essay, he demanded that Germans colonize all non-German territory within the German Bund, with the express goal of “unifying the Germans.” Even after the creation of the German state in 1871, Lagarde remained expansionist. He insisted that Germany's safety could be guaranteed only if she took some border territories from France and annexed the whole of the Austrian empire. He wrote that, “Austria had no other purpose than to become Germany's colonial state.” The greatest obstacle to Germany's fulfillment of its expansionist destiny as Lagarde understood it was Russia, who would “force us to war” by refusing to surrender Poland, the Balkans, and part of the Black Sea coast, all of which Lagarde felt rightfully belonged to Germany. “The Germans are a peaceful people,” Lagarde claimed, “but they are convinced of their right to fight for themselves, as Germans, and convinced that they have a mission to perform for all the nations of the

14 The Deutscher Bund, or the German Confederation, was created by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 in an effort to coordinate the economies of German speaking territories and countries. It was considered by some to be weak and ineffective, and certainly went against the grain of rising German nationalist aspirations. The Bund collapsed in 1848, due in part to German dualism and revolution, but was re-established in 1850. It is this configuration of the Bund to which Lagarde's essay refers. Several of the member states were ruled by foreign or non-Germanic monarchs, (the King of Britain even ruled one of the states), but the most powerful members were Prussian and Austria.


After all, according to Lagarde, war was a powerful means of gaining strength, unity of purpose and virility for any nation.

Lagarde's plans for the German domination of Europe included “population transfers.” After colonizing Poland, for example, Lagarde felt the whole of Polish Jewry should be expelled to an unnamed territory. All other “non-Germans”—Slovenes, Czechs, and others—should be relocated to assigned and regulated locations within the Austrian empire. From there, Germany could simply keep expanding its borders, until it had gone as far as Asia Minor. Lagarde felt his scheme would solve several issues that he identified as most pressing for Germans of the time. First, it would unify the German people. Second, it would provide a cultural boon by taking many Germans out of urban centers and place them in the countryside, where he felt they belonged. Finally, it would ease Germany's overpopulation problems and cease all immigration to America. What Lagarde ultimately wanted, though, was an Austrian-German union. According to Lagarde, the two emperors should form an alliance, whereby the two empires would merge after the death of either monarch. If Europe as a whole were dominated by German thought and culture, Lagarde reasoned, then it would be at peace.

It should come as no surprise that the Nazis recognized Paul de Lagarde as a progenitor of National Socialism. Many of the similarities between Lagarde's fantasies and real world Nazi policy are startling. Lagarde's suggested “population relocation” immediately following Germany's colonization of “the east” was a significant part of the

\[17\] Lagarde, Deutsche Schriften, 79.
\[18\] Ibid.
\[19\] Lagarde, Deutsche Schriften, 286.
inspiration for what would later be known as the *Lebensraum* movement—Nazi Germany's push for more and more acreage upon which Germans could comfortably live, while native populations gave up their money, jobs and property to work as slaves to the Reich. Even Lagarde's villainization of Russia, coupled with his assertion that countries unwilling to hand over their territory to Germany were “forcing Germans into war” was echoed in Hitler's later rhetoric as the Nazis blitzkrieged Europe.

Less obvious, perhaps, are the *philosophical* similarities between Lagarde's impassioned essays and the ideology of the Reich, as well as the work of other nineteenth and early twentieth century Germans. First and foremost is the claim that Germany had a messianic destiny to fulfill, a destiny which, once attained, would bring peace and cultural renaissance to all of Europe. This messianic destiny was founded on a mythologized German past and a deep nostalgia for an imagined history to which Germans and Germany must be forcefully re-connected. No less important is the shared romanticization of physical conflict and war as noble and spiritually cleansing. Finally, there is the shared distrust of mechanization and urbanization—of “cosmopolitanism,” the fear of which often manifested itself as anti-Semitism.

These ideas cannot be attributed to Lagarde and the Nazis alone, who typify National Socialism and anti-Enlightenment response in their most extreme forms. Consider the words of Walter Rathenau:

> We [Germans] are endowed as no other people is for a mission of the spirit. Such a mission was ours until a century ago; we renounced it, and
instead devoted ourselves to the most far-reaching developments of mechanism and their counterpart of bid to power. It was Faust, lured away from his true path, astray among witches, brawlers, and alchemists. But the Faust soul of Germany is not dead. Of all peoples on the earth we alone have never ceased to struggle with ourselves...the soul of the German people still lies in the convulsions and hallucinations of a slow recovery. It is a recovery not alone from the War, but from something worse, its hundred years alienation from itself. We must reunite ourselves with the days before we ceased to be Germans and became Berliners.²⁰

Walter Rathenau was not a fascist, or even a member of the German or Viennese youth movements, groups known to espouse a similar distrust of industry, capital, and urban spaces. Rathenau was a German Jewish economist, industrialist, writer and statesman who served as Foreign Minister of Germany for the Weimar Republic. Yet in the above passage he describes Germany much like Lagarde does: as a nation unique among nations and charged with a messianic destiny who has been led astray by the mechanization and industrialization of the city, implicitly identified as foreign inventions that have forced themselves upon a hapless Germany. Rathenau was indeed an ardent German nationalist, and a strong proponent of Jewish assimilation who felt very strongly that Jews should reject both Zionism and socialism in order to fully integrate into German society.²¹ For

²¹ See Arnold Brecht's essay, “Walter Rathenau and the German People,” *The Journal of Politics* 10, no. 1
Rathenau, German Jews were, first and foremost, German.

Even though Rathenau felt the reparations assigned to Germany through the Versailles Treaty would prove impossible to repay, he nonetheless insisted that Germany comply to the best of her abilities until the terms of the treaty could be re-worked. This point of view made him extremely unpopular with those German nationalists who, unlike moderate, liberal Rathenau, favored authoritarian rule—a population that, especially since Germany's defeat in WWI, was growing in numbers. Rathenau was assassinated in 1924, the same year he received his appointment to the Foreign Ministry by very young assassins who were members of a group called the “Organization Consul.” In an eerie foreshadowing of things to come, the Consul's chief complaint about Rathenau was that he was a member of “the Jewish-Bolshevist conspiracy,” and needed to be disposed of; when the Nazis came to power, his assassins were declared national heroes.\(^{22}\) We must admit that, in the words of Arnold Brecht, Rathenau “sometimes use[d] a language that could be mistaken for that of a forerunner of the Nazis, as Luther, Kant or Nietzsche used phrases that could be so mistaken.”\(^{23}\) This should not make us doubt Rathenau's sanity—for why indeed would a German Jew espouse proto-Nazi ideology? Rather, it should help us to understand something deeper about the German political and intellectual climate of the pre WWI and interwar periods.

Notions of special German mission, distrust of cities, industry, and of all things deemed “non-German” were not exclusive to the language, ideology and mythology of...
right wing German romantic nationalists. Of course even though the general climate of interwar Germany can be characterized as marked by fantasies and concerns similar to those expressed by National Socialism, there are qualitative differences between the politic goals of someone like Rathenau—who was not and never would have been a Nazi—and the goals of someone like Paul De Lagarde, who is credited with providing national socialism with some of its most important foundational ideas. Rathenau was indeed a fervid nationalist, but he eschewed the then-popular claim that national unity required authoritarian rule. As a liberal capitalist, he also rejected the idea of state ownership of industry, and instead advocated for greater worker participation in company management. Of the Bolshevik revolution, Rathenau wrote that this “Russian idea is compulsory happiness, the same sense and with the same logic as the compulsory introduction of Christianity and the Inquisition.”

As William Orton pointed out in 1935, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Germans made similar romantic nationalist proclamations, so, from his point of view, “two poles of the German universe” emerge. “...on the one hand, genius for objective system and order, pragmatic accomplishment and tenacity of purpose, reflected in the tangible successes of social, economic and military organization; and on the other hand, the transcendental aspiration, the romantic introversion, the [self-proclaimed] profundity of German feeling and culture.” Orton suggests that “between these poles the ideal of German unity has always lain in a field of instability and

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tension...and in this constant tension lies the key to German history.” Orton, who described his essay as an attempt to explain what he called the “semi-mystical, subjective Germanism” of the Nazis to baffled Americans, closes his argument by quoting a September, 1934 speech of Adolf Hitler:

The idea of human civilization may be built up on an entirely unconscious...fulfillment of a longing and its urge as inwardly determined by the influence of blood...For the purpose of building up a new civilization it would be a mistake to adopt elements of a philosophy imported in the past but not rooted in the blood of our people.

In this passage, Orton identifies a number of the themes that are central to what Fritz Stern later calls the “German cultural critics” of the romantic nationalist persuasion. He points to Hitler's “admission of a deep spiritual dissatisfaction, together with its natural outcome in messianic imagery,” something Stern claims is ubiquitous among conservative German cultural critics in Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hitler's distrust of “foreign philosophies”—as well as the assertion that blood is a purveyor of ultimate identity—is found in the earliest forms of romantic nationalism. In conclusion, Orton claims that Germans “put [national] solidarity” before “personal liberty to a degree that seems shocking to an American...”

Orton makes excellent observations here, but hints that this fondness for “solidarity” that he identifies in nineteenth and twentieth century German political thought is intrinsic to the German “spirit.” He suggests that Germany has somehow taken a path far different than the one monolithically chosen by the rest of Central and Western Europe. Orton subscribed to the Sonderweg thesis, or the idea that Germany was somehow unique among other European nations and therefore pursued a less well-established path than the rest of the West. As Jürgen Kocka points out, there have multiple variants of the Sonderweg thesis since its modern genesis in the nineteenth century. Many German historians from nineteenth and early twentieth century “were convinced of a positive 'German way.' In contrast to English and French historians, they liked to stress certain basic German specifics, consistent with German geography and historical pattern...[and] German 'Kultur' was considered different from western 'Zivilisation', a view which reached its zenith at the beginning of the first world war...”²⁸

Then scholars like Otto Hintze and Ernst Troeltsch adopted a variant of the Sonderweg idea as well. National Socialism's argument that Germany was destined to dominate all of Europe under a messianic führer was another variant of this theory of essential German uniqueness. Interestingly enough, Sonderweg theories are often used to explain the development and overwhelming success of the Third Reich's genocidal version of fascism in Germany (rather than in France or Italy, for example).

In the nineteenth century, the Sonderweg theory was popular among liberals as

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well as conservatives. Fritz Stern argues that the fundamental difference between someone like Rathenau and someone like Lagarde, both of whom embrace Sonderweg style notions of German uniqueness can, in many ways be attributed to whether one possessed the “deep spiritual dissatisfaction” with extant German culture professed by many conservatives. Stern's 1961 study, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study of the Rise of Germanic Ideology* which examines Paul De Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck as progenitors of the ideology of the Third Reich, suggests that these men saw themselves as “moralists and the guardians of what they thought was an ancient tradition.” As such, they “attacked the progress of modernity—the growing power of liberalism and secularism.” All three recounted the dangers of Germany's growing industrialism and “warned against the loss of faith, of unity, of “values.” All three were foes of commerce, and cities as well—heroic vitalists who denigrated reason and routine.”

“Above all,” writes Stern, “these men loathed liberalism.” But why? Liberalism had, up until the Weimar years, never been an especially popular position in Germany, and Stern's cultural critics were primarily active before the Weimar years. Stern argues that to Lagarde and Moeller in particular, liberalism nonetheless seemed to be the “cause and the incarnation of all evil...and the principle premise of modern society; everything they dreaded seem to spring from it: the bourgeois life, Manchesterism, materialism, parliament and the parties, the lack of political leadership.” What they

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30 Manchesterism was the term used for a particular kind of liberalism that originated in Manchester, England. The central idea was that free trade would lead to a more equitable society by making more goods readily available to more people. The term is believed to have been coined by Benjamin Disraeli in 1848.
longed for, Stern claims, was “a new faith, a new community of believers, a world with fixed standards and no doubts, a new national religion that would bind all Germans together. All this liberalism denied...”

In addition, Langbehn and Lagarde were virulent anti-Semites, and saw Jews as “insidious bacilli.” This should come as no surprise, given that Langbehn and Lagarde's sense of authentic “German-ness,” unlike Rathenau's, was deeply rooted in an imagined Teutonic past that they believed was destroyed by modern liberalism—a political point of view which, in Germany, often included strong support for civil rights for German Jews. To add insult to injury, it was French rule that ultimately forced the passage of equal rights for Jews in Germany, not a German government acting on its own accord. If Jews were not already targets of suspicion for thinkers like Lagarde, Langbehn and Moeller, then Enlightenment ideals of the equality of all men and the subsequent forced liberation of European Jews certainly would have made them so.

Part and parcel with their own peculiar brand of messianism, Lagarde, Langbehn and Moeller plainly called for a Führer whose strength of will would not only unify Germany at home, but bring her into well-deserved dominance abroad so that she might, at last, become the greatest power in the world. Taken together, this collection of ideas impacted the Lebensgefühle of Germans of every class two generations before Hitler ever appeared on the political scene. Moreover, this ideology, in the words of Stern, “not only resembles National Socialism, but...the National Socialists themselves acknowledged [it]

as a central part of their legacy...” and accounts for “the politically exploitable discontent...so long embedded in German culture” with which we have “not sufficiently reckoned.”  

Stern points out that these forerunners of National Socialism, not unlike the forerunners of other forms of European fascism, also believed deeply in a similarly articulated but imaginary folk-rooted past. They also shared a fondness for conspiracy theories, and often proclaimed a deep distrust for the state. But they also tended to advocate authoritarian forms of government coupled with extensive cultural planning as a means of stamping out any possible dissenters until true national unity could be (re)-established. Stern's sense that political and cultural discontent—forces with which the rest of the world “had not sufficiently reckoned”---were at least in part to blame for the popularity and power of the Nazi party mirror almost exactly Levinas' concerns about the inability of Western philosophy to “sufficiently insure itself against...the bloody barbarism of national socialism.” Both Stern and Levinas attribute the success of National Socialism to the West's inability to understand itself. The West's love of reform (and its penchant for messianic longing, which looks both forward into the future while gazing intently backward into an often mythic past) can manifest itself as a revolt against modernity just as easily as it can demonstrate a profound desire for it.

Note that neither Stern nor Levinas blame German thought and culture exclusively, although neither would deny that National Socialism was wildly successful in Germany, perhaps surprisingly so. Certainly, to suggest that the problem lay only with

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German thought and culture comes too close to reifying romantic nationalism’s essentialist claims that identity is dictated by “blood” or folk “spirit,” and most importantly would not account for the significant popularity of other forms of romantic nationalism in the rest of the modern West. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this kind of nationalism appeared in nearly every country in Europe and showed signs of life in the United States. What Stern calls an “ideology of despair and redemption” could be found not only in the political platforms of the pan-Germans and the anti-Semitic parties in Germany, but in those of *Action Française* and the anti-Dreyfusards in France, the 1903 Italian nationalists, and the Christian Fronters and the German American Bund in the United States as well.

For example, historian Peter M. Rutkoff notes that the political milieu of late nineteenth century France when *Action Française* and other anti-Dreyfusard groups were founded is marked by a “transference of nationalism from [the] left to [the] right.” Rutkoff correctly points out that the French right of the late nineteenth has not been universally understood as proto-fascist because key figures of the period have been “evaluated in terms of what they said rather than what they did and who they were...” Therefore historians have “tended to deny the existence of an authentic [subsequent] fascist movement” because they mistakenly believed there was no “indigenous fascist tradition.” Subsequently, the French leagues of the 1930s that were inspired by the anti-

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34 There were quite a number of far-right *Ligues* in France in the 1920s and 1930s, and some of them copied Mussolini’s form of fascism or were inspired by or collaborators with the Nazis, but a few saw themselves as inheritors of a French, ultra-nationalist, anti-republican tradition. *Jeunesses Patriotes* was founded in 1924 by Pierre Taittinger who claimed the legacy of the *Ligue des Patriotes*. Other “native French” *Ligues* from the 1920s and 1930s include the royalist *Action Française*, inspired by the
Dreyfusards and the *Ligue des Patriotes* from the latter part of the previous century are identified as “Bonapartist, conservative, or foreign but not fascist in inspiration.” Yet there are two major events in nineteenth century France which both reflected and helped to create an upsurge in right wing political activity in both Paris and the provinces: the Boulanger Affair and the Dreyfus Affair.

Rutkoff identifies Paul Déroulède, founder and leader of the *Ligue des Partiotes* in 1882 and again in 1897, as the major figure in “indigenous” French proto-fascist and fascist politics, and the Boulanger Affair and the Dreyfus Affair provided traction for Déroulède's *Ligue*, which served to unify royalist, anti-republican and anti-parliamentary constituencies under one proto-fascist umbrella. In its first iteration, the *Ligue* supported Georges Ernest Boulanger, a French General and political figure whose popularity ballooned during his commission as War Minister which began in January of 1886. He earned the nickname “Général Revanche” when he introduced legal and military reforms to benefit soldiers and appealed to the French desire for revenge against Germany for France's swift defeat in the war of 1870 (the Franco-Prussian War). The government fairly quickly came to see Boulanger as a risk, and he was removed from his position as War Minister in May of 1887. The government was astonished, however, when Boulanger received approximately 100,000 votes in the general election in Seine, he was

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removed from Paris, where is was an increasingly beloved figure, and sent to the provinces.

By 1889, Boulanger had received enough votes to seize power, but he refused. The government launched an attack on both Boulanger and his followers. Boulanger fled to Belgium with his mistress, who died in July 1891, and Boulanger himself committed suicide 2 months later. What is most interesting about Boulanger is that he attracted followers from across the French political spectrum. Bonapartists, Republicans, socialists, Blanquist,

36 (known for their anti-Semitism) and monarchists alike subscribed to Boulangisme, which advocated three basic principles: Revanche (revenge against Germany), Révision (of the constitution), and Restoration (of the monarchy). These are culturally specific manifestations of themes already familiar to us. Much like Lagarde, Langbehn and van den Bruck, Boulanger called for a return to a monarchist past that predated modern constitutional, democratic, republican government. Boulanger’s appeals were attractive to the working and middle classes and the socialists of Paris and the provinces because of their anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist content. Like other conservative anti-modern movements, Boulangisme centered on the power and charisma of a single leader who was seen as a kind of political savior for a nation led astray by “foreign” forces and ideology. Just as the German cultural critics felt certain that “foreign” ideology and invention would distract Germany from her ultimate mission to unify and perfect Europe, at stake for Boulanger and his followers was the purity and

36 Blanquism refers to a form of socialist revolution generally attributed to Louis Auguste Blanqui, who claimed that small, organized and secretive conspirators were best equipped for carrying out revolution. Revolutionary takeover would be putsch-like, except that the revolutionaries would harness the power of the state in order to institute socialism or communism.
French history, identity and mission.

Déroulède's *Ligue of Patriotes* disbanded after Boulanger fled, but the *Ligue* reappeared in 1897 in response to the Dreyfus Affair, a phenomenon which, perhaps even more than the Boulanger Affair, provides a useful display of the most significant philosophical and political conflicts of nineteenth and twentieth century France. Nancy Green points out that “...polarized around the Affair were “anti-Semites, clericalists, militarists, nationalists and anti-republicans on one side; and the anti-anti-Semites (not only Jews nor necessarily philo-Semites), anti-clericalists, anti-militarists and republicans on the other.” Green asserts that “[French] nationalism as a coherent doctrine was forged through The Affair.” Between 1897 and 1900 Déroulède's *Ligue* was at the forefront of the anti-Dreyfusards and nationalist forces. Déroulède retained Boulanger's cry for “Revanche” against Germany as central to *Ligue* ideology, and this was a powerful theme for the times, especially in Paris where the Dreyfus Affair dominated the conversations of the wealthy and the working class alike. And although *Action Fraçaise* would not come into being until a year later when it is founded by monarchist counter-revolutionary Charles Maurass, much of its organization and membership descends directly from the Déroulède's *Ligue*.

The *Ligue* used the same psychological weapon utilized by all proto-fascist

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37 Nancy L. Green, “The Dreyfus Affair and Ruling Class Cohesion,” *Science and Society* 43 no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 31. Green's essay is particular helpful for readers interested in what Green calls “the contemporary terms” related to the Affair and their “corresponding constellations of interests.” (34) She argues persuasively that these interests should be closely examined in relation to the socio-economic cleavages in French society that they—and the Affair itself—represented.

38 Green, “The Dreyfus Affair,” 35.

groups of the time: fear of the foreigner, the Jew, the far left, the “sans-patrie.” And although, as Rutkoff points out, the Ligue did not engage in anti-Semitic propaganda until late in its existence, it is evident that many Liguers were anti-Semitic and that the Ligue des Patriotes and the Ligue Antisémitique had remarkably similar constituencies.

Rutkoff’s observations about the demographics of Ligue membership are instructive:

It is significant that the quartiers of Paris where the membership of the Ligue des Patriotes was highest also contained the highest proportional number of eastern European Jews, who tended to enter, or try to enter, lower middle-class trades, and whose relative success and competitive strivings were instrumental in arousing anti-Semitism...Further, the undercurrent of anticapitalism was a significant theme in the general appeal of the Ligue, with its exhortations against the rotten, inbred, “foreign”-dominated parliamentary regime...[The Parisian lower middle-class was] no longer at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder but [was] fearful of many things—proletarianization, the wealthy, the Jew, the socialists, the foreign element—they were becoming the forgotten men of in a system of economic interests and political compromise based on the alliance of the middle class and peasantry of which they had once been a part. The Parisian lower middle class had but one outlet for its frustrations--the street...Although the Ligue failed in its major objectives

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40 Rutkoff, “‘The Ligue des Patriotes,’” 587.
[regarding Dreyfus] it did represent a segment of the population and a tradition that became a new and modern force on the French right.\(^{41}\)

An additional *Ligue* contribution to French nationalism was a “new appeal for direct action.”\(^{42}\) The “politics of the street” took precedence over “electoral politics.” Underlying this emphasis on direct action in the streets was the *Ligue*’s firm rejection of parliamentary systems as unacceptable. Emphasizing the “power of the street” kept the focus—and the political control—in the hands of the leaders, such as Déroulède. Rutkoff notes that Déroulède's “personal dominance over the *Ligue* was extraordinary; his followers' sense of loyalty to the man first and the movement second is the most striking feature of his rôle in the *Ligue*...”\(^{43}\) The *Ligue* fizzled out completely when its charismatic leader could not remain at the helm.

French proto-fascism was invigorated by the divisive nature of the Dreyfus Affair, which according to Rutkoff, is “surely the episode that in the history of the Third Republic which divided Frenchmen the most.”\(^{44}\) The popularity of the second iteration of the *Ligue* was not insignificant. By February of 1899, the month of Déroulède's unsuccessful coup attempt the *Ligue* had 60,000 members.\(^{45}\) The details of the Dreyfus Affair touched on nearly all of the issues that deeply divided a conflicted French populace. Not all of France felt that a republic, which was after still after all an

\(^{41}\) Rutkoff, “The Ligue des Patriotes,” 602.
\(^{42}\) Rutkoff, “The Ligue des Patriotes,” 586.
\(^{43}\) Rutkoff, “The Ligue des Patriotes,” 588.
\(^{44}\) Rutkoff, “The Ligue des Patriotes,” 586.
\(^{45}\) Rutkoff, “The Ligue des Patriotes,” 587.
experiment, was preferable to a non-parliamentary monarchy, and not all Frenchmen felt Jews and other French minorities should be afforded civil and legal rights. Many cried out for a “return” to a more homogeneous France—which, not unlike the Germany that the cultural critics of the same era pined for, never truly existed. The conservative revolutions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century France and Germany were, in fact, more similar than different, even with regard to the power and prevalence of anti-Semitism.

A similar, although less popular conservative backlash occurred in the United States, evidenced by the creation of the German American Bund in 1936. The Bund was one among many German-American ethnic organizations, but the only of its kind to define itself as pro-Nazi. This meant they were anti-Semitic, anti-communist, and pro-Hitler. The Bund published magazines and brochures, launched demonstrations, and ran a number of youth camps, not unlike those run by the Nazi party in Germany. At their peak, they had 25,000 dues paying members and supported 8,000 uniformed “Storm Troopers” (the Bund's equivalent of the Sturmabteilungen, or the SA).46

The Bund worked closely with another conservative American organization called the “Christian Front” whose constituency was much broader and whose members were more likely to be Irish-Catholic than German-American. The Front was founded and inspired by Father Charles Coughlin,47 whose anti-Semitism was well known. Coughlin

46 The Reich sent Rudolph Hess to facilitate the creation of an American Nazi party in 1933. There are other estimates of membership rates, but most reliable sources reckon the number to be around 25,000. The number of people who were sympathetic to the Bund's ideology would be far more difficult to ascertain.

47 United States Holocaust Museum. “German American Bund,” Holocaust Encyclopedia,
achieved a degree of national fame because of his radio program broadcast out of Detroit from 1926 to 1940. The Christian Front's official mandate was “to organize Christians to battle communism.” But the organization's mission seemed far broader in scope than that; it sought to accomplish what it considered a moral mission. In the words of Father Coughlin himself, “It is Christ or chaos!...It is either Christian social justice or pagan social decay!” Not at all unlike the European cultural critics who trumpeted warnings about modernity's trajectory toward certain moral decay, Coughlin insisted that foreign “forces were engineering the mechanism of a juggernaut of hatred, slavery and death.” America's only hope was a united Christian “front,” that could repel the “foreign “isms” “which were ready and waiting to “plunge its dagger into YOU.” Not surprisingly, members of other ultra-nationalist, pro-fascist, and pro-Nazi groups, like the German American Bund, associated themselves with the Front almost immediately.

One of the central messages given to Christian Front members was to “act Christian.” But as Gregory Fein points out:

Fronters would not even define what they meant when they instructed members to “act Christian”—they would just say it. The Fronters became more specific when they spoke about buying and voting Christian. These


Father Charles Coughlin, radio address from August 27, 1939.


definitions were more obvious. Buying Christian including patronizing Christian-owned businesses, boycotting Jewish owned businesses, and railing against “Jewish-controlled” media...\(^{52}\)

To facilitate this end, the CF used anti-Semitic stereotypes and language to describe “Jewish business policies.” For example, Jewish businessmen were called “circumcisers” because the CF believed that Jewish businesses routinely posted going out of business signs in stores that were actually staying in business. As Fein relates:

>[It was believed that] their false advertising enticed unsuspecting Christian patrons to shop at their shops, thinking they were getting a good deal. The result was those patrons did not shop at Christian-owned businesses. In other words, Jews were taking their “pound of flesh” from Christians—they methodically cut-off Christian shoppers from Christian merchants. Jewish merchants were denounced for unfair business practices and were accused of being irreligious because they failed to live up to the “Commandments of Moses.”\(^{53}\)

Just like their European and American fascist and romantic nationalist counterparts, the

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\(^{53}\) Fein, “Twisted Justice,” 10. Fein cites the minutes of CF meetings, pamphlets and articles written by CF priests like Coughlin, Reverend Edward Lodge Curran, and others.
CF blamed the ills of modernity—typified for them by the poverty, alienation, and fearful uncertainty wrought by the Great Depression—on the “internationalists,” a euphemism for Jews, always identified with secular government and urban, industrial society. According to Coughlin and other CF members, “Jews were the internationalist bankers; Jews were the factory owners; Jews had usurped the control of education and labor unions, all in the name of communism.”\(^5\) Like their European fascist cohorts, the CF worked with a messianic fervor to protect and create a “Christian America” founded on what they considered the principles of social justice as taught by Jesus. And not unlike the European cultural critics who longed for a mythical past that never existed, the CF “proclaimed itself the protector of a Christian America that existed only in its collective mind.”\(^5\) In an article by James Wechsler from *The Nation*, Coughlinites were described as “A grim and humorless array.” Wechsler went on:

Parochial students who have suddenly become missionaries, middle-aged men and women who have obviously had very little fun in life, neighborhood toughs who now have lofty motives for rowdyism, elderly women who get hysterical at the drop of an anti-Coughlin phrase, children whose services have been donated by zealous parents. But they are more than stock types for fanaticism. In large measure they are creatures of poverty and disappointment: You can see the frayed white collar, you can

sense the unfulfilled dreams and the perennial inadequacy of lower-middle-class life. They are clerks who wrap bundles all week, unsuccessful little merchants with large and resentful wives, unemployed workers clutching for some intangible enemy...\footnote{56}

The tone of this passage is derisive, but Wechsler's description of CF members as “disappointed,” “resentful,” and “clutching for some intangible enemy” is almost identical to Stern's more diplomatic descriptions of the German cultural critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\footnote{57} And although the rioting and violence perpetrated by CFers was minor outside New York City, national membership was on the rise in 1940, especially in cities like Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Cleveland. As we have seen, contemporary depictions of CF and Bund members often describe them as almost exclusively uneducated, immigrants or working class poor, but evidence shows this is not the case. Nor was fascism simply another manifestation of the “German spirit,” as suggested by Orton. Members of every class and every cultural and ethnic group, in fact, supported totalitarianism. The work of Julien Benda also strongly suggests that without the support of the educated middle and upper classes, fascism, in any nation,

\footnote{57} In a government-sponsored pamphlet written for the American Council on Public Affairs, Theodore Irwin also describes CF members in similar terms. New York City always hosted the largest population of CF members—at one time, Manhattan and the outer boroughs claimed to have 20,000—and in Irwin's opinion, these individuals were mostly “admirers of Charles E. Coughlin and sundry hoodlums, crackpots, misguided patriots, Bundsters” whose activities and rhetoric bore a “startling resemblance to early Nazism.” Irwin, Theodore. “Inside the Christian Front,” American Council on Public Affairs (Washington, D.C., 1940): 3. According to Irwin, “Affection for Hitler and his policies was outspoken” and “Christian Front propaganda penetrated even the public schools, and several Jewish children were beaten by small-fry Streichers.” 4.
could not succeed. Supporters of fascism profess a political and cultural alienation, a dissatisfaction with many—and sometimes all—aspects of what they might call a modern liberal society: cities, industry, secular schools and institutions, cultural heterogeneity, democratic political process and everything associated with it. What drives them is messianic longing for a leader who will unite—or reunite—them with their “own people,” defined in terms similar to the Reich’s use of the term “volk.” Political and cultural backlash against the Enlightenment was typified by, but not isolated to, the work of Lagarde, Langbehn and Moeller in France and Déroulède in France who felt strongly that their country should resist “creations” like mechanization, industrialization, political parties, and democracy, which they describe as “foreign” and return to its past in order to fulfill its destiny.

If we define “modernity” as having begun in the mid-eighteenth century—and I agree with Stern's terms here, since much of what romantic nationalism and fascism object to are the fundamental claims promoted by Enlightenment models—we can locate the intellectual roots of the “conservative revolution” in the work of Rousseau and his followers, and trace it through the work of Hegel, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, even though it is far from accurate to claim that these figures were all fascist. On the other hand, although Levinas and Rubenstein in particular take aim most passionately at Heidegger, he is by far not the only member of the Western intelligentsia to have supported fascism, although he might be the only such thinker whose work is still lauded by many as among the most brilliant of the twentieth century. What Heidegger did for National Socialism in Germany, Giovanni Gentile, best known today for the texts he
ghostwrote for Benito Mussolini, did for fascism in Italy; he legitimated the conservative revolution among intellectuals and middle and upper class people, at home and abroad.

Gentile was, in turn, greatly influenced by Georges Sorel, a French Marxist best known for his advocacy of syndicalism, a proposed replacement for capitalism and state socialism. Like the German cultural critics and the Italian fascists of the early twentieth century, Sorel considered violence a virtue. As his disciple Mussolini once said, Sorel felt that ultimately humanity did not actually “move mountains,” but rather “created the illusion that mountains move” independently of historical reality. Not unlike Mussolini, Heidegger, and other modern pro-fascist philosophers, Sorel also insisted that ethical codes are relative to their time and place. Therefore, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was “only a colorless collection of abstract and confused formulas, without any political bearing.” Interestingly, Sorel was a member of Action Français for one year, but in the end never truly committed to their ideology, and he was unimpressed by much of fascism and communism as it developed on political stage in his lifetime. Nonetheless, the philosophical ideas he espoused are more similar to those of Gentile, Lagarde, Langbehn and van den Bruck than they are different.

The modern Western love affair with romantic nationalism and totalitarianism was far-reaching. In 1927, Julien Benda, wrote in his insightful essay on modern romantic nationalism, The Treason of the Intellectuals, that:

Patriotism today is the assertion of one form of mind against other forms

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of mind...the notion that political warfare involves a war of cultures is entirely an invention of modern times, and confers upon them a conspicuous place in the moral history of humanity. 59

Unlike writers who attempt to provide phenomenological descriptions of “conservative revolutionaries,” Benda focuses on the ethical problems created by romantic nationalism. He also notes the strong messianic component of modern romantic nationalism, although he describes it in slightly different terms:

Another strengthening of national passions comes from the determination of the peoples to be conscious of their past, more precisely to be conscious of their ambitions as going back to their ancestors, and to vibrate with “centuries-old” aspirations, with attachments to “historical” rights. This Romantic patriotism is also a characteristic of patriotism as practiced by popular minds (by “popular” here I mean all minds governed by imagination, that is, in the first place society people and men of letters).

Moreover, Benda adds:

...national passions, owing to the fact that they are now exerted by

plebeian minds, assume the characteristics of mysticism, of a religious adoration almost unknown in these passions in the practical minds of great nobles…this mystical adoration of the nation is not only to be explained by the nature of those who adore, but also by the changes which have taken place in the adored object. There is first of all the spectacle of the military force and organization of modern States, which is something far more imposing than of old.  

As a French philosopher and man of letters, Benda is particularly concerned with the increasingly nationalistic trends he observed in French politics. Of course *The Treason of the Intellectuals* is a polemical essay against the rising tide of romantic nationalism and a waxing affair with totalitarianism in Western Europe in general, and yet Benda's observations are illustrative:

...several very powerful political passions, which were originally independent of nationalist feeling, have now become incorporated with [nationalism]. These passions are: (a) The movement against the Jews; (b) the movement of the possessing classes against the proletariat; (c) the movement of the champions of authority against the democrats. Today each of these passions is identified with national feeling and declares that

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its adversary implies the negation of nationalism. I may add that when a person is affected by one of these passions he is generally affected by all three...⁶¹

To sum up, like Orton, Irwin, Fein, Wechsler, Stern and Benda all note of the messianism inherent in romantic nationalism which, more than any other aspect of its agenda, tended to sweep followers up into an intoxicating romance with a mythical past they hope to revive. Romantic nationalists tended to be anti-Semitic, anti-worker (even though the rhetoric used by the National Socialist and fascist parties of Germany and Italy respectively belied this reality), anti-democracy and pro-“authority.” Like Stern, Benda observes that totalitarian romantic nationalism relies more on ideology more than demography. The love affair with totalitarianism is not only a “German thing.” It is a Western thing, at least in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And Benda is describing what he feels are troubling political trends among educated Europeans and not just the “uneducated masses.”

What bothers Benda most, however, is his sense that “passions” such as “Anti-Semitism, Pangermanism, French Monarchism and Socialism,” once considered appropriate only for politics, are used as to “defend a particular form of morality, of intelligence, of sensibility, of literature, of philosophy and of artistic conceptions.” Moreover, these political passions are justified by theories that they are in line “with the

⁶¹ Benda, Treason, 28.
development of evolution” and “the profound unrolling of history;” one's own movement is merely carrying out the inevitable trajectory of history, while one's opponent is bound to fail because she is working against history.\textsuperscript{62} Philosophers and intellectuals are, as always, not only caught up in current political and cultural tides, but simultaneously help to create and sustain them by justifying them in seemingly objective terms. What is lost, Benda claims, is any sense of morality that exists outside of the political round. Ethics that transcend tribal affiliation, at least insofar as they were understood by post-Enlightenment Europe, might have been the “conservative revolution’s” first target.

\textit{The Doctrine of Fascism}, by Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile makes use of and places itself squarely within a long line of Western philosophy and political thought, and addresses the problem of universal ethics as promoted by the Enlightenment within the first few pages. Mussolini and Gentile state that fascism “sees not only the individual but the nation and the country; individuals and generations bound together by moral law...” They go on to define the scope and content of this “moral law” according to (Italian) fascism:

\begin{quote}
...with common traditions and a mission which suppresses the instinct for life closed in a brief circle of pleasure, builds up a higher life, founded on duty, a life free from the limitations of time and space, in which the individual, by self-sacrifice, the renunciation of self interest, by death itself, can achieve that purely spiritual existence in which his value as a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{62} Benda, \textit{Treason}, 33.
man consists.\textsuperscript{63}

According to the fascist worldview, one behaves morally by engaging in “common traditions” with other members of his state, and focuses on his duty as it is dictated to him by that State, not by the inherent nature of man. Whereas most Enlightenment theories about the nature of the perfect state indicate that the best government supports and protects the innate rights of the individual and enforces a morality grounded in man's nature as a creature of reason, the fascism, according to Mussolini and Gentile, “creates the nation, conferring volition and therefore real life on a people made aware of their moral unity.” According to this view, the state creates and enforces human ethics; human ethics do not inform the state because human beings are not inherently ethical. Unlike the “liberal State,” which, according to Mussolini and Gentile, “restricts its activities to recording results, the fascist state “direct[s] the game and guide[s] the moral and material progress of the community.”\textsuperscript{64} Mussolini and Gentile make further comparisons between Fascism and democracy (often simply referred to as “liberalism”):

If liberalism spells individualism, Fascism spells government. The Fascist State is, however, a unique and original creation. It is not reactionary but


\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
revolutionary, for it anticipates the solution of certain universal problems which have been raised elsewhere, in the political field by the splitting up of the parties, the usurpation of power by the parliaments, the irresponsibility of assemblies;...in the ethical field by the need felt for order, discipline, obedience to the moral dictates of patriotism.  

Gentile explains succinctly that, according to fascism, nothing is or should be outside the purview of the state. Restricting the power of the State, even in relation to individual liberty or expression, is unethical, since even morality is a product of the state. Fascism is “totalitarian” because nothing truly exists outside of it; in fact everything is unified and homogenized within it, including ethics, culture and religious practice. The state does not require parties or parliament, but is streamlined, monolithic, and spends all its “moral” energy in its battle for eternal life for the state. “All nations...bring their contribution” to “history,” and outside of its trajectory, “man is a non-entity.” Fascism conceives of individual human life as a short and brutal struggle best spent in the glorification of the state. “Fascism,” Gentile writes, is “not only a system of government but also and above all a system of thought.”

In a 1921 article, Mussolini claimed that “the philosophy of force” upon which fascism is grounded was, unlike Germany's essentialist racist national socialism, “nothing
but relativist.” Here Mussolini uses Nietzsche and Hans Vaihinger, a leading neo-Kantian of the time a justification for his use of “philosophy of the as-if.” Italian fascism, argued Mussolini, was the ultimate manifestation of philosophical relativism and Nietzsche’s “Will to Power.” Fascism and relativism are ungrounded systems unless we “act as-if” they are grounded; the ungroundedness becomes the ground. Geoff Waite points out that for Mussolini, “there are no eternal verities: God is dead, all is permitted; only the strong decide what truth is;” and when fascism is, in its turn, crushed by a superior entity, “then so be it.” What emerges is a “profound epistemological and political aporia that extends through history...” The aporia of fascism—in Italy as well as in Germany—is that it is a form of relativism and a form of mysticism because it creates its own myths; and, even more importantly, it both eschews the notion that all men deserve respect and ethical treatment and instead purports to embrace them by making man's duty to the state, and to his particular community only, the ultimate in ethical behavior.

III. Return to Davos

Recall that Heidegger and Cassirer's conversation focused primarily on the correct interpretation of Kant and the place of ethics in philosophical discourse, a topic that was of great interest to Mussolini and Gentile as well. There is no question that the debate

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was shaped by and directly reflected in the political and philosophical climate of the times. And as Richard Rubenstein points out, “Were Heidegger a lesser figure, his involvement in National Socialism would be of little concern save to historians with a special interest in German philosophy. Unfortunately, such is not the case.”\(^6^9\) Some claim that there is no intrinsic connection between Heidegger's thought and his politics, and yet this seems impossible, given that as early as 1927 Heidegger himself implied there was indeed a connection between authentic existence, thought and politics. Heidegger wrote:

Our fates have already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another in the same world and in our resoluteness for definite possibilities...\(Dasein\)’s fateful destiny in and with its 'generation' goes to make up the full authentic historicizing of \(Dasein\)\(^7^0\).

One is authentic when one is fully committed to and engaged in achieving the destiny of one's \(volk\). This is, in fact, the most authentic of all engagements, since for Heidegger there is no transcendence and no authentic subjective “individualism.” These themes—the destiny of a \(volk\), the submersion of the individual for the purpose of a specific \(volk\) collective's greater good—are reminiscent of those taken up by proto-fascists and by Heidegger’s fascist contemporaries.


\(^7^0\) Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 436.
Also present as early as in *Being and Time* is Heidegger's longing for a “hero.” According to Heidegger, *Dasein* might choose his hero based on “authentic...repeatable possibilities of existence.” In other words, one might choose a “hero” based on whether or not his or her presence resonates with history, with themes and values and mythologies of a repeatable past. Although Heidegger's language is far more guarded and esoteric than that of the other romantic nationalists we have examined so far, the messianic longing in *Being and Time* is unmistakable. An authentic hero will bring with him the possibility of repeating the mythic past in the present time, among his own generation and for the sake of his volk.

Throughout his career Heidegger professed a profound distaste for pluralistic, urban modernity that for Heidegger and other likeminded intellectuals was synonymous with the democracy and heterogeneity of the Weimar years. Along with Heidegger, men like Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch, all Protestant theologians gave National Socialism their full support when it arrived on the German political scene. This disgust for cities and heterogeneous life often went hand in hand with the racial anti-Semitism of the time. In 1937 Paul Althaus wrote of his distaste for both Jews and urban places:

> Its does not have to do with Jewish hatred—one can reach an agreement directly with serious Jews on that point--; it does have to do with blood, also not with the religious beliefs of Judaism. But it does involve threat of a quite specific disintegrated and demoralizing urban spirituality, whose
representative is now the Jewish Volk.\textsuperscript{71}

Statements like this from thinkers across Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which express a distaste for urban life accompanied by anti-Semitic feelings are not uncommon.\textsuperscript{72} It is outside the scope of this study to answer the question of whether Heidegger himself was anti-Semitic.\textsuperscript{73} The question is still hotly debated, but there is significant evidence that Heidegger was indeed anti-Semitic, or at least opportunistic enough to have acted the part of an anti-Semite more than once. Our understanding of the discussion at Davos is more comprehensive when we see the exchange between Heidegger and Cassirer as taking place at the same time that National Socialism and other forms of totalitarianism are increasingly popular.

We begin to see this most clearly when, during the proceedings at Davos, Heidegger resorts to a personal attack against Cassier. When attempting to sum up what he feels is the essential task of philosophy, Heidegger states: “...there is genuine activity only when there is opposition...and philosophy has the task of throwing man back into the

\textsuperscript{71} Paul Althaus, \textit{Kirche und Volkstum: Der völkische Wille im Lichte des Evangeliums} (Gutersloh, 1928), 34. Found in Rubenstein's “The Philosopher and the Jews,” 183.

\textsuperscript{72} For in depth analyses of anti-Semitism in European politics from the medieval to modern periods, see Jacob Katz \textit{From Prejudice to Destruction} and Lucy Dawidowicz's \textit{The War Against the Jews}.

hardness of his fate from out of the softness [or shallowness] of one who merely lives off the work of the spirit.” As Geoffrey Waite rightly remarks about this statement, “The Davos audience must have gasped silently, if not aloud. For it was clear...that Cassirer—his person, institution, and tradition—was suddenly being accused of inauthentic, cowardly, opportunistic parasitism. The rule of academic decorum had been...broken.”

In response to Heidegger's underhanded, oppositional remarks, Cassirer seems to acknowledge that Heidegger has insulted him: “I believe it has already become clearer in what the opposition exists. It is not fruitful to stress the opposition repeatedly...It seems, then,” Cassirer continued, “we are condemned here to some sort of relativity...We are at a point where there is little to be gained through purely logical arguments.” If Cassirer was not aware that Heidegger was a budding National Socialist, he at least recognized the relativist, romantic nature of Heidegger's thought. Heidegger claimed, at Davos and elsewhere, that truth and ethical norms were not universal but relative. Heidegger states that he does not believe that “truth is always only what the individual man thinks” when he claims “truth is relative to Dasein.” Yet he asserts that “truth as such can only be as truth if Dasein exists,” therefore, “truth is relative to Dasein.” Heidegger then asserts that the real question of philosophy should not be about the nature of truth, but rather, the “validity of eternality” and the impossibility of freedom as an “object of theoretical comprehension.” In so doing, he sidesteps entirely the issue of ethics as a primary concern of philosophy and avoids acknowledging directly the implications of the claim.

76 Slade, “A Conversation Between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger,” 10.  
77 Slade, “A Conversation Between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger,” 5.
that truth is relative. Heidegger resorts to attacking Cassirer personally after he resists
Heidegger's repeated attempts to steer the whole of the conversation toward musings
about metaphysics.

Heidegger's work is targeted by thinkers like Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein for
reasons which include and extend beyond accusations of anti-Semitism. About
Heidegger's earliest years as a thinker, Emmanuel Faye writes:

...the rejection, by 1919, of universality as inauthentic, disdain for the
ideal of humanity, the affirmation of self and concern for oneself, as well
as attentiveness to the historicity of existence: these salient points were
affirmed by 1919-1923, while he was teaching at...Freiburg as Husserl's
assistant...Heidegger kept up an appearance of ties with Husserl until
obtaining the latter's succession, in 1928, as ordinary professor
at...Freiburg. Two months after his appointment [as Husserl's
replacement] he broke off all relations with his former teacher.\textsuperscript{78}

Heidegger later accused Husserl, as he had accused Cassirer at Davos, of \textit{Bodenlosigkeit},
or absence of soil with regard to history, a concept he may have discovered in
\textit{Correspondence Between Wilhelm Dilthey and Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg}, from

\textsuperscript{78} Emmanuel Faye, \textit{Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy} (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 2009), 11-12.
the first volume of Erich Rothacker's *Philosophy and the Sciences of the Mind.*

Wartenburg writes to Dilthey:

> I thank you for all the particular cases in which you keep teaching chairs away from the thin Jewish run-of-the-mill [*die dünne jüdische Routine*]
> who lack consciousness of the responsibility of thought, just as the whole race lacks a feeling for psychic and physical soil.

These ideas entered the academy and were justified and normalized by the scholars who embraced them and made it possible for fascism to laud itself as philosophically and ethically sound. While Dilthey himself was not an anti-Semite, it is hard to read his friend and correspondent’s words as anything but that. The notion that Jews constitute a “race” with a pre-determined “consciousness” was far from uncommon, even among intellectuals.

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79 This volume appeared in 1923.
80 Found in Faye, *Heidegger,* 12.
IV. “Between Rivers,” or, Modern Jewish Thought

Along with changing the way much of European thought about science, statecraft, governance, human nature and ethics, the Enlightenment also created modern Jewish thought, which must be differentiated from Jewish philosophy. The term “Jewish thought” refers not only to Jewish philosophy, but also to Jewish theology and political thought as well. The distinction between “thought” and “philosophy” is in many ways a counter-Enlightenment critique, but Jewish intellectual tradition makes these distinctions as well. The term “Jewish thought” assumes that Jewish philosophy is but one kind of Jewish intellectual expression.

One crucial difference between Jewish “thought” and Jewish “philosophy” is that in theory Jewish philosophy attempts to transcend the particularities of Jewish religion, culture, politics and experience by means of a methodology that aims for the “universal,” or better yet, makes use of the particularity of Judaism in order to point to something “universal.” Ancient, medieval and modern Jewish philosophy all participate in placing texts, ideas and traditions specific to Judaism as well as its laws, precepts and ethics in correlation with the methodology of philosophy. In the ancient and medieval periods, the basic assumption that drove the entire enterprise of Jewish philosophy was that

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82 The phrase “Between Rivers” comes from an unpublished version of an essay by Michael Zank entitled “‘Between Rivers’ or Zwischen den Stühlen? The End of Modern Jewish Philosophy.” “Between Rivers” refers to Franz Rosenzweig’s assertion that his generation of German Jews lived in a kind of “Zweistromland.” As Zank points out, “Mesopotamia, the ‘land between the rivers’ was an image for the situation of the German Jew...Jewish philosophy is [here] understood as clearly a hybrid, feeding from two main tributaries, (Judaism and philosophy), its nature clearly problematic,” 5-6. Used with permission.
reconciliation between revelation and philosophy was not only possible, but also relatively unproblematic. The work of Philo of Alexander, for example, centered on the allegorical interpretation of sacred texts and served a dual purpose. First, it served as a justification of Judaism to mainstream Greco-Roman society. Second, it attempted to prove to other Jews that Judaism and Greek philosophy were not actually in opposition with one another, but in fact stood for what he felt were compatible ideologies. Judaism and philosophy could work in concert, modifying and improving one another through the application and development of shared values.

The medieval period experienced a proliferation of Jewish philosophy for a number of reasons. First, philosophy itself was a popular discipline because it still included all the theoretical sciences of antiquity, including physics and metaphysics (otherwise known as philosophical theology) and ethics. The study of philosophy was often combined with the study of law or medicine as well. As Michael Zank points out, medieval philosophers were “universally educated” thinkers who were not considered specialists, at least not in the modern sense of the term. Philosophers showed their skill by becoming familiar with a canon of texts and an accompanying number of “well-rehearsed” arguments, and “…individual creativity expressed itself mostly in style and in the ability to rearrange connections between problems that had long since been articulated.”

But medieval Jewish philosophers like Judah Ha-Levi, Abraham Ibn Daud and

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Maimonides did not have direct access to the ancient Greek and Romans sources like ancient Jewish philosophers did, and so they inherited the Islamic philosophical tradition and wrote mostly in Arabic or Judeo-Arabic and, later, Hebrew. And like their ancient predecessors, they primarily concerned themselves with proving that the truths and tenets of Greek philosophy were not in contradiction with those of the Torah. Modern Jewish philosophers read most of these medieval Jewish philosophers in Hebrew rather than in its original Arabic or Judeo-Arabic but were also able to read the ancient Greek and Roman sources in their original Latin and Greek. According to Zank, "...like ancient Jewish philosophy, its modern heir is fraught with problems of cultural identity, while for the medievals the problem was how to philosophize without breaking the law, and how to be obedient to the law without relinquishing the truth. In contrast, modern Jewish philosophy appears under the suspicion that it represents an attenuated Judaism."  

Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, published in 1783 is generally considered the progenitor of modern Jewish philosophy but there is less agreement on which texts are considered the “last” of the genre. In general, however, the production of modern Jewish philosophy, not unlike neo-Kantianism and other Enlightenment-inspired philosophies, wanes during the interwar period. And like many of the philosophical, theological and political texts of the time, modern Jewish philosophical works feature the messianic

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86 Zank, “Zwischen den Stühlen?”, 108, ff 4. Zank claims that Buber's *I and Thou* cannot be considered philosophical but must be thought of as something altogether different. This point is certainly arguable, since the tendency to consider Buber a theologian and not a philosopher is problematic but not uncommon. Likewise, I am less likely to consider Franz Rosenzweig's *Star* as part of the Jewish philosophical canon. In fact, because of Rosenzweig's indebtedness to romantic nationalism, I am far more inclined to say his texts constitute the beginning of modern Jewish *thought* as a genre. I do agree with Zank, however, when he claims that Spinoza was not a purveyor of modern Jewish philosophy, even though his work set the conditions for the creation of the modern Jewish philosophical canon.
notion of “progress” achieved by means of a “return” to original, pre-modern and heretofore misunderstood systems and paradigms. Messianism manifests itself in a number of ways in modern Jewish philosophy, but is arguably the most prominent in the work of Hermann Cohen, who understands the messianic as at least in part man's ability to perfect himself and his world by means of the reason given to him by God. Cohen's messianism did not embrace the same kind of utopian future favored by the German cultural critics and proto-fascists of his time. Instead, man and man, and man and God, would come into greater correlation with one another, until each man saw every other man as his mitmenschen. Cohen's final destination was the perfection of ethical relations between human beings, and by extension, the perfection of the relationship between humankind and the Divine.

Cohen's image of a perfected world was liberal, progressive and socialist. To be sure, many modern Jewish philosophers supported Enlightenment ideals. In the political climate of the times, rejection of the Enlightenment implied a lack of support for the emancipation of European Jews, and without the Enlightenment, people like Cohen and later, his student Ernst Cassirer, would have never been eligible for a university post in philosophy. Jürgen Habermas' observation that a deep affinity existed between the spirit of Kant and the spirit of Judaism was supported by the “remarkable prominence of theorists of Jewish heritage would seem to suggest Kant's essential “attractiveness to the Jewish mind.””87 As Peter Gordon points out, “it seems most likely that it was the

emancipatory potential of Kant's Enlightenment idea that best explains the alliance.” This connection between Jewish and liberal Enlightenment interests continued “from the era of emancipation to the First World War and continued well into the Weimar Republic, when most Jews still identified themselves with the major liberal parties or the majority socialists (not, as some might now imagine, with anarchism and radical utopianism).”88 This makes sense, since it would be in a German Jew's best interest to support his own emancipation.

Of primary concern is the possibility of a secular ethics derived from values shared by Judaism and Kantian inspired philosophy. As Paul W. Franks states:

Since the end of the eighteenth century, no non-Jewish philosopher has been more central to Jewish philosophy than Kant. The major Jewish philosophers of late mediation of post-Kantians...just as the major ancient and medieval Jewish philosophers worked out their positions in relation to Plato, sometimes through the mediation of post-Platonists such as Aristotle, Plotinus and Alfarabi.89

Franks further argues that Jewish philosophy's affinity for Kant can be best explained by its “longstanding involvement with the Platonic tradition...some distinctive features of Kant's Platonism are especially susceptible to interpretation in terms of such central

88 Gordon, Rosenzweig and Heidegger, 13.
Jewish concepts as divine unity, law and messianism.\textsuperscript{90}

Most striking, though, for anyone familiar with both Jewish philosophy and Kant is the fact that Kant brings together epistemology and ethics through the concept of law, a concept central to Jewish philosophy since Philo. Even more important is Kant's understanding that ideas regulate the goals of ethical life. In the words of Franks:

Kant argues [that] human beings want to be happy, and it is rational for us to pursue happiness, so long as it is subordinate to virtue. Thus, the supreme goal of life—\textit{the highest good}—is a world containing a society of maximally virtuous agents who are \textit{just as happy as they deserve to be}. The highest good makes ethics into a project that is also \textit{political and economical}. For it requires us to do whatever we can to create and support institutions and arrangements that maximally support this ideal world.

But as Franks points out, Kant's project is not entirely secular, even though he intends to develop an ethics that can facilitate “the highest good” in secular society.

...the highest good [however] makes ethics into a project that is also religious. For, Kant argues, we humans can never secure the proportionality of happiness to virtue; only God, who is both creator of the world and has a holy will—a will for which the moral law justice is a strict

\textsuperscript{90} Franks, “Maimon,” 54.
necessity—could render this goal attainable. Since the ethical project requires us to hope for the highest good, and since this hope is realizable only with divine assistance, it follows that the ethical project requires belief in God. Religion is thus required by reason as a part of morality.\textsuperscript{91}

Kant’s later work, then, claims not only the idea that rational faith is a precondition for the highest good, but God is “the legislator of the moral law” because God is pure rational will which expresses itself in the moral law. Some Kantians—specifically those who seek to dispense with religion as the ground of morality altogether—have remained unconvinced by this argument, but Jewish philosophers often adopted this aspect of Kant’s ethics. Hermann Cohen, for example, asserts that God is the idea of a holy will that is the absolute ground of virtue, and not merely a guarantor of the realization of the highest good.

The themes of prophecy, revelation, law and ethics are central to Jewish thought and are irretrievably and inextricably intertwined. Thinkers put these components together in various ways and may emphasize one over the other, but the prophet as the receiver and mouthpiece of the law and ethics is constant. For Maimonides, the prophet was one who received “lightening flashes” of truth in varying amounts and for varying lengths of time. Some prophets received brief flashes only to return to “darkness” forever, although most perceived these prophet flashes at long intervals. As the receiver

\textsuperscript{91} Franks, “Maimon,” 59. Emphasis original.
of the *Torah mi'Sinai*, Moses Rabbenu remained in “unceasing light” and “night appears to him as day.” Law and ethics are inseparable because they come from the same source: the Divine. And the prophet is the harbinger of the ethical imperative because the law is revealed to him or her by God. But the rabbis of the Mishnah instruct practitioners to follow every commandment with equal diligence, since we cannot be sure which merits the greater or lesser reward. There was no independent ethics that could be separated from the law.

But most European Jewish philosophers from Mendelssohn on assumed that divine commandments were not a proper source for the foundation of universal ethics. As Marvin Fox explains, “Moral principles, in their view, are known independently and are grounded in human reason.” These modern thinkers, unlike their rabbinic and medieval predecessors, asserted that laws were ordained by God because they were moral. This meant that the ethicality of a commandment was based on its inherent rationality, not on the fact of its divine source. This configuration does not necessarily sever the connection between law, ethics, and prophecy present in Jewish texts since the Hebrew Bible but it does create significant changes in the way in which Jewish thought treats themes related to the interconnectedness of morality and law specifically.

Modern philosophy of religion in general tends to argue that the area of greatest connection between religion and philosophy—and therefore the juncture at which the two

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93 *M. Abot*, II, 1.
traditions can be of greatest service to us—is ethics. We recall that regardless of Kant's assertions that God's holy will guarantees the possibility of the highest good, what he worked toward was an ethics that can be applied in all our actions with any other human beings regardless of differences in belief or station. If every person is her own “kingdom of ends,” then every human being deserves respect, or ethical treatment at the hands of others. It is hard to think of an approach to ethics that would have appealed more to most European Jewish philosophers before, during and immediately following the emancipation of European Jewry. When Jewish philosophers point to the centrality of the prophetic imperative in Jewish thought and legal tradition, they are also highlighting an aspect of their tradition which they hope will be seen as compatible with liberal post-Enlightenment interest in human equality.

But not all modern Jewish philosophers monolithically supported the precepts of the Enlightenment. By the end of the 1920s many of the younger generation had grown disillusioned with Kantianism. Given that many of this generation were also veterans of the Great War, this ideological malaise is understandable. Thinkers like former Hegelian Franz Rosenzweig turned away from philosophical idealism and categorized it as “diseased.” Instead Rosenzweig was deeply influenced by the romanticism and existentialism of pre-and-post-World War I Europe. According to Rosenzweig, idealism failed to provide man with his most important skill: dealing with the fear of death. Like Heidegger, who Rosenzweig claimed as his “philosophical brother,” Rosenzweig embraced “Das Neue Denken,” that focused on finitude, alienation and isolation as the central concerns of modern thought. Rosenzweig's most famous work, The Star of
Redemption, written in the gruesome trenches of World War I, reflects the culture of Weimar at least as much, if not more than it represents traditional Jewish metaphysics. Like Heidegger, Rosenzweig claims that man develops “authenticity” only when he stares into Nothingness and faces his finitude, and “redemption” has occurred when man embraces his temporality and learns to exist in stable relation to man and God.  

Rosenzweig's language is often essentialist. If Gordon is correct that “similarity, not otherness, was the guiding principle of Cohen's cultural vision,” then surely Rosenzweig's guidepost was his understanding of German-Jewish identity as “between rivers” or in a “perpetually liminal space.” This is different from Cohen's assertion that German Jews represented the perfect correlation between Deutschtum and Judentum. Instead, German Jews represented a kind of liminality, not “this” and “that” but neither “this” nor “that.” German Jews were an ultimate other for Rosenzweig, and unlike Cohen's generation who struggled against associating Judaism and Jewishness with otherness, Rosenzweig embraced it.

According to Rosenzweig, Jews and Christians exist in different kinds of time and experience. Whereas Jews receive redemption “in the world,” Christians must wait to experience eternality at the end of time. “The role of the Christian is the eternal way,” wrote Rosenzweig, “while the role of Judaism is that of eternal life.” The notion that a

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95 See Peter E. Gordon's Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy for a well-written and well-supported exploration of the similarities between the philosophies of Rosenzweig and Heidegger. For an excellent overview of Gordon's book, see the review by William Nathan Alexander in Shofar 29 no 4 (Summer 2008): 181-184.
96 Gordon, Rosenzweig and Heidegger, 15.
*volk* like the Jews has a pre-determined, distinctive position in human history is reminiscent of other nationalist discourses of the time. But it is difficult to characterize Rosenzweig's political proclivities, except that he may have had monarchist, rather than democratic or socialist leanings. He was not a Zionist, but one could not call him and anti-Zionist either; what characterized his work, at least in part, was his rejection of Enlightenment precepts of universality with regard to culture, belief and ethics.

Leo Strauss was not a theologian, but like Rosenzweig, he rejected what he felt was the inherently homogenizing nature of Enlightenment thought and politics. In his opinion, democracy as it developed via Enlightenment philosophy forced a “creeping conformity” and made false promises to minority communities who traded their traditions and specific identities for an equality and freedom that, in Strauss' opinion, never fully materialized. Moreover, he felt that politically enforced equality prevented excellence and erased difference. Strauss' rejection of neo-Kantian Judaism may have been the result of the Great War, the failure of emancipation to quell increasingly virulent anti-Semitism, and maybe even the irresistible pull of “the New Thinking” espoused by Heidegger and his students. It should be noted that Strauss hoped to be Hermann Cohen's student, but the World War I prevented it. By the time Strauss was free to attend university, Cohen had died.

When Heidegger and Cassirer appear at Davos in 1929, the 23 year-old Levinas is a student of Edmund Husserl and also enthralled with “the New Thinking” as expressed by Rosenzweig and Heidegger. By the 1930s, Levinas' thinking would change radically. In 1929, Richard Rubenstein was 5 years old, but only a few short years later would face
anti-Semitic violence from Bund members who lived in his neighborhood while his parents looked on helplessly. Elie Wiesel was not yet a year old and was living with his family in Hungary. By the time he was 23 years old, he had survived his father in Auschwitz, been relocated to Paris, studied at the Sorbonne, and joined the Irgun. The world Levinas, Rubenstein and Wiesel inherited was different beyond measure from that of their predecessors.

V. Jewish Theological and Philosophical Response to the Holocaust

Emancipation of the Jews in Europe changed Western Jewish thought profoundly. The Holocaust changed it yet again. Although Jewish theological and philosophical responses to the Holocaust vary significantly, they can be understood by and large as either relying on pre-existing explanations for the presence of evil and undeserved human suffering, or as attempts to develop new ways of coping with these eternal problems. The question of foremost significance in regard to this issue is the question of the Holocaust's uniqueness in Jewish history and in human history in general. While there are several ways in which one can attempt to measure the uniqueness of an event like the Holocaust qualitatively, such efforts are dubious and produce results that are impossible to defend. How, for example, can we claim that the Holocaust is “more evil” than New World slavery or the mass murder of Armenians under Turkish rule in the early twentieth century? How, too, could we possibly compare the suffering of those slaughtered in
Rwanda to those who suffered in Treblinka? As Steven T. Katz asserts, the best criteria for measuring the uniqueness of any event are phenomenological. Katz writes:

The Holocaust is phenomenologically unique by virtue of the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate every man, woman and child belonging to a specific people. This conclusion entails that the Holocaust would not be the Holocaust if the property of “intentionally pursuing the physical annihilation of a people without remainder” were not present. Likewise, other occasions of mass death that lack this necessary intent...are not comparable to the Holocaust, at least not as regards this property.98

Katz also argues persuasively that it is “not at all clear...that there is a direct, and preferred, theological meaning to be drawn from the exceptionality of [the Holocaust].”99 Yet arguments that claim that no significant changes are necessary as a result of the Holocaust are not thoroughly convincing, either. The matter remains open for debate. And this fundamental question regarding the Holocaust's uniqueness serves as the necessary starting point for the numerous theological and philosophical responses to the

Holocaust whether they are traditional or innovative, including those of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein.

For example, there are at least six biblical models that have been used by Jewish theology and philosophy to cope with and make sense of the many challenges the Holocaust poses to Jewish life and practice.

1. The *Akedah* or the Binding of Isaac story found in Genesis
2. Job
3. The “Suffering Servant” doctrine in the Book of Isaiah
4. *Hester Panim*, an idea found in various texts in the Hebrew Bible that attempts to account for moments in history when God appears to be conspicuously absent
5. *Mipnei Chataeynu*, or “Because of Our Sins We Are Punished,” often referred to as Deutoronomistic approach to theodicy
6. The Burden of Human Freedom, or “The Free Will Defense”

Each of these positions are extensions of classical Jewish responses to Jewish suffering and persecution and can be used to support the position that the Holocaust does not necessitate any significant changes to Jewish theology and practice whether it is considered a unique event in Jewish history or not. The salient characteristic of these responses is that the nature of God, humanity and creation as Judaism has understood them (at least since Maimonides if not before) remain intact. God is perfect, He is just,

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and His justice is often beyond human understanding. While the more ultra-orthodox assertions which place the blame for the entirety of the Shoah squarely on the shoulders of the 6 million murdered Jewish men, women and children are often considered unthinkable by most, such claims must also be understood as containing, for those who espouse them, a significant degree of comfort: God still loves His people, precisely because He made the effort to punish them; Hope remains because the Jews, although severely reduced in number, remain; God and His Torah need not be questioned. Then, too, if you believe those who suffer deserve to suffer, then your own suffering and the suffering of your loved ones seems within your control: If I want to avoid punishment, I will follow the Law as best I can and persuade others to do the same.

But most of the approaches that seek to maintain traditional Jewish theology even in light of the Holocaust do not embrace this Deuteronomistic approach to suffering. The strength of these arguments is founded in the very claims Katz makes regarding the impossibility of measuring the potential ethical or metaphysical uniqueness of an historical event. The suffering of those Jews who died in the Rhineland and elsewhere during the massacres of the first Crusade, for example, cannot be compared to the suffering of the Jewish children who starved to death in the Warsaw Ghetto. And the qualitative uniqueness of the domestic policies of a state such as Nazi Germany need not influence the future of Jewish theology; that is, Jews were the victims of the Holocaust and not it's perpetrators. The moral or metaphysical imperfections that led to the Shoah are not the fault of traditional Judaism as system, but rather of Western ethics and governments as a whole. Even the ultra-orthodox who claim the 6 million were punished
and therefore not innocent claim only that Judaism was imperfectly practiced, and not that Judaism as a system is somehow lacking and therefore responsible for the tragedy of the Shoah.

In the last 60 years, however, a number of Jewish philosophers and theologians have insisted that the size, scope and magnitude of the horrors of the Final Solution require radical changes to Jewish thought and practice even though the 6 million innocent victims—and Judaism itself—are blameless. These thinkers attempt to create something new, their efforts usually feature the same stories, metaphors and images as those utilized by classical pre-Holocaust Judaism; Job, Abraham and Isaac, the Hidden God, and the Suffering Servant continue to hold meaning, whether or not Judaism can remain unchanged after Auschwitz. The notion that I suffer because I sinned, however, is universally rejected by the more innovative approaches to Judaism after the Holocaust. While there are many suggestions for how Judaism can and should respond to the Holocaust six in particular that are worth exploring here.

1. Auschwitz Constitutes a New Revelation
2. The Covenant Has Been Broken
3. Redefining God
4. God is Dead
5. A Renewal of Ethical Obligation
6. Mystery and Silence

Jewish philosophical responses to the Holocaust abound as well. Berel Lang argues that the “single most widely discussed analysis of evil in relation to the Holocaust...remains” that posed by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of the Banality of Evil*. Lang argues that Arendt views the Holocaust as both unique and part of a continuing problem of theodicy and human evil as it has unfolded in time. Lang also points out that the controversial nature of Arendt's discussion of Eichmann and evil rests on her simultaneous arguments that evil is neither deep nor “real” in the philosophical sense and that Eichmann is nonetheless responsible for the attempted genocide of European Jews and deserves execution. Lang aptly writes that if these “claims [are] puzzling, it says as much about the issues as it does about her specific account.”

Arendt's treatment of the problem of evil is more well known, perhaps in part because it is patently philosophical and lacks the theological component present in the work of many Jewish thinkers, especially with regard to the *Shoah*. Arendt's assessment of both Eichmann and the Holocaust as originating from something “banal” invited intense criticism from contemporary Jewish thinkers in particular. Gershom Scholem,

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for example, felt that Jewish philosophy—and perhaps philosophy in general—was out of touch with and disconnected from lived human experience. Scholem instead embraced a “kabbalistic” approach to confronting the problem of evil:

Kabbalism...did not turn its back on the primitive side of life, that all-important region where mortals are afraid of life, and in fear of death, and derive scant wisdom from rational philosophy. Philosophy ignored these fears...and in turning its back upon the primitive side of man's existence, it paid a high price in losing touch with him altogether. For it is cold comfort to those who are plagued by genuine fear and sorrow to be told that their troubles are but the workings of the imagination.104

The tendency of Jewish thinkers to utilize both philosophy and theology, especially when approaching the problem of evil as Scholem does is neither new nor uncommon. On the other hand, Arendt's approach to evil (which Scholem roundly condemned)105 is atypical,

particularly dismayed that Arendt attempted to discuss the role of the Judenräte in the death of 6 million European Jews. While Arendt claimed “there was no possibility of resistance,” she did insist that “there remained the possibility of doing nothing.” What, for example, if the Judenräte had simply been less organized, and had refused en masse to provide the Nazis with careful lists of names? These kinds of questions were almost impossible to broach at the time, as is evidenced by the outpouring of criticism when Arendt raised the question in Eichmann in Jerusalem. For more on reactions to Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem, see Judith N. Shklar's “Hannah Arendt as Pariah,” Partisan Review 50:1 (1983): 64-77; Bernard Crick, “Hannah Arendt and the Burden of Our Times,” in The Political Quarterly 30 (1997): 77-84.

105 In 1964, an exchange of letters between Scholem and Arendt was published in Encounter. All the correspondence between them referred to in this chapter belong to that exchange. Arendt's assessment of evil as it manifested in Eichmann and the henchmen of the Reich runs counter to Scholem's theories about evil. See “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” Encounter 22 no. 1(January 1964):51-52 and “An Exchange
at least among Jewish thinkers.\textsuperscript{106} In his letter to Arendt regarding \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem} wherein Arendt begins to develop her theory regarding the nature of evil, he focuses mainly on what he calls her “heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone.” According to Scholem, her account of Eichmann's trial and her subsequent discussions regarding the role of the \textit{Judenräte} in the demise of European Jewry\textsuperscript{107} and the ethical quandary she believed was posed by collaborative efforts between some Zionists and the Nazis to get Jews out of Europe “cease...to be objective and acquire...overtones of malice.” Scholem went on to say that he had “little sympathy with that tone—well expressed by the English word “flippancy”—which you employed so often in the course of your book. To the matter of which you speak it is unimaginably inappropriate.” Jewish critics were deeply upset by her book, he explained, because “…In the Jewish tradition, there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as \textit{Ahabath Israel}: “Love of the Jewish people”…In you, dear Hannah...I find little trace of this.”\textsuperscript{108}

Arendt agreed wholeheartedly with Scholem's assessment of her as no “lover of Israel.” She was “not moved by any “love” of this sort...I have never in my life “loved” any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American,

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\textsuperscript{106} When I use the term “Jewish thinkers” here, I am referring to thinkers who practice Jewish philosophy or Jewish thought as defined earlier in this chapter. I am not referring to all thinkers who happen to be Jewish.

\textsuperscript{107} Arendt wrote that “Jewish leaders...almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis. The whole truth is that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been four and half an six million people.” “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” \textit{The Portable Hannah Arendt}, 354.

\textsuperscript{108} Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” 354.
nor the working class or anything of that sort...in this sense I do not “love” the Jews...I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument.” Arendt wrote to Scholem:

I do not belong to any organization and always speak for myself, and on the other hand...I have great confidence in Lessing's *selbstdenken* for which, I think, no ideology, no public opinion, and no “convictions” can ever be a substitute. Whatever your objections to the results, you must realize that they are really my own and nobody else's.  

There were noteworthy supporters of Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial, as well. Among the most prominent was Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote a positive review of the book for *The New Republic*. Bettelheim, who was a camp survivor, insisted that the real issue was not Eichmann, but totalitarianism. Bettelheim wrote:

...while I would recommend this book for many reasons, the most important one is that our best protection against oppressive control and dehumanizing totalitarianism is still a personal understanding of events as they happen. To this end Hannah Arendt has furnished us with a richness of material.

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Bettelheim agreed with Arendt's assessment that the Holocaust was not the climax of a long history of violence against the Jews of Europe, but rather “merely one part of the master plan to create the thousand year totalitarian Reich.”

In 1965, Michael Musmanno, an outspoken critic of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, claimed that Arendt's book was so full of errors that “one could only cover the absurdities in her book by writing one equally as long to refute it.” Jacob Robinson did just that. His treatise, entitled *And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight*, was over 400 pages long. By means of hundreds of different sources in multiple languages he comprehensively demolished Arendt's theses regarding the Judenräte, the character of Eichmann, and the nature of international law. Although she attempted to refute Robinson's argument, Robinson's book was extremely well researched and pointed to glaring mistakes in Arendt's scholarship.

Unlike many other Jewish thinkers of her time, Arendt never employed a dual tradition, but remained firmly ensconced in the tradition of German philosophical and political thought. It may have been precisely this fact that made her approach to understanding the Holocaust—and more broadly, to evil—so unpalatable and ultimately insufficient for Scholem. It indicated more than Arendt's reluctance to affiliate herself ideologically with one camp over another. For thinkers like Scholem, such problems could not be understood or dealt with by means of a single tradition or discipline alone. Anson Rabinovich argued that the controversy surrounding *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was

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“certainly the most bitter dispute regarding the Holocaust that has ever taken place.”

What emerges from the majority of post-Holocaust Jewish thought is rarely exclusively philosophical or theological but an amalgamation of both, a methodology that has been utilized by Jewish thinkers for centuries. If Kant and Cohen insisted philosophy should be about method, and Heidegger and Rosenzweig insisted it should be about metaphysics, then Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein insisted it should be about ethics, even if this meant rejecting traditional metaphysics.

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Chapter 2

The Call of the Other: Levinasian Ethics

Part one of this chapter provides an exegesis of texts selected from Levinas' corpus to support the following claims about Levinasian ethics:

1. Levinas grounds ethics in the temporal experience of suffering.
2. Levinas draws heavily on Jewish texts, themes and culture to create his ethics, and claims that Judaism's focus on ethics and obligation to the other could provide Western thought with a blueprint for making ethics "first philosophy."
3. Levinas does not intend to create a normative ethics. Instead, he argues that we possess a built-in propensity for ethics that does not guarantee ethical behavior, but makes it possible. Levinas hoped others would use his theoretical framework to create an applied ethics.

Part two of this chapter is a critical analysis of the texts and ideas presented in part one. Additional conclusions regarding Levinas' project are provided in Chapter 5.

I. Exegesis

If one reads Levinas' "philosophical" works as well as his "Jewish" writings, it is
clear that at least for Levinas, the two are not necessarily in conflict. Richard A. Cohen, who has translated a considerable number of Levinas' writings into English, writes:

For...Levinas, there is no divorce between philosophy and religion. “There is communication between faith and philosophy,” he writes, “and not the notorious conflict. Communication in both directions.” No doubt the continuity between the two derives from the fact that Judaism is obligated to no “theology,” to no logos or dogma in conflict with philosophy. Judaism is rather a way of life in covenant with God, and such covenantal life includes knowledge, reflecting, and questioning—the mentalities traditionally associated with philosophy. But [more deeply than this]...For Levinas monotheism provides the ultimate justification for philosophy, satisfying philosophy's innermost demand for justification, but in a way that a philosophy detached from religion is unable.¹

Cohen correctly points out that many Jewish thinkers before Levinas have made similar arguments about the interconnectedness of religion and ethics.² Ethics and religion are

² R.A. Cohen aptly states that making ethics the primary philosophical concern is not just a product of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or even of reformed liberal religion. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the intellectual founder of modern Orthodox Judaism, would have agreed with Levinas' understanding of keeping the mitzvot. As Cohen states, it “requires constant renewal in the present. Only in this way are commandments “living,” the word of the “living God,” operative in the created world that God Himself declares “good” right from the start. In this way, eternity and time intersect,
not distinct, but “one is the fulfillment of the other, and both require obedience to Law.”

In other words, if I keep God's Law, then I am in close relation with God, especially when I render justice to other human beings in accordance with that Law. Cohen goes on to state that Levinas should be understood as applying this correlation between God, humanity, ethics and Law to more than just halakah:

...the origin of theory is not simply praxis...nor is the origin of both theory and praxis a more primordial aesthetics of sensation or worldliness...Rather they begin and are permeated by the imperatives of social life as ethics. Prayer and ritual, moral care and juridical structures, as well as knowledge and scientific inquiry are all ventures in a human sociality driven not by myths and fantasies but by respect for others.³

The familiar historical position that encourages correlation between morality, ritual, and law adopted by many Jewish thinkers before, during and after Levinas' time becomes “ethics as first philosophy” in Levinas' thought. Again, in the words of R.A. Cohen:

For Levinas, the very humanity of the human is constituted as a moral relation—an “inter-subjective” relation—requiring kindness to one's neighbors and justice for all. Instead of thinking of humans as real beings require and elicit one another.” See “Philosopher and Jew,” 483.

who take on moral behavior as a gloss, or as intellects surpassing common morality, Levinas conceives of humans as moral beings for whom the real—both as science and culture—takes on a sense based upon personal responsibility, moral obligations and justice. Not freedom and culture but responsibility and justice lie at the heart of human selfhood. 4

Levinas finds this orientation of morality and obedience to the “good” as the ground of all other human pursuits—such as culture, science and civilization—in the Torah and the Talmud. One does “good” as is commanded, and then one “knows” the “good.” If Western philosophy and culture adopted as its first concern man's responsibility for his fellow man, we would not create and support science or culture for its own sake or solely for the sake of economic growth; we would create science and culture to exist in the service of humanity. We would create culture and pursue knowledge because as moral creatures we want to create systems whose sole intent was the benefit our fellow man. Such a shift in emphasis would indeed require not just a re-orientation but a radical re-thinking that in every sense places ethics in the first position. When we think of Levinas' project as working toward this kind of re-organization of thought and culture, Levinas' rejection of a forcible separation of philosophy and religion is not simply a matter of course but a deliberate re-ordering. Herein lies one of the most important innovations of Levinas' work and makes it a true re-thinking of Western thought. As R. A. Cohen puts it,

in the world view to which Levinas subscribes, “All the world's value and meaning—from the intimate sighs of love to the universal symbols of mathematics—stands or falls on the shoulders of these very pressing historical concrete responsibilities.”

The face of the other person contains a reminder of our obligations to one another, and provides a glimpse of the Holy Other. That Holy Other is “living” because the singularity of the human face contains the epiphany of God on earth.

The focus of this dissertation with regard to Levinas is the way in which he uses the universal human experience of suffering as the ground for human ethical relations.

Levinas not only focuses on the problem of human suffering as the central concern of ethics, but asserts that suffering, experienced on a spectrum throughout our lives, is what repeatedly activates the potential for ethics in the human psyche. While many scholars have focused on the theme of suffering in Levinas' work, none have noted that for Levinas human ethics are in fact grounded in suffering. Levinas turns philosophical ethics on its head yet again by suggesting that ethics are not founded on law, happiness or carefully cultivated virtues. The human ethical impulse is activated in spite of us and without our permission, and we experience our confrontation with the needs and demands of the other as both a suffering and a fulfillment.

What Is Suffering?

Levinas attempted to correct what he believed was a centuries-long flaw in Western thought (a disinterest in ethics as a “serious” philosophical concern) and to

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respond to the historical events for which he held Western thought responsible: the genocides and mass murders of the twentieth century. For Levinas, philosophy’s disconnection from religion not only took the problem of suffering out of the purview of philosophy, but placed ethics and the ethical impulse outside the range of rigorous inquiry altogether. Like Husserl, Levinas believed that consciousness is our first “world” and that it can be investigated if we effectively describe affect, passions, moods, and reflections with fullness.\(^6\) Levinas’ focus on immanence allowed the spectrum of consciousness as constituted in part by affective modes to become the subject of serious philosophical inquiry. In Levinas’ own words: “Husserlian phenomenology has made possible this passage from ethics to metaphysical exteriority.” And lest we think Levinas aims to answer any questions in the traditional sense, he avers that “Philosophical research in any case does not answer questions like an interview, an oracle, or wisdom.”\(^7\) Levinas didn’t believe his observations alone would solve long-standing philosophical, political or cultural problems, although his work was motivated by those problems. He wanted to change the style and focus of philosophical inquiry in hopes that a seismic shift of this kind would create at least the opportunity for change. The political nature of Levinas' project is stated clearly in the preface of *Totality and Infinity*:

> The state of war suspends morality; it divests the eternal institutions and


obligations of their eternity and rescinds *ad interim* the unconditional
imperatives...The art of foreseeing was and of winning it by every means--
politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is
opposed to morality, and philosophy to naïveté.  

Levinas begins by claiming his project is above or at least set apart from politics.
But it is not politics in the general sense—that is, the activities associated with governing
bodies, or the beliefs and values which motivate us to support one system or party over
another—that Levinas is rejecting, but a certain political persuasion:

...violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as
in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no
longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments
but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy
every possibility for action.  

Levinas clearly refers to the dehumanizing policies of twentieth century totalitarianism—
and Nazism and its “race” policies specifically—wherein:

...individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them

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9 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22.
unbeknownst to themselves…and the meaning of individuals (invisible outside this totality) is derived from the totality.

And he felt that the political inclination toward totalitarian ideology and racism in Europe had become ingrained not just in Western politics, but Western thought:

The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy.\(^{10}\)

Levinas wants to expose as political the philosophical claim made by Nietzsche, Heidegger and others, that humanity's destiny is fulfilled—and his innermost connection to being reclaimed—when we engage in war. Levinas makes it clear that what motivates his own desire to shift philosophy away from justifications of war and toward the problem of ethics is the suffering of innocents at the hands of totalitarian regimes that make the obliteration of cultural and political difference their first priority. To do this, Levinas searches for a different understanding of man as *not* fundamentally for-himself, but as for-the-other, and *not* driven toward homogeneity, but desirous of the other as not-I.

Suffering becomes the ground upon which Levinas can make these claims. Suffering not only makes ethics possible, but is the affect experienced by consciousness

\(^{10}\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21-22.
upon the discovery that there are others in the world and that my needs, wants and perceptions are not my first concern. I “suffer” intense passions when I understand on an affective level that I am not the center of the world's concerns. According to Levinas, this experience takes place before I even have the capacity to reflect upon my experiences, and awakens what makes ethical response in humans possible. But does the “I” really suffer when it “sees” the face of the other for the first time and is pried open? Does the suffering I feel then feel the same as the suffering I experience as a victim of child abuse, domestic abuse, rape, or torture? Is it like the emotional suffering brought on by the end of a love affair, the death of a beloved parent, the loss of religious faith or disappointment I feel when I realize a long-cherished dream will not come to fruition?

Levinas would likely agree that suffering varies in degree and type. Levinas does not equate the suffering of “ruptured immanence” (the realization of the vulnerability and mortality of both myself and the other and my inescapable responsibility for that other) quantitatively with the extreme corporeal suffering experienced by victims of physical torture. What connects these forms of suffering are, for Levinas, the phenomenological features of suffering as an affect. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes this, regarding the nature of suffering:

> The privileged situation where the ever future evil becomes present—at the limit of consciousness—is reached in the suffering called physical. We

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11 Levinas' interest in the pre-cognitive and his belief that we begin life by feeling that “I” am the whole of the world, or at least the center of it is deeply informed by and indebted to psychology. Although he did not agree with much of Freud's analysis of human psychology, he was nonetheless, like Husserl, interested in and influenced by him and other European psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan.
find ourselves backed up to being. We do not only know suffering as a disagreeable sensation, accompanying the fact of being at bay and struck; this fact is suffering itself, the “dead end” of the contact.\textsuperscript{12}

Suffering “backs us up to being” by nailing us to the present. Part of what defines suffering is a feeling of inescapability; I \textit{must} be here now. I have no choice. Moreover suffering is not only physical. He continues:

The whole acuity of suffering lies in the impossibility of fleeing it, of being protected in oneself from oneself; it lies in being cut off from every living spring. And there is the impossibility of retreat...here the other grasps me, the world affects, touches the will.\textsuperscript{13}

Another characteristic of suffering is that it leaves me feeling that I cannot protect myself from the other or from my own experience of pain. Suffering is also marked by a feeling of being cut off from living things and from the source of life itself. The other grasps me, holds me still, “nails me to the present” and holds me open. I cannot shut out the world but am affected by it and held in place by it. And:

In suffering reality acts on the in itself of the will, which turns

\textsuperscript{12} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 238.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
despairingly into total submission to the will of the Other...suffering realizes in the will the extreme proximity of the being menacing the will.\textsuperscript{14}

Suffering defeats my will, my drive to be for-myself. I cannot help but acknowledge the power of a being whose intent is to disrupt my own will, my own plans for this moment, this week, this year, or my life.

Levinas' understanding of suffering is paradoxical. Suffering is also capable of creating multiple responses in the sufferer:

[When we suffer]...we witness this turning of the I into a thing; we are at the same time a thing and at a distance from our reification, an abdication minimally distanced from abdication. Suffering remains ambiguous: it is already the present of the pain acting on the for itself of the will, but as consciousness the pain is always yet to come...It remains at a distance from this pain by its very consciousness, and consequently can become a heroic will.\textsuperscript{15}

When we suffer, we feel strange to ourselves because we experience ourselves as no longer subjects with the ability to choose. We become “things” or objects, and are forced to watch our own “thingification.” The I is no longer the ruler of its body or destiny; the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
I's power has been stripped and the I itself abdicates, gives in, submits. I become a “thing” insofar as I lose my power to be for myself, and yet I am more a subject, an “I” than ever because I witness and experience pain at my own objectification, and recognize my own vulnerability, my own interconnectedness with the world I believe I have mastery over or can escape. I am both in pain and distanced from pain.

Finally, suffering begets “hope”:

...consciousness deprived of all freedom of movement maintains a minimal distance from the present, this ultimate passivity which nonetheless desperately turns into action and into hope, is patience---the passivity of undergoing and yet mastery itself.\(^\text{16}\)

When I see I am not free, I can maintain a distance from the present and yet experience pain nonetheless. In my despair, I hope. I hope the pain will end, and I hope that I will be freed. I am patient because I have to be. In a sense I master the pain because I integrate into my sense of self and world. Already, suffering calls me to act even before I am free to do so.

In these passages, Levinas offers a phenomenological description of suffering that we can use to compare the suffering we experience when we encounter the other to the experience of physical suffering described above:

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
1. First, suffering is not only the physical experience of pain. Suffering can also be emotional pain or intellectual pain, and it can vary in acuity. But suffering is a particular kind of pain.

2. Second, all varieties of suffering share a quality of inescapability, of feeling nailed to the present despite the sufferer's will to escape the present and the suffering.

3. Third, suffering deprives me of my will and suffering forces me to submit my sovereignty over myself to the will and sovereignty of the other.

4. Fourth, suffering causes the sufferer to become a “thing” which can be acted upon; this “thingification” is itself a kind of suffering, and the pain I feel witnessing my own objectification reminds me that I am both a thing and not a thing, a subject who has been subjugated. The world is not in my control, and others are not defined or controlled by me. My immanence is not a hermetically sealed enclosure into which I can safely burrow when the world makes it clear that I cannot control it. I am strange to myself.

5. Finally, suffering has the power to change me, to make me hopeful, to call me to action on behalf of the suffering other.

The above five-part description of suffering culled from *Totality and Infinity* highlights Levinas’ intention to express that the infant or child suffers (rather than resents or fears, for example) when it realizes that the other is “not-I” but another subject whose needs, wants and sufferings are her responsibility. Moreover, she will also suffer each
time she encounters the other throughout her life. In Levinas' later work, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, he attempts to describe the pre-reflective event—that is, an event which precedes our ability to reason—of the experience that I am “for-the-other” that makes human ethics and ethical action possible. He defines the recognition that I am “for-the-other” as “substitution,” which is a kind of repeating potential investiture innate to the human psyche.\(^\text{17}\) This experience is described as an inhabitation of the I by the other. “The suffering of substitution,” Bergo writes, “is remarkable”:

> It is traumatic, it entails a fissioned immanence or an “other”-in-the-same. But the strange force in “me,” which I suffer repeatedly and cannot grasp, is neither neurosis nor psychosis...Still, it must be considered an “experience” which repeats, with increasing intensity, whose sign is anxiety. In substitution...the anguished immanence is described as a pre-reflective self, narrowed down...to a kind of singularity. Ethical investiture [is circular] and comprises specification of selfhood through the loss of the volitional, representational subject. This takes place only at the passional [or emotional] level...and is discovered once suffering can be represented as a “mood”...\(^\text{18}\)

Levinas' understanding of transcendence changes between the 1930s and the 1970s, but


\(^{18}\) Bergo, “What is Levinas Doing?” 125.
always it involves escape from the immanent self toward an other, and constitutes a message that arrives spontaneously, as if evoked. This initial encounter of the other is repeated and my response to it gains intensity and always elicits a break in my immanence, my experience in the world as same within the same. Just as in Levinas' phenomenological description of physical suffering, the will of the I breaks down and finds itself “backed up to being,” nailed to the present in such a way that I both escape myself and am trapped in myself. I am forced to realize I am for-the-other, and not, as I might want to believe, for-my-self. I am both subject to the will of another and a thinking subject. And perhaps most importantly, I am forced to acknowledge that my immanence is not hermetically sealed, and I cannot escape the particularity of myself and of every other “I.” The world affects me, and I cannot change that or control that.

Levinas' descriptions of the experience of substitution are, as Bergo states, fraught with emotional and intellectual pain. And yet, not unlike what Levinas describes in the case of physical suffering, near the end of the arc which might figuratively replicate the concrete experience of substitution comes hope and a sense of being called to action for-the-sake-of-the-other. The experience of substitution and the experience of other kinds of physical and emotional suffering are phenomenologically similar because the suffering of substitution activates my potential for ethical behavior. It is the repeated experience of suffering, either from substitution or from the suffering brought about by loss, persecution, failure, illness, tragedy and other experiences that renews and gives shape to the call to act on behalf of the suffering other. The whole of Levinasian ethics, while resistant to systematicization, is grounded firmly in the lived, concrete experience of
suffering.

The Predatory Other

This breaking open of my immanence, my temporal emotional self which I had heretofore imagined as sealed and as the same among same, will not always create an ethical response. This experience only creates the possibility of ethical response. Levinas does not see man as entirely or inevitably moral; in fact for Levinas “being” should be understood as, at least in part, predatory and mechanistic. Therefore, for Levinas, some people are governed by drives that do not include a proclivity for the other. This does not mean that such a person—a person we might call for our purposes a “potential predator”—does not encounter the face of the other. Rather, such people might respond to the face of the other, the inter-subjectivity it demands and the personal suffering the encounter creates in the “I” with violence rather than with obedience. In the following passage from Totality and Infinity, Levinas provides a description of the affect of the victimizer as she is victimizing the other:

...hatred...seeks to grasp the ungraspable, to humiliate, from on high, through the suffering in which the Other exists as pure passivity. Hatred

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19 Scholars argue that this understand of “being” is in part of response to Heidegger, for whom being is always neutral. Levinas develops an understanding of human being, which is not, for the most part, only neutral and mechanistic, but often inclined toward morality and sensitive to the call of the face of the other. For more on this read Bettina Bergo's “Ontology, Transcendence and Immanence in Levinas's Philosophy,” in Research in Phenomenology 35 no. 1 (2005): 141-180.
wills this passivity in the eminently active being that is to bear witness to it. Hatred does not always desire the death of the Other, or at least it desires the death of the Other only in inflicting this death as extreme suffering. The one who hates seeks to be the cause of suffering to which the despised being must be witness. To inflict suffering is not to reduce the Other to the rank of object, but on the contrary is to maintain him superbly in his subjectivity. In suffering the subject must know his reification, but in order to do so he must precisely remain a subject. Hatred wills both things. Whence the insatiable character of hatred; it is satisfied when it is not satisfied, since the Other satisfied it only by becoming and object, but can never become object enough, since at the same time as his fall, his lucidity and witness are demanded. In this lies the logical absurdity of hatred.  

Although Levinas uses the term “hatred” here, he is also describing the logic of violence. Just like someone who will respond ethically rather than with violence, the potential predator sees the face of the other, and his immanence is disturbed, slammed into by the unsolicited call of the other. He also realizes that the world is beyond his ability to define or control it, realizes when the other looks at him that he is particular, and finally that what he has seen as homogeneous is in fact pluralistic. The other, simply because she

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20 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 239.
exists, is his responsibility. And yet rather than accept this responsibility, the potential predator rejects it, and rejects his own particularity as well. The potential predator resents the face of the other for fragmenting him, for making him strange to himself; if the potential predator acts, she then becomes a predator and commits violence in response to the call of the other, a call, which for Levinas contains the imperative “thou shall not kill.”

Levinas insists that the predator is aware of the paradoxical experience of suffering. When suffering, one becomes a thing that can be grasped, and yet is aware of one's “thingification” and suffers from it. We are keenly aware of ourselves as subjects when we suffer, even as we are powerless to escape the suffering. A sentient subject cannot truly be “grasped” even as his body is held down, or is beyond his control. The living face is always its own, even as it offers itself. The predator knows this, and wants to become the force that causes suffering, and wants to make the other witness her own objectification, her own dehumanization. And yet, a living human being can never be a thing; and when she dies and her body does not contain the force that calls out to the world and says, “thou shall not kill!” the predator is not satisfied, for the victim was not “there” to witness her final objectification. This inevitable dissatisfaction is what, for Levinas, accounts for the cyclical nature of violence and persecuting societies. Levinas also notes that violence prevents transcendence, even transcendence as escape. Thus the predator, like all humans, longs for an exit from himself and cannot get it because he

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21 For more on this, *Difficult Freedom* is especially helpful, as well as *Otherwise Than Being*. This theme is central to Levinas work from the 1960s on, however.
cannot bear the acceptance of heterogeneity that transcendence requires.

Levinas' inclusion of “the predator” in his ethics is part of what makes it unique and, potentially, of real use. Levinasian ethics is grounded in suffering because Levinas locates the ethical trajectory of any individual in his response to the suffering created by the realization which for many of us is developmentally inevitable: the world is not defined by me and is not, regardless of what I think I want, an extension of me. An individual can accept this and accept the ethical investiture it can endow; or an individual can reject the call to ethical action and attempt to make the world as he understands it a homogeneous extension of himself. He can attempt to obliterate, subjugate and reify the other. He can attempt to force a totality that will always be an illusion. Yet we are each faced with the choice to respond ethically or unethically each time we hear the call of the other and are disrupted inside ourselves by her. We do not choose the path toward or away from ethical investiture once, but many times. The choice is always dependent on our response to the suffering inherent to the human condition.

Why Judaism?

Religion is the excellence proper to sociality with the Absolute, or, if you will, in the positive sense of the expression, Peace with the other...This seems to me fundamental to the Judaic faith, in which the relation with God is inseparable from the Torah; that is, inseparable from the
recognition of the other person. The relation to God is already ethics; or, as Isaiah 58 would have it, the proximity to God, devotion itself, is the devotion to the other man.  

In “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition” Levinas remarks on “the surprising present existence of Judaism, a human collectivity, albeit small and continuously sapped by persecution, weakened by half-heartedness, temptations and apostasy, yet capable, in its very irreligiousity, of founding its political life on the truths and rights taken from the Bible.” Jews maintain a “mysterious unity” even in Diaspora because they are capable of basing their most important truths on the Bible and the “holy History” it relates, whether or not they are religious, whether or not they confess a connection with or belief in God. Levinas goes on to state how he believes Jews and Judaism are able to do this—to maintain continuous connection with the ancient Holy past—despite dispersion, integration, assimilation, conversion, atheism and unspeakable persecution:

...the chapters of Holy history are reproduced in the course of profane History by trials that constitute a Passion, the Passion of Israel. For many Jews who have long since forgotten or never learnt the narratives and the message of the Scriptures, the signs of the Revelation that was received—and the muted calls of this exalting Revelation—are reduced to the trauma

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of lived events long after the completion of the biblical canon, long after the Talmud was written down...For many Jews, holy History and the Revelation it entails are reduced to the memories of being burnt at the stake, the gas chambers, and even the public affronts received in international assemblies or heard in the refusal to allow them to emigrate. They experience the Revelation in the form of persecution!23

Here Levinas equates revelation (the Sinaitic Revelation as well as God's revealing of Himself to individuals) with the physical and emotional trauma created by the lived experience of persecution. In other words, this lived experience of suffering transmits at least some of the most important of the lessons found in the Sinaitic Revelation (the written and oral Torah). For Levinas, Revelation as lived, repeated experience is the center of Judaism and is what has made the centuries-long survival of the Jews possible, no matter how loosely affiliated they are with one another as a “people.” Revelation can be “reduced to the trauma of lived events” and nonetheless contain Judaism's essential message. A Jew can know no Torah, no Talmud, no Hebrew, but if he suffers as a Jew, whether he intends to or not he is receiving the lessons of Revelation. What, then, according to Levinas is Judaism's essential message and how does it inform his ethics? Is Levinas reducing Judaism to the suffering of persecution that is more or less absent of content? What is he doing here?

By claiming that Jews can “receive” what is central to Judaism through persecution, Levinas is on one hand insisting that Judaism consists of more than “just” text and law; it is also constituted by lived experience, made up in large part by a religious practice that both feet planted in this world. “The entire Revelation,” he asserts, “is bound up around daily ritual.”

Keeping the mitzvot is likewise meant to “bind” us to our duties here on earth. When we keep His Law, we remain in relation with God. Traditionally understood, the Revelation is the delivery of the content of Torah from “outside the order of the world...the exposition of the content and above all of the structure of the Revelation presented so far.”

Levinas insists that Revelation is of continued relevance even though we live in what Levinas calls the age of “the death of metaphysics” and cannot accept the idea of transcendence in the traditional sense. The values taught by Revelation, and by Judaism more broadly, are transmitted by experience whether—or even if—we believe in the ontological status of that Revelation as outside, above, or elsewhere, or not.

But how is Revelation connected to suffering specifically, rather than awe or humility or something else? To be sure, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible who are charged with the task of re-iterating the lessons of the Sinaitic Revelation to recalcitrants often undergo trauma of all sorts. Moses' face is changed forever after meeting with God.

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24 Levinas uses the term “bound up” intentionally here. Among the many source texts Levinas uses to support his understanding of revelation are Exodus 33:23 and the midrash of the same passage. According to Exodus 33:23 when Moses asked to see God's face, God refused to show Moses his face, but agreed to hide Moses in the cleft of a rock as his “divine Glory” ran past. Moses saw only God's “back parts.” The rabbinic sages claimed that this “back” Moses saw was the straps of his tefillin knotted at the back of God's neck. God, too, was “bound up” by the word because he was following the commandment to lay tefillin and “bind” the words of Deuteronomy to his body.

25 Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” 140.
on Sinai in Exodus 34:29-35. Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel all undergo physical hardships and social humiliation for the sake of God and his messages to Israel; this is what all “suffering servants” are obligated to accept, what Levinas calls the “trauma of prophecy.” 

Na'vi, the Hebrew word for “prophet” loosely means “spokesperson.” The root (nun-vov) means “openness” or “hollowness,” implying that a person who is chosen to prophesy will be hollowed out and filled up with whatever God puts there. The prophet often resists God's commands initially. Moses wants God to ask someone else, Jeremiah dreads the public spectacle his office will require him to enact and resents that when he opens his mouth, he speaks God's words and not his own. God tells Moses he will be “with” Mose's mouth when it is time for him to speak; Ezekiel's mouth is forcibly filled with the words of God as God pulls him up off the ground by his hair. God reveals himself to his prophets and they become receivers of God in every sense.26 The individual selfhood, the “subjectness” of the prophet is erased and he or she is subjugated to God, the ultimate Other to whom engagement with the other always points; and yet according to Levinas, prophets—and all who suffer at the hands of others—ironically experience themselves as free subjects through their mandatory powerlessness. The prophet as suffering servant is the servant of God and man.

Levinas identifies suffering as inextricably connected to prophesy. In order to explain how an every day person of any background and practice who is not a prophet in the strict sense can nonetheless be said to experience the “trauma of prophecy,” Levinas

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26 Many of the prophets suffer physically as well as emotionally. Jeremiah is compelled to make a wooden yoke with leather straps and wear it around his neck as a foreshadowing of Babylon's occupation of Israel. Ezekiel must lie on his side for 390 days to warn of a coming siege; Isaiah went naked for three years to forewarn of Israel of her forthcoming captivity.
turns to Amos 3:8: “The Lord God has spoken—who can but prophesy?” and understands this to mean that “prophetic receptivity already lies in the human soul. Is it not subjectivity, through its potential for listening—that is obeying—the very rupture of immanence?” What makes the prophetic encounter with the divine Other possible is the nature of humankind, our potential for listening to the other, to the “not me,” to move beyond our sense of the world as homogeneous to “I” and embrace heterogeneity (and for Levinas the ethical relation is always heterogeneous). Revelation is correlative to the life changing experience of being in relation with a being which is wholly other, and thereby encountering the ultimate Other and responding to it with open “obedience.” For Levinas, this obedience,

...cannot be reduced to a categorical imperative in which a universality is suddenly able to direct a will. It is an obedience, rather, which can be traced back to the love of one's neighbour: a love without eros, without self-complacency and, in this sense, a love that is obeyed, the responsibility for one's neighbour, the taking upon oneself of the other's destiny, or fraternity. The relation with the other is placed at the beginning!

He goes on to say that,

...Kant himself, in the statement of the second phrase of the categorical

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27 Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” 141.
imperative, hastens toward this relation [with the other] through a regular or irregular deduction from the universality of the maxim. Obedience, which finds concrete form in the relation with the other, indicates a reason that is less centered than Greek reason, the latter having its immediate correlative something stable, the law of the Same.\textsuperscript{28}

Biblical law delivered through Revelation puts ethics first because the delivery requires humanity's openness to someone or something entirely different from itself before anything else can take place. For Levinas, this is not true of “Greek” or Western philosophy, which aspires to universality and homogeneity as a precondition for the ethical. The “Greek” philosophical approach to ethics, Levinas argues here and elsewhere, actually requires the obliteration of the ethical (that is, the acceptance of the other is not-I and the realization that I am responsible for him) as Levinas understands it.

God, the absolute Other, calls to man, and man says, “\textit{Hineini!}”\textsuperscript{29} This is the first encounter, the encounter which makes being in relation with the other the first, most important step of man's development, and also the beginning of ethics and ethical relation. It is what makes us human. “Is not the model of revelation,” Levinas insists, “an ethical one?”\textsuperscript{30} Ethics—and, just as important, man's predisposition to the ethical—are born of the suffering we experience as human beings. On this Levinas is clear:

\textsuperscript{29} “Here I am!” Levinas refers to this response to God's call as “man welcoming his neighbour.” This primal relation is template for ethical relation to the other. “Demanding Judaism,” 144.
\textsuperscript{30} Levinas, “Demanding Judaism,” 143.
...to follow [the teachings of] the Most-High is also to know that nothing is
greater than to approach one's neighbour, than the concern of the lot for
the 'widow and orphan, the stranger and the poor'; and that to approach
with empty hands is not to approach at all. The adventure of the Spirit
also takes place on earth among men. The trauma I experienced as a slave
in the land of Egypt constitutes my humanity itself. This immediately
brings me closer to all the problems of the damned on earth, of all those
who are persecuted...My very uniqueness lies in the responsibility for the
other man...  

When we suffer, Levinas claims, we become more ethically inclined. Simply put, we
will empathize with, and then wish to assuage, the suffering of others if we have suffered
ourselves. Moreover, when we obey or listen to the call of the other, and respond
“Hineini: Here I am!” we become, through our subjectivity, “the very rupture of
immanence.” This “rupture” is the next important step toward the development of our
potential for ethical behavior.

For Levinas, “immanence” refers to a number of things. “Immanence” refers to
the affective aspect of humanity. Rupture of my own immanence is proof of the
undeniable alterity of others that reminds me that the whole of the world is not identical

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31 Levinas, “Demanding Judaism,” 139.
32 Levinas, “Demanding Judaism,” 141.
to me, but rather filled with other thinking, feeling subjects who I cannot in any absolute way define, control or obliterate.\(^{33}\) When I understand that the “other” or the not-me is also a subject and yet exterior to me, I must subsequently acknowledge my obligation to honor that reality; to know that I am not the world, nor can I control the world, makes me suffer, and feel strange to myself. I then enter into ethical relation with the other. My own “immanence” is enriched by this acknowledgement of or “obedience” to the “immanence” of the other and evokes and substantiates God's Revelation to humanity. Again, this heterogeneity makes ethical relations possible and provides inspiration to humanity to evolve and achieve. Levinas states:

\[ \text{The path I would be inclined to take in order to solve the paradox of the Revelation is one which claims that this relation, at first glance a paradoxical one, may find a model in the non-difference towards the other, in a responsibility towards him, and that is precisely within this relation that man becomes his 'self'; designated without any possibility of escape, chosen, unique, non-interchangeable and, in this sense, free. Ethics is the model worthy of transcendence, and it is an ethical kerygma that the Bible} \]

\(^{33}\) It is important to note here that for Levinas, murdering the other does not give me power over her. Instead, the act of murder proves that the other cannot be fully eliminated by eliminating her body. “To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. It is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but already impotency, because the face rends the sensible. The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique ‘matter’ possible for total negation” (Totality and Infinity, 198). Also, Levinas' earlier work often describes transcendence (the getting-out-of-myself) in terms of “light.”
is Revelation.\textsuperscript{34}

And in “Demanding Judaism,” Levinas writes:

...it is probably distinctive feature of the Jewish people to live and endure, already in its exceptional history and in the precariousness of its condition and dwelling on earth, the incompletion of a world experienced from the irreducible and urgent demand for justice which is its actual religious message. The crudeness of the world...of which Judaism is not only the conscience, but also the testimony, that is to say, the martyrdom; the cruelty where the burning of my suffering and the anguish of my death were able to be transfigured into the death and concern for the other man...Judaism...is a rupture of the natural and the historical that are constantly reconstituted and, thus, a Revelation which is always forgotten.

And here we return to our original question: Why does Levinas reduce the lessons of Judaism to temporal suffering for the other? One answer to the question is that for Levinas the violence of anti-Semitism and the suffering it creates for Jews makes the Jewish people the perfect mouthpiece—the perfect prophets, perhaps—for Judaism's religious message which he sees as constituted primarily of the desire for justice in an “incomplete world,” a world that in Lurianic terms, is always in the midst of being

\textsuperscript{34} Levinas, “Demanding Judaism,” 144-145.
created but is never “done.”

35 Jewish people cannot escape the most important lesson of Judaism—the ethical relation—because Jews are (at least in the West) in almost every era, made to suffer and yet are innocent. They are the historical “other” of Western civilization since Rome, an “other” which is understood to have stubbornly refused to join completely his or her non-Jewish neighbors culturally or religiously. The history of their suffering (suffering they endure because of their refusal to join the “same”) makes them the conscience of Western thought as well as the proof or testimony of the exact nature of the problem: ethics. Moreover, that man is meant to be a moral creature whose ethics are grounded in the experience of suffering is for Levinas the central message of Judaism. Judaism as a system—and not Jewishness or Jewish people in essentialist terms—corrects and completes Western philosophy because it privileges ethics above ontology and epistemology and is, for Levinas, open to all who wish to embrace its precepts.

Levinas is not the first Jewish philosopher to see connections between the gift of revelation and humanity's moral development. Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* also depicted Judaism as possessing a morality he felt was lacking in other forms of Western thought and culture. Martin Buber, Leo Strauss, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and perhaps most especially Franz Rosenzweig (whose *Star of Redemption* was particularly important to Levinas), all of whom studied Cohen’s work closely at one time or another, repeatedly treat the themes

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35 The idea that demanding justice is one of humanity's most important tasks in the never-ending job of creation is an important concept in various streams of Judaism.
Cohen’s work brought to the fore: the role of revelation in human experience, individual and communal spiritual renewal, the possibility of universal human progress through the moral lessons of ethical monotheism, the continued importance of Jewish mission, perhaps most importantly the messianic idea as both manifestation of and crucial vehicle for the attainment of universal human perfection. For Cohen, revelation did not endow man with the potential for ethical behavior directly, but it did, by imparting reason to humankind, make us capable of existing in ethical correlation with one another. Reason rather than affect was the faculty that, for Cohen, had the capability to make humans “good.”

Although Levinas and Cohen are very different thinkers on a systematic level, both felt strongly that the burden of the other man was man's most important duty, the fulfillment of which placed him in direct relation with God and His Law. As a consequence, both thinkers made ethics the center of their work. Suffering is redemptive for both Cohen and Levinas, although in markedly different ways. That suffering—an experience he describes as existing on a spectrum that makes us more empathetic to our fellow man—creates the potential for ethical actions is a universal truth. In short, suffering, an experience which is at best unpleasant and at worst deadly, has the potential to redeem us by making us more ethical and thereby more likely to intervene on behalf of those who suffer. For Cohen, suffering and punishment played an important role in our individual and collective development. The suffering other is for Cohen a kind of prophet whose trials are meant to remind us of the value of atonement and the avoidance of sin. For Cohen, suffering was a necessary part of recognizing one's moral
responsibilities to God and one's fellow human beings.\footnote{For an interesting discussion of suffering in Hermann Cohen's philosophy, see Oliver Leaman's \textit{Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 157-164. For a valuable and comprehensive analysis of atonement, revelation, correlation and redemption in Cohen’s work, see Michael Zank's \textit{The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen} (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2000).}

Levinas did not feel, as Cohen did, that the innocent suffering of the Jews would, by and by, play a role in humanity's ultimate discovery of the value of unification through ethical monotheism, although for both men Jewish suffering is endowed with special meaning. For Levinas, the suffering of the Jews was a political reality that stemmed from the increasingly totalizing nature of Western thought, the result of which was a culture increasingly intolerant of difference. He felt the plight of the Jews and other “others” could be changed by changing Western thought. According to Cohen, the suffering of the Jews preserved them as a people and enabled them to fulfill their role as harbingers of the progress of history toward messianic perfection. And while the prophets and their message of ethical responsibility were also central to both thinkers, Cohen perceived the prophets as harbingers of the truth of monotheism, while for Levinas, “prophetic receptivity” demonstrated humanity's special receptivity to obedience and service.

Perhaps surprisingly, both Levinas and Cohen expressed a faith in the messianic future. For Levinas, the universalism championed by the philosophical idealism espoused by Cohen is an illusion; cultures are particular, individuals are particular, languages are particular and religious traditions are particular. And yet, not unlike Cohen, Levinas imagines a messianic future wherein human beings engage in the ethical treatment of one another. For Levinas, this was a utopian “eschatological future” that would initially
unfold on an inter-subjective level in human relationships, while for Cohen, the messianic future, also a rabbit on the horizon, constituted a perfecting of history and a unification of mankind culturally, politically, economically and spiritually. And though these two constructs are different in many ways, both suggest a belief in the perfectibility of mankind as a species. While Cohen felt mankind moved toward universality in an idealist sense, Levinas seems to have felt that utopian existent would entail a human acceptance of difference and the celebration of intersubjectivity rather than an unrealistic and violent homogenization.

Most importantly for our purposes here, though, is that Levinas and Cohen felt Judaism provided necessary correctives to Western thought resulted by placing ethics at the center of human concern. Certainly both felt Judaism made significant contributions to Western thought and civilization and had still more to offer. For Cohen, God was in many ways an ideal which humans should strive to emulate than a personal deity or a deity who intervenes in human history. Levinas' God, the Holy Other, is also highly abstract; Levinas' descriptions of God depict an un-embodied divine transcendence more than the traditional God of Judaism. Cohen offers an intellectualized textual Judaism heavily influenced by *Wissenschafts des Judentum* movement, while Levinas offers a phenomenology of the Divine. Yet both see Judaism as an approach to human life and culture that does not, at least in definitive terms, separate law from ethics, the individual from the collective, theology from philosophy. Judaism is historical, continuous and contemporary, and the suffering of Jews has, according to Cohen and Levinas, generated more hope than despair. Both Cohen and Levinas value and make use of the Talmudic
tradition as evidence of the possibility and ethical value of dialogue in the face of disagreement. Creation, revelation, the prophets, exile and redemption, themes both men identify as central to authentic Judaism are both specific to the Jewish experience and indicative of humanity’s broader developmental journey. But while Cohen's messianic future may have entailed a world full of ethical monotheists, Levinas was imagining a world full of particular communities in service to other “others.”

**But is it Ethics?**

Ethical action in the temporal lives of human beings is the most genuine expression of ethical “inter-subjectivity.” Levinasian ethics rely on the lived experience of suffering to ground it, and “the ethical” must be expressed not only in thought but also in action. Yet while Levinas carefully delineates the source of the ethical impulse and the circumstances that awaken it, he provides very few examples of actions we should consider ethical. In fact, Levinas' work contains very few directives for ethical behavior in any sense. As a matter of principle, his ethics consistently resist systematization, making it problematic to discern a practical ethics in his project. According to Diane Perpich:

It is as if there is a dilemma at the heart of Levinas' scholarship. It is clear that Levinas is not in the business of constructing normative moral
principles meant to tell us how to live rightly or virtuously or well, so it
seems quite right to distance his thought from what we normally mean by
normative ethics. But when we deny that Levinas' thought has anything to
do with normative ethics, it then appears contradictory to use his work to
do exactly the sort of work that normative ethics is usually employed to
do.  

Perpich describes Levinas as entering the philosophical “scene” enthralled with
Heidegger's “Letter on Humanism” which speculates that the desire for ethics reflects a
misguided yearning “for a peremptory directive and for rules that say how man...ought to
live in a fitting manner.” Heidegger's claims that both ethics and humanism were
unnecessary—at least in the traditional sense—can be understood as part of a wider
movement in France and elsewhere toward questioning normativity in general. “Does
Levinas offer us an ethics after Heidegger,” Perpich asks, “or an ethics despite Heidegger
or, as seems to be the case, an impertinent combination of the two?” And even as
Levinas attempts to, on occasion, distance his work from “moralistic resonances”
associated with the term 'ethics,' his terminology is laden with normative prescriptions
and injunctions.

“My task,” Levinas wrote, “does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to

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38 Perpich, Ethics, 10-11.
find its meaning...[but] One can without a doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme.”  

Levinas' own description of his goals as a philosopher, Perpich is right to insist that “Levinas' work is not about the specifics of our moral life so much as it is a struggle to say how we come to find ourselves with a moral life at all.”  

Levinas does not engage in traditional normative ethics, but it is useful to see Levinas as what Stanley Cavell calls a “moral perfectionist.”  

According to Cavell, some ethicists are “legislators” who, like Kant, Rawls, and Rorty, produce detailed rules for ethical action while others, like Levinas, are perfectionists who believe that there is something prior to rules without which the rules themselves are useless.  

Herein lies one of several important reasons for Levinas' overwhelming popularity among the humanities and social sciences: Levinas intended to create a theoretical framework that could support the point of view that ethics were not only necessary but possible, and not only possible, but hardwired into psycho-social development. This theoretical framework is arguably poetic and certainly radical, but its most innovative feature is that gives itself over for implementation by other thinkers whose “theme” is—unlike Levinas'—the construction of ethics “in function.” When understood as primarily concerned with grounding ethics in temporal experience—or as Cavell might phrase it, with the illumination of the prior temporal conditions that make ethics possible—any normative language Levinas uses can be primarily understood as

first and foremost pointing toward definitive evidence for the possibility of ethics. What makes Levinas' thought “universal,” however, is that he grounds ethics in the lived experience of human suffering. Suffering rather than love or law or a sense of justice activates and provides the ground for human ethics.

One of the most well known critics of Levinas' ethics qua philosophical ethics is Ricard Rorty. Rorty states that if “one understands ethics in the particular and radical sense given to that word by Levinas, then Derrida's practice may well have 'an overriding ethical significance.' But I don't understand the 'ethics' in that way, and I don't think it useful to give it that sense.” Rorty also admits to being “unable to connect Levinas' pathos of the infinite with ethics or politics” because politics is at least in part about “reaching accommodation between competing interests” and it remains unclear how Levinas' descriptions of the other/Other contribute to that end. Elsewhere Rorty asserts that Levinas' notions of infinite responsibility “may be useful to some of us on our individual quests for private perfection. [But w]hen we take up our public responsibilities...the infinite and the un-representable are merely nuances. Thinking our responsibilities in these terms is as much of a stumbling-block to effective political organization as is the sense of sin.”

What is implied by Rorty's critique in particular is that ethics informed by religion

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45 Mouffe, Deconstruction, 17.
46 Found in Diane Peprich, Ethics, 5.
cannot truly be understood as ethics in the broader sense; for Rorty, religious traditions are private and particular and perhaps cannot be expanded or adapted for secular public use. According to this line of thinking, it follows that if Levinas grounds an ethics informed by the texts and traditions of a religious tradition, his ethics cannot be philosophical or even relevant to political discourse. Rorty is correct that Levinas' project cannot be defined as “ethics” in any traditional sense. As Bettina Bergo rightly claims, “If ethics means rationalist self-legislation and freedom (deontology), the calculation of happiness (utilitarianism), or the cultivation of virtues (virtue ethics) then Levinas' philosophy is not an ethics.” Levinas' work is primarily an interpretive phenomenological description of inter-subjectivity designed to challenge traditional understandings of human development and the role of ethics in human relationships and culture.

Contrary to Rorty's objection that Levinas' ethics is not connected to the political realm, Levinas' project is also inherently political and concerns itself directly with the human casualties of political conflict. Levinas resists and dismantles “totalizing” philosophy because he rejects political totalitarianism. He wants a world with room for difference and an ethics that does not rely on shared religious or political ideology; moreover, a relation is not ethical unless you are “other” than myself. Finally, an ethics that cannot protect the other from my ability to destroy him when his otherness disrupts me is not an ethics. Levinas' work advocates, in the words of Seán Hand, “a multiplicity

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in being which refuses totalization and takes form instead as fraternity and discourse, an
ethical relation which forever precedes and exceeds the tyranny of ontology.”

Levinas claims to locate the precepts of his ethics in the sources of Judaism and not in those
exclusive to Christianity, Islam or “Greek” or Western philosophy, and this, too, is in part
a political statement. For Levinas, theology does not supersede philosophy, nor should
ethics derived in part from religion be of use only for religious people. Levinas wants to
correct Western philosophy at a fundamental, systemic level with what he believes
Judaism has successfully placed at the front and center of its system: an understanding of
ethical relation as dependent upon heterogeneity, and an account of the existence of an
ethical impulse in the human psyche which is activated by the universal human
experience of suffering. If Levinas were creating a religious ethics developed for
religious Jews alone, wouldn't it be most prudent if he insisted that any normative claims
be derived from observance of the Torah? But this is not what Levinas does.

And yet the practical implications of Rorty's objections are relevant. Can Levinas'
work be meaningful for people who do not share his theological proclivities—in other
words, people who are not religious Jews? Can his ideas about suffering as central to
ethics be applied to “secular” thought as well? With regard to Rorty's objections
specifically, it is arguable that the religious and the political can be so neatly severed
from one another in the first place. Political persuasions are similar to religious
persuasions in that they suggest a particular worldview or ideology that shapes and is
shaped at least in part by our place in society as we understand it. But setting aside for

now the inherent problems with claiming that the political or the philosophical are inherently more “universal” than the theological, a comparison of Levinas' thought as it appears in his “philosophical” with excerpts from the “Jewish writings” excerpted above demonstrates the continuity of his thought and its applicability and value to secular discourse. Bergo aptly points out that as early as the 1960s, Levinas was actively working toward a “pre-synthetic phenomenology” or a phenomenology of the pre-cognitive:

Levinas tells us he is describing a prerepresentational occurrence, which we cannot call “experience,” if “experience” involves just intentional consciousness. Instead, Levinas pursues a prereflexive immediacy that is affective and excessive, and whose expression is paradoxical. This protoexperience, “substitution,” takes the form of suffering and contains a certain call—of consciousness, as it had done in Heidegger, yet somehow more concrete because the “other” is another person.49

Bergo refers specifically to what is, in many ways, most Husserlian50 about Levinas' project. Husserl sought to connect science and philosophy to a greater extent than they had been before, in part by proving that phenomenology, with its use of bracketing and descriptive analyses of experience, could offer valuable new tools to scientific inquiry. Levinas used phenomenology to develop what Bergo calls a “description of affectivity.”

49 Bettina Bergo, “What is Levinas Doing?” 123.
In Levinas' work these descriptions of affectivity lead us back to prereflective consciousness to the development of conscience, which is inextricably connected to the subject's initial realization of the other—that is, the being other than the self who is not an object but another thinking subject. If ethics could be traced to a human impulse that presupposes cognition, then the idea that ethics must be grounded in metaphysics, as Kant claimed—as well as the arguments against ethics posed by Heidegger could be laid to rest. If the ethical impulse is hardwired into our sense of self and our psycho-social development such that it appears even before our ability to reflect, then ethics are essential to human engagement should be of primary concern.

Levinas is not interested in developing a systematic normative ethics, nor is he interested in offering objective “proof” that ethics should consist of certain norms and values per se. He is interested in uncovering that which even makes ethics possible and upon what grounds a normative ethics can be constructed. Levinas uses a phenomenology deeply informed by psychology to locate the ethical impulse in the pre-representational experience of suffering created by the immediacy of the presence of an other. Not unlike Jacque Lacan's mirror stage, Levinas gives an account of a pre-reflective experience of the presence of the “other” who is not the “same” as me yet shapes me profoundly. Lacan's infant looks into the face of the mother and sees himself mirrored there. Levinas' infant (although Levinas does not refer specifically to infant development but to precognition) experiences suffering or “passions” which must be endured when she realizes she does not constitute the whole of the world and is obliged to subjugate her own needs to the needs of the other. Again, this suffering is brought on by “the call” of
the conscience that develops not in isolation, but is activated by the demands of the other.\textsuperscript{51}

That we experience suffering in the moment that we hear the “call” of the other is significant in a number of ways. First, for Levinas, we suffer when we hear the “call” because the discovery of the other makes me strange to myself, such that I experience an “other” within myself. This experience repeats again and again, and has the power to create \textit{either} ethical investiture \textit{in} or explosions of violence against “the other.” A person has countless opportunities over the course of his lifetime to either embrace or reject ethical engagement and investiture. We see the beginnings of an articulation of suffering as the foundation of ethical action in \textit{Totality and Infinity} where relation between “I” and “the other” or the Stranger is made the primary pursuit of philosophical inquiry. Suffering forms the foundation of Levinasian ethics because I cannot become an ethical being until I suffer the experience of myself as separate from the world around me and, therefore, separate also from myself.

\textit{Totality and Infinity} discusses physical suffering at length as well. For Levinas, physical suffering is also ethically meaningful. We are reminded that \textit{Totality and Infinity} is a book driven by the desire for social justice when we read that “[t]he whole acuity of suffering lies in the impossibility of fleeing it, of being protected in oneself, it is the impossibility of retreat.”\textsuperscript{52} In suffering, the free being ceases to be free, and yet remains

\textsuperscript{51} Levinas borrows heavily from Heidegger's terminology, but often inverts its meaning, emphasis or usage. For Heidegger, “the call” originates from an ontologically neutral, faceless place and lacks a clear message. Levinas, on the other hand, describes “the call” of being as of specific import to humans and thus constituted of a clear message which demands our attention.

\textsuperscript{52} Bergo, “What is Levinas Doing?” 123.
free in that it cannot truly be controlled by those who impose suffering upon it. Much in
the same way that our initial discovery of the other creates a paradoxical emotional
suffering which both makes us strange to ourselves and yet shapes us in potentially
positive ways, we “witness the turning of an I into a thing” when in the throes of acute
physical suffering. The sufferer becomes both “a thing and at a distance from our
reification.” As for the self who is suffering, his suffering makes him feel like both an
object or a thing and a subject, an “I” who can never be reduced to an object. This
inability to forget oneself and get “out” of or escape oneself as at the mercy of the other
makes the suffering all the more acute.

For Levinas, then, suffering is what makes us ethical, or at least helps create the
potential for ethics. As Bergo points out:

Levinas' reduction [of the ideology and “sacred delirium” of religion to
signification] yields various claims about the “ethical” meaning of
affectivity—generally as traumatized affect. Not all affectivity has ethical
meaning. But certain affects, or better, passions (i.e., intense recurring
emotions that we “suffer”) that we find in the wake of trauma are liable to
have an ethical character. For Levinas, this ethical character means that
the otherwise closed character of our immanence can be held open...in the
presence of a human other [and] gets forced open momentarily, in what he

53 Ibid.
calls transcendence.  

Our “immanence” or affectivity is normally tightly sealed and eschews suffering precisely because it makes us suffer, makes us vulnerable, and makes us strange to ourselves. But when my immanence is before the other who I cannot help but acknowledge is my obligation, I suffer, and am forced open momentarily. This forced openness creates what Levinas calls “transcendence.” Levinas calls this opening “for-the-other,” which is ethical in nature because it is what makes inter-subjective relation and generosity possible. This generosity allows me to escape the shackles of my obsession with myself, thereby allowing me a paradoxical freedom.

II. Analysis

Dominique Janicaud's *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* is an analysis of the ways in which French phenomenology has changed since its initial reception of Husserl and Heidegger. Janicaud provides analysis, critique and polemic which “aims toward a sole goal: methodological clarification.” Janicaud's central question is whether phenomenology's current interest in making “the invisible” an object of philosophical investigation constitutes a misuse of Husserlian phenomenology.

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Janicaud spends a great deal of time on early Levinas, whose work Janicaud describes as “imprecise” and “inconsistent,” a kind of theological hijacking of Husserlian phenomenology. His critique of Levinas, although flawed, is nonetheless astute and provides insight into some of the weaknesses of Levinas' project.

Janicaud begins with Totality and Infinity, wherein Levinas lays the groundwork for his project as it unfolds throughout his career. He accuses Levinas of “philosophical aplomb,” or marked self-assuredness:

[Here] aplomb designates...the attitude that loftily affirms itself in...Totality and Infinity...aplomb is the categorical affirmation of the primacy of the idea of infinity, immediately dispossessing the sameness [mêmeté] of the I, or of being [être]. Totality and Infinity is...concerned with resolving the...problem in ...Husserlian phenomenology [which is that] neither emergence in the world, not access to the other [autrui] received sufficient attention.\(^{56}\)

Janicaud is correct that Levinas “assumes the primacy of infinity” as a matter of form; his philosophical claims won't hold otherwise. The “I” is always confronted with the “other,” and this repeated encounter prevents the “I” from believing for too long that the world is an extension of itself and can be legitimately unified by its categories. But Levinas'

\(^{56}\) Janicaud, Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,” 25.
interpretations of his own phenomenological observations are the evidence for these claims. Levinas' identification of suffering as the source of ethics is itself an interpretation of his own affectivity and the affectivity of other human beings as he observed and subsequently interpreted them. Such phenomena can be categorized as both visible and invisible. For example, we “read” the facial expressions and body language of others to understand what they might be feeling on the “inside.” When reading our own emotions, moods and reactions to stimuli, though, we are not reading our own faces but analyzing what cannot be “seen.” Both phenomena must be “read” whether they are visible or not. Furthermore, interactions between subjects must be “read” and interpreted as well, which Levinas does freely in order to support his theories regarding the centrality of inter-subjectivity to human development and self-awareness.

When Levinas refers to the invisible as an object of philosophical investigation, this is, in part, what he means. This focus on emotion and emotional exchange as not only suitable for philosophy but the primary concern of philosophy is what makes Levinas' work radical and allows him to begin, almost a priori with the “primacy of infinity.”

Janicaud claims that the phenomenologist must choose between “the unconditional affirmation of Transcendence and the patient interrogation of the visible” because the “incompatibility” of the two “cries out.” He laments, “...are we going to choose with the head or the heart—arbitrarily or not?” Here Janicaud misses an important aspect of Levinas' project. If pressed to choose between the two, Levinas would likely answer that he chooses—and that Western philosophy should choose—both. Rationality and affectivity must inform one another. When these human faculties are placed in
isolation from one another, human social development is stunted. The importance of this idea to Levinas cannot be underestimated. We cannot, and should not, divorce the body from the mind or emotions from thought. The inextricable connections between these working parts is precisely why ethics as the first concern of philosophy can and should, in Levinas' opinion, be grounded in the physical and emotional experience of suffering.

Janicaud's most important objections to Levinas' work are evident in Janicaud's claims that philosophy demands we follow the “guide that does not buy itself off with fine words.” Janicaud mentions Levinas' definition of Desire as desire for the absolute Other. The alterity of the other is, by Levinas, “understood as the alterity of the Other [Autrui] and as that of the most High.” Janicaud writes:

All is acquired and imposed from the outset, and this is all no little thing: nothing less than the God of the biblical tradition. Strict treason of the reduction of the transcendental I...here theology is restored with its parade of capital letters. But this theology which dispenses with giving itself a title, installs itself at the most intimate dwelling of consciousness, as if it were as natural as could be. Must philosophy let itself be thus intimidated? Is this not but incantation, initiation?

Janicaud objects to what he sees as Levinas' re-introduction of theological metaphysics to

58 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 34.
59 Janicaud, Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,” 27.
philosophy. It is Levinas' nonchalant analysis of this “invisible” phenomenon, and not the “invisible” phenomena of affect mentioned earlier, then, to which Janicaud most objects. “After all,” Janicaud continues, “even if we agree to consider a “dimension of height,” must it immediately yield the “Most High”? For Janicaud, this is a transgression of serious dimensions, and Levinas' purpose is difficult to understand. While he does not see Levinas' work as without merit, he cannot accept Levinas' project in its entirety:

We would do well to recognize the talent and singular originality of Levinas without, however, granting him the least concession when it comes to methodological and phenomenological coherence...To be sure, Levinas acknowledges his transgression of phenomenology's “play of lights,” but his biased utilization of what he presents as phenomenology (to pedagogic ends? To apologetic ends?) and his inscription of the aplomb of the Other [Autre] at the heart of experience makes things infinitely more complex than would be an explicit passage (or conversion) from “phenomenology” to “metaphysics.” Vis-à-vis what he names “formal logic,” Levinas likewise walks quite softly—striving to overwhelm it, all the while proclaiming himself faithful to the spirit of intellectual rationalism...every philosopher has the right to intervene and point a finger at Desire: capitalized, does it not become generic?

Levinas’ thought is assertive, and he willfully attempts to undo hundreds of years

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of philosophy without carefully delineating his methodology. Levinas' marriage of
religion and philosophy is also intentional, although not necessarily unannounced, as
Janicau claims. It is not be so strange or radical a move to make meaningful use of
theology in the course of philosophical examination for a thinker like Levinas who was
so profoundly shaped and influenced by Judaism. But Levinas does this while claiming to
reject traditional metaphysics, and for all his insistence that it is the living God in the face
of the other, the fact remains that sometimes Levinas feels compelled to ground the
transcendence and alterity of the other human being an absolute transcendence of God.
While Levinas may aim at a deeper “complexity” by phenomenologically blurring the
boundaries between theology and philosophy, the results are often, as Janicau claims,
inconsistent. Too often, Levinas engages in word play that causes us to lose sight of his
most unique and practical contributions to Western thought. The results are poetic and yet
smack of revivalism. He uses religion to disrupt totalizing theories of Western
philosophy that he believes pave over, uproot and ignore the affective experiences of
human beings and the moral nature of humankind.

For Levinas, any philosophy relevant to the temporal world must include
affectivity in investigations and acknowledge that unseen phenomena are at play in the
world. What is the force that animates the human face while it lives but vacates the body
when it dies, for example? What is it about this force that makes us “suffer” and then
submit to the obligation to care for it? For Levinas, religion is the place where questions
regarding affectivity, ethical responsibility are most often posed; moreover, religion
historically provides instruction for the maintenance of particular identity that can survive
cultural and political totalization (or at least Levinas’ Judaism is such a religion). And so it is to religion that Levinas turns. As a result, metaphysics are not done away with but problematized, and to a large extent, consist in part of a God who paves the way for inter-subjectivity, rather than “Being,” which Levinas asserts calls for and justifies totalizing violence to the other.

Along with sneaking God “back” into things, Janicaud claims that when Levinas asserts that Husserlian methodology is constituted mainly of eidetic reduction, he is selling phenomenology short. This is indeed what Levinas thinks; even though he freely admits that his own work would not be possible without Husserl, Levinas attempts to solve Husserl's lack of attention to inter-subjectivity by equating revelation with subjectivity:

...what sense does it make to claim that it does not involve, precisely, intentionality? A sham intentionality, purely representative, has been fabricated to prepare the way for the advent of the infinite. This is an artificial operation, one that Descartes and Husserl were able to do without: for these thinkers, in discovering in me the idea of the infinite, I discover also that my subjectivity exceeds the representation I have of it. There is no need, then, to introduce the Other [Autre] face to the Same, nor to claim, as Levinas does, that the idea of the infinite is “the non-

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When Decartes and Husserl and attempted to make sense of human subjectivity, they did so imagining the self in relation to other objects, rather than in relation to objects and subjects, and it is exactly this kind of approach to subjectivity which Levinas rejects. Either you agree with Levinas that Husserlian and Cartesian investigations ignore a dimension of human consciousness and development (that of correlation and intersubjectivity), or you don’t. For Levinas, humans only truly experience their own subjectivity as “beyond them” when they come into relation with other human beings. The subjectivity of others will always be invisible to me even if their words, actions and affectivity are largely disclosed to me; therefore, it is really my contemplation of and interest in the subjectivity of others that allows me to transcend myself. It is not my own subjectivity but the subjectivity of the other that finally exceeds my understanding and forces me outside my own immanence.

“Levinas imposes his schema...only at the price of considerable distortions of his methodological referents,” Janicaud concludes. “In order to reestablish the coherence of his project, we must accept “his” intentionality, “his” conception of phenomenology. But at what price?” Janicaud is correct again, and yet what innovative thinker does not ultimately demand this? Intellectual history is filled with thinkers who push beyond the boundaries of their disciplines because what they have been taught has in their opinion,

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proved inadequate. Much is owed to those whose “distortions” or reinventions that show us something new about ourselves or about our time and place. It is seems impossible to expect that we all remain beholden to the methods of the past without first rejecting and then re-imagining those aspects that no longer seem effective. Janicaud would rather Levinas had held onto Husserl's “intentionality” and engage in intellectual gymnastics to make it “work.” It is not Levinas’ demands that we accept his definitions that most bother Janicaud. Janicaud simply remains unconvinced. And yet, Janicaud admits, “…we would like to conclude these critical remarks by showing that things still hold together. A phenomenology attentive to experience is within its rights to contest the “defection of phenomenology” that would be forced upon it.”

Janicaud admits that phenomenology does not prevent Levinas from posing the question of the philosophical status of the idea of God. “Our critical inquiry,” Janicaud insists, “means to make room for all phenomenological and philosophical possibilities. Thanks to methodological discrimination, we mean to permit each project to retrieve its specificity and to respect the type of rigor specific to it.”

One can argue that the God idea has no real place in philosophy, but is this a fair claim? Is Janicaud correct that we should make room for philosophical inquiry into the existence and nature of God, and if so how would this be any different than a theological inquiry of the same?

If we allow, albeit reluctantly, the idea of God to re-enter the philosophical mainstream—and we must keep in mind that God has never left the conversation in

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64 Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* 46.
Jewish thought—then we must ask if Levinas' philosophical Judaism really Judaism. And if so, how?

**But is it Judaism?**

In persecution I rediscover the original sense of Judaism, its initial emotion. This is not just any persecution—an absolute persecution, which pursues the being everywhere. And it is here also (chapter 53 of Isaiah) – in the discouragement which no one would know how to comprehend—that the divine presence is revealed. The situation of pure submission where there is an *election* in the sense of a person who caresses you. Or rather revelation of an order different from the natural order...An intoxication of this useless suffering, of this pure passivity by which one becomes the son of God.  

The diary Levinas kept while in the German POW camp sheds light on the ways in which Levinas' personal sufferings shaped his post-war conception of Judaism and on his understanding of the role of election in his own philosophical inquiries. As Sarah Hammerschlag points out, in “On Escape,” written in 1935, it becomes clear that “Levinas had already begun to look at Judaism as the source for a thinking that could

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offer a route to transcendence. But how could Judaism exemplify the existence of being riveted to one's being and offer a path to transcendence?"\(^{67}\)

As discussed above in relation to Janicaud's discussion of Levinas' use of religion in philosophical analyses, Judaism as a tradition takes on what Levinas believes philosophy leaves out: suffering and its role in the creation of ethics and the demand that ethics be humanity's first concern. More broadly, Judaism also offers a particular identity and practice that withstands the totalizing aspects of Western culture and even enriches it. Judaism is the place of particularity (or, if you like, alterity, in Levinasian terms) from which the totalizing aspects of Western secular culture can be challenged, and it is proof that we can remain faithful to our specific cultural identities and still have the best interests of the larger collective in mind. In fact, Levinas would argue that it is better for mainstream culture if we are *not* all the same culturally, spiritually and politically. The presence of minorities in fact ensures ethical relations. We will return to this idea later on in the chapter. For now, having offered the possible philosophical and political value of Judaism in Levinas' work, we return to the original now two-part question: Is what Levinas calls Judaism really Judaism, and how does it offer a path to transcendence?

Recall that Levinas wrote that “holy History and the Revelation it entails are reduced to the memories of being burnt at the stake, the gas chambers, and even the public affronts received in international assemblies or heard in the refusal to allow them to emigrate. They experience the Revelation in the form of persecution!”\(^{68}\)

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\(^{68}\) Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” *Beyond the Verse* trans. Gary D. Mole (London:
other words, can be “reduced to the trauma of lived events” and nonetheless contain Judaism's essential message. From here we might assume that Judaism's meaning lies not in its content but in the experience of persecution suffered by its followers. And yet traditional Judaism does not see the Sinaitic Revelation as void of content. Revelation is the contents of the Torah, and the Torah in turn provides not only Law but ethics which, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, are for most of traditional Judaism, interconnected. In other words, for most Jews, Judaism is not reducible to the form of its delivery (i.e., the painful experience of receiving revelation and then delivering the message delivered by that revelation to an often unreceptive audience) but is traditionally defined by the content delivered to its earliest adherents at Sinai.

Yet we should be hesitant to believe that a man who spent decades of his professional life as a Talmud teacher and an administrator in a Jewish school would take this poetic claim too literally. As Janicaud points out, for Levinas, revelation is equated with subjectivity; and our subjectivity is activated by our repeated encounters with the other. But the face of the other is not without content; it is not defined only by the suffering it brings which activates our ethical impulse. Its message, according to Levinas, is “Thou shalt not kill.” Just as revelation is not without content, Revelation is not without content, despite Levinas' musings in Beyond the Verse and elsewhere. Levinas emphasizes the textual evidence of the traumatic nature of revelation for the prophet to draw a parallel between the role of suffering in the creation of the ethical impulse and the role of Jews and Judaism in Western culture in general. But does this work?

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Continuum, 2007), 127-128.
To explore this idea more deeply, we return to Sarah Hammerschlag's "‘A splinter in the Flesh’," her 2012 essay which explores the ways in which Levinas' Judaism—at least as it appears in his writings—changes after 1945. In this essay, Hammerschlag spends a great deal of time drawing parallels between Heidegger's work before and during the war and Levinas' changing conceptions of Judaism after his release from the POW camp. What allows Levinas to connect his philosophical work with his Judaism, according to Hammerschlag, is Levinas' conception of election, which she claims "is a temporal one."\textsuperscript{69} As early as 1935 Levinas begins to explicitly make connections between "his phenomenological descriptions and his Jewish writings: 'Not to be able to flee one's condition—for many, this was like vertigo. Granted, this is a human situation, and in this the human soul is perhaps Jewish.'"\textsuperscript{70} Hammerschlag rightly asks that if election is not necessarily theological, but dictated by the position in society to which you are born (which may be impossible to escape, depending on the time and place in which you were born) then what is Jewishness?

If [Judaism] is not based on a belief in God, then on what is it founded? Is it racial or natural? Is it historical? Is it merely a cultural remainder, a vestige, a sign that points nowhere but signifies nonetheless?\textsuperscript{71}

She answers by noting that Levinas does not necessarily deal with that question

\textsuperscript{69} Hammerschlag, "‘A Splinter,” 398.
\textsuperscript{70} Hammerschlag quotes Levinas' essay “On Escape” here. Hammerschlag, “‘A Splinter,” 398.
\textsuperscript{71} Hammerschlag, “‘A Splinter,” 399.
consistently. Instead he focuses on the experience of election. And:

Levinas can consider the experience of election without addressing the question of its cause by treating it as a modality of facticity. In so doing he is following in Heidegger's footsteps...What is now evident, however, is the fundamental link between Levinas' ethics and his Jewish writing in so far as both depend on factical description of election.  

Hammerschlag's compelling conclusion regarding Levinas' understanding of election is this:

Levinas is clearly not advocating Jewish fatalism in the face of persecution but his essays from the late 1930s, the notes we have from journals written during his imprisonment in a Nazi labor camp, and his publications from the first years after the war all entail an attempt at re-appropriating the experience of being persecuted as a form of being-in-the-world, which, running counter to what Levinas will come to identify as Heidegger's neo-paganism, nonetheless would seem to be aimed at conceptualizing Jews and Jewishness as an alternative Schicksalgemeinschaft. When we consider the debt that Heidegger's own

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description of *Dasein* owes to Christian theological resources, as recent scholarship has clearly demonstrated, then Levinas' turn to Jewish categories begins to look less like a departure and more like its translation into different register.\textsuperscript{73}

Levinas is very much concerned with politics and power, despite his feeble attempts in *Totality and Infinity* and elsewhere to claim otherwise. Like Hammerschlag, Janicaud also suggests that Levinas is fighting Heidegger with Heideggerian weapons. If we understand Levinas in this way, then Levinas is simply offering another “community of fate” that will lead Europe—if not the world—toward another destiny grounded in the metaphysical truth of the God of the Jews. But I must respectfully disagree with Hammerschlag’s claim that Levinas' use of Judaism “looks less like a departure and more like a translation [of Heideggerian thought] into a different register.” As discussed in Chapter 1, Levinas' thought is in many ways a direct response to Heidegger, but not because it wants to displace the Aryan with the Jew and thereby lead Europe or the world toward a different destiny. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas makes it clear that his thought is meant to disrupt European political assumptions about the value of a universalization that obliterates the individual cultures and contributions of minority

\textsuperscript{73} Hammerschlag, “‘A Splinter,’” 394. Hammerschlag also argues that Levinas applies Heideggerian notions of *Shicksalgemeinschaft* by way of Franz Rosenzweig, who saw Jewishness as, in Levinasian terms, “another category of being” from whom non-Jews could learn something about history and salvation. Levinas’ interest in Rosenzweig is a topic of considerable proportion, and it is beyond the scope of this study, but others have devoted their time to the matter with interesting results. Robert Gibbs' excellent book *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) is among the better discussions of the similar ways in which Rosenzweig and Levinas approach philosophy through the lens of Judaism.
groups. What can stem the tide of the West's adoption of political and philosophical homogeneity is the preservation of particular communities and the way in which they resist complete assimilation can have powerful consequences. When a society is made up of particular groups rather than a homogenized whole, ethical relation is possible. Recall that for Levinas, true ethical relation requires an acknowledgement on my part that another who is not like me nonetheless deserves to define himself in his own terms. When I engage in true ethical relation, I heed the call of the other and do not raise a murderous hand against him. His face reveals to me that he deserves to live, and so do I. A continent led by a hegemony built on the ethical imperative to refrain from murder would arguably develop very differently than Europe did under a Reich founded on racial dominance and the ethical imperative to protect that dominance by murdering the other.\(^7^4\)

If Levinas did at one point theorize about the possibility of a Western philosophical tradition focused on theologically informed ethical relation, I doubt he hoped for such a state of affairs for long. But then what did Levinas want? We have discussed at length Levinas' equation of Judaism with suffering, his equation of suffering with prophecy, and the ethical call of the other, “thou shalt not kill.” If we see Levinasian ethics and theology as temporal—and I believe that they are, despite Levinas' exasperating inconsistencies—then it makes sense that, for Levinas, to practice Judaism, or to even be a Jew in Europe from 1933-1945 very likely meant that unprecedented suffering was inevitable. A Jew was indeed trapped in her being, so to speak. To survive,

\(^7^4\) I am not implying that Hammerschlag considers Levinasian thought murderous. I am taking the Heideggerian hegemonic as it unfolded in Nazi practice and the Levinasian hegemonic to two possible logical ends.
a Jew fled, hid, or held on to life in some way in the abyss of the German camp system until liberation. And then one had to survive the memories of one's loss and suffering to go on living after the war was over. Levinas' motives with regard to Heidegger specifically are practically impossible to discern with any reliability, but we can easily understand how, after 1945, Levinas might be driven to find not just proof of the possibility of ethics, but proof of the value of Judaism to Western thought and culture.

After 1933, when Heidegger accepted the rectorship at Freiburg, Levinas could no longer, if he were sane, see his own philosophical point of view—let alone his experiences—reflected in contemporary philosophy. And if Levinas did not see philosophical value in suffering before the war (or even imagine that human suffering must be represented and a primary concern of philosophy), then after the war, he certainly did.

At least part of what Levinas worked toward was a disruption of the current trajectory of Western thought as he understood it, and a way to give voice to another aspect of human experience which was not represented by the triumphant march of Being which typified popular politics of the time. Western philosophy rarely reflects or considers minority experience, let alone applies itself with any seriousness to the problems members of persecuted minority groups face. Western thought and experience are not monolithic, and Levinas knew this from experience; his experience was proof of that fact. Furthermore, the totality of human thought and experience is not monolithic either, although humans have much in common with one another experientially. Levinas and Wiesel both remark that their experiences in Nazi Europe were more reliably
reflected in traditional narrative of Judaism than in the mainstream European thought and culture surrounding them. Of course they would turn to the tools of the culture and tradition that speaks to their experiences when attempting to make use of them philosophically.

That said, Levinas takes liberties with Judaism, at least in his writings. Hammerschlag is right to notice the peculiar nature of election in Levinas' thought. And her questions about the nature of Levinas' Judaism are likewise worth asking. Again, I am unconvinced that Levinas simply took up Heidegger polemic and turned it on it's head, especially because this theory hinges on a clear understanding of what election means for Levinas, and the nature of Levinas' election remains unclear. Are the Jews “chosen” in accordance with any of the traditional understandings of that term discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, and if so, for what are they chosen? Or do the Jews themselves do the choosing, and if so, what are they choosing, and to what end? Is all of humanity chosen, as Levinas suggests in “On Escape?” And if so, again, by whom, and to what end? Sometimes Levinas indicates that election is the plight of the Jews alone, and that the Jews are chosen to suffer for political reasons that are beyond their control. Again, this understanding of election, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, would not be surprising, but we should be careful not to adopt this understanding as timeless or universally embraced by all Jews, let alone non-Jews. Even when Levinas attempts to extend chosenness to humanity in general, he defines election as a state of being trapped. Ultimately, election is not the linchpin for Levinas' Judaism or for Levinas' philosophy, nor does it connect the two bodies of work. What holds the two bodies of work together
and fuels the engine of each is suffering.

Despite the fact that much of Levinas' work is innovative, unique, poetic and thought provoking, Levinas' grounding of ethics in the temporal experience of suffering, a project he begins in earnest in *Totality and Infinity*, is arguably one of his most valuable contributions to Western thought. And the task of creating a philosophy that makes ethics its first concern remained Levinas' primary project. Levinas did not develop a normative ethics, but he consciously opted out of that task. What he provided was a theoretical framework for an ethics grounded in the experience of suffering that could be utilized by thinkers concerned first and foremost with the alleviation and prevention of useless suffering and persecution. Levinas created this theoretical framework from phenomenological descriptions of his own experiences and from the sources of Judaism that prioritize the alleviation of temporal suffering. The bare framework of Levinas' theory does not require God or Judaism, even though both concepts figure prominently for Levinas. We need not adopt a Levinasian “system” in order to adopt those aspects of his work that will be of long term value to the work of urging Western philosophy toward a greater interest in the problem of suffering. In any case, to attempt to do so would belie Levinas' entire project.

But if we accept Levinas' framework for an ethics grounded in the experience of suffering, what principles would such an ethics embrace, and what would the motivational force of its content be? The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” has long been an imperative in Western theology, and yet the Holocaust took place in modern Christian Europe. Perhaps what needs changing is not the command
itself but the definition of who one's neighbors are\textsuperscript{75}.

\textsuperscript{75} Thank you to my friend and colleague, Cristine Hutchison-Jones, with whom I have had many meaningful conversations regarding the centrality of the question of how we define the term “neighbor” to the problem of ethics.
Chapter 3
In Spite of Man: The Ethics of Elie Wiesel

The existence of an Eichmann casts doubt on the nature and mentality of the German people, but the possibility of a Mengele throws into question the very basis of German education and culture...many officers of the Einsatzgruppen...received [doctorates in literature...philosophy, theology or history] from Germany's best universities...yet nothing kept them from killing Jewish children...Their education provided them with no shield, no shelter from the temptation and seduction of cruelty that people may carry within. Why?¹

In part one of this chapter, an exegesis of texts selected from Wiesel's corpus is presented to support the following claims about his project.

1. Wiesel ground ethics in suffering.
2. Wiesel argues that the stories of suffering told by victims activate ethical response in bystanders and potential victims. Literature and storytelling are among the best methods for the dissemination of moral message and the persuasion of bystanders to

intervene on behalf of those who suffer unjustly.

3. Wiesel claims that the particularity of Judaism can represent what is universal in human spirituality and culture.

Part two is a critical analysis of the texts and ideas presented in part one of this chapter. Final conclusions regarding Wiesel's project are provided in Chapter 5.

I. The Exegesis

Of the three thinkers examined here, Wiesel's work and thought have had the greatest impact on mainstream culture. Wiesel's influence is two-fold. Wiesel is very popular among non-Jewish audiences for his work on Holocaust memory and victim advocacy, and he has utilized that popularity to educate non-Jews not only about the Holocaust but also about Jewish history, culture and religious practice. Generally, he is considered a novelist and essayist and, more broadly, a “voice of morality” but his impact on Jewish thought outside of his work on Holocaust remembrance and representation is less often examined.

To be sure, Night, Wiesel's bestselling autobiography and Holocaust testimony for which he is most known, has sold millions of copies worldwide and has been translated into more than 30 languages to date. Thousands of primary and secondary schools around the United States and Europe have adopted Night as a centerpiece to their genocide
education programs, and this has contributed significantly to Wiesel's fame as an outspoken advocate for victims of genocides, mass murders and other forms of brutality. The sheer volume of primary and secondary literature surrounding Holocaust education and Holocaust literature is astounding, and Wiesel's *Night* has inarguably played a significant role in the study and representation of the Holocaust. For reasons discussed in the following pages, however, this dissertation utilizes other sources as the primary foci of this analysis of Wiesel's ethics, an aspect of Wiesel's thought which is of central importance. Since it is typically assumed that any discussion regarding Holocaust and post-Holocaust Jewish thought will include *Night*, the decision to leave this text out of an in-depth analysis of ethics after Auschwitz should be explained. Given *Night*'s impact and its international popularity, how could any analysis of Wiesel's work fail to include it?

There are two primary reasons discussed below before we begin our analysis of Wiesel's ethics vise-a-vie other works in his *corpus*. Wiesel has written 58 books to date, many of which are non-fiction. When Wiesel *is* described as a theologian, the label is often qualified: Wiesel is a “Holocaust theologian,” a term which is problematic because it implies that the theology in question refers—or is meaningful only in relation to—the Holocaust. Critics who describe Wiesel in these terms tend to over-emphasize his descriptions of the Holocaust as a metaphysical and mystical event in such a way that many of the other contributions Wiesel makes to Holocaust remembrance, contemporary Jewish theology, ethics, and political and social justice activism are overshadowed or misinterpreted. Naomi Seidman is correct when she states that “the interpretation of the
Holocaust as a religious-theological event is not a tendentious imposition on Night but rather a careful reading of the work." But Seidman convincingly argues that Night may not be an unmediated account of Wiesel's experience in the first place—nor, I would argue in conjunction, of his theological understanding, analysis and incorporation of that experience.

In her controversial essay “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,” Seidman asserts that “...Read together, the text of Night and Wiesel's account of its composition form a single portrait of the artist as a young survivor, haunted by a cosmic, deathly silence he can only break at the urging of another.” The French version of Night to which Seidman refers features a forward written by French Catholic philosopher François Mauriac, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1952. It was Mauriac who, two years later, is said to have “urged” Wiesel to write about his experiences as a child survivor of the Holocaust. According to Seidman it is Mauriac's introduction, replete with comparisons of Wiesel to Jesus on the cross, in addition to the translation of the initial Yiddish text into French which mediate Wiesel's account by stripping it of his rage and his desire for revenge and instead buttressing it with sad “mysticism.” What most differentiates Und di welt hot geshvign from La Nuit as different texts with different audiences in mind, however, is that they belong to completely different literary genres.

Seidman's argument is valid. According to Wiesel's own 1994 memoir, All Rivers Run to the Sea, he first composed the first part of his memoir of his life in Yiddish while

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aboard a ship to Brazil. He submitted this text for publication in 1954, several months before his meeting with Mauriac. Therefore, that account was already published in a series edited by Buenos Aires based Mark Turkov entitled *Dos poylishe yidntum* (*Polish Judaism*). This first Yiddish version of his experience, *Und di welt hot geshvign* (*And the World Was Silent*), was not published as a stand-alone memoir like *La Nuit*, but rather as one among a growing number of Yiddish Holocaust memoirs published for a Jewish audience, most of whom it can be assumed no longer lived in Europe. Many Yiddish testimonies of the Holocaust were modeled after the local chronicle (*pinkes*) or memorial book (*yizker-bukh*), which featured catalogues of names, addresses and occupations. In addition, these Yiddish accounts were scrupulously detailed and tended to profess political motivations of some kind. Wiesel's *Und di welt hot geshvign*, which contains detailed history of Sighet and its residents and overt calls for revenge against the “German murders” and those who stood idly by follows these genre specific requirements.

The part of *La Nuit* and *Und di welt hot geshvign* that differs the most is the ending, which recounts the first time Wiesel sees his own reflection since he left the ghetto in 1944. *La Nuit* or *Night* ends with Wiesel's assertion that the image of the “corpse” gazing back at him has “never left [him].” Significantly, *Und di welt hot geshvign*'s final paragraph does not end there. It includes the statement that Wiesel began

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4 One reviewer of Turkov’s volume, as Seidman points out, found this series valuable because it included “useful historical material” regarding Yiddish theatre and other cultural phenomena destroyed by the Holocaust. Since he attempts to describe the degree to which Transylvanian Jews were ignorant of the coming destruction, Wiesel's account is no exception in its value to interested historians of Jewish life before World War II. See Seidman, p. 5.
the outline for his memoir while still recovering in Buchenwald, which contradicts Wiesel's later claim that he only began to write his story after “ten years of silence.” But perhaps more importantly, *Und di welt* includes overtly stated political hopes for the testimonies of survivors:

I see that the world is forgetting. Germany is now a sovereign state, the German army has been reborn. The bestial sadist of Buchenwald, Ilsa Koch, is happily raising her children. War criminals stroll the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past has been erased. Forgotten.⁵

As an act of rebellion against this forgetting, Wiesel “thought it would be a good idea to publish a book based on the notes [he] wrote in Buchenwald.” According to this account, what ultimately motivates Wiesel to recover from the abuse he suffered in Auschwitz was the rage that awakened his “will to live.”⁶ *Und di welt hot geshvign* depicts Wiesel gazing into since a mirror for the first time since entering the ghettos before breaking it with his fist. “The Yiddish survivor,” writes Seidman, “shatters that image” of the corpse “as soon as he sees it, destroying the deathly existence the Nazis willed on him. The Yiddish survivor is filled with rage and the desire to live, to take revenge, to write.”⁷ Seidman concludes that “There are two survivors, then, a Yiddish and a French—or perhaps we

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⁵ This is Seidman's translation of the original Yiddish text.
⁶ Translation Seidman. See “Jewish Rage,” 7-8.
⁷ Seidman, “Jewish Rage,” 8.
should say one survivor who speaks to a Jewish audience and one whose first reader is a French Catholic.”

Seidman suggests that while Wiesel finally gained the audience he wanted with Night, he may have done so only by “suppressing the very existence of this desire” and by allowing “the survivor who pointed the accusatory finger...[to be] supplanted by the survivor haunted by metaphysics and silence.”

One might—and many do-- glean from the pages of La Nuit that talking or writing about Auschwitz is impossible, and the only way to truly respect the suffering of it's innocent victims is to allow their experiences to remain ineffable. Yet Wiesel, to whom this point of view has often been attributed, has been anything but silent, and urges any survivors of undeserved suffering and violence to speak up as well. In fact, dialogue that happens in spite of everything is at the very heart of Wiesel's ethic, even if we cannot find this message as emphatically expressed in La Nuit as he has certainly expressed it elsewhere. It is easy to mis-categorize Wiesel as a thinker, and to overlook the defining features of his work when Night is considered the determinate, crowning jewel of his efforts. After all, Wiesel's approach to theology, mysticism and ethics have only just begun to develop in the pages of Night. If we are interested in looking beyond Wiesel's descriptions of the Holocaust as an event and search for how we might meaningfully proceed in light of the Holocaust, Night is not the best source for that information. Wiesel's value as a post-modern and contemporary Jewish thinker is better understood if we lavish even half as much attention on texts like The Trial of God, Souls on Fire, and

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
*Somewhere a Master,* as we have lavished on *Night.* Wiesel's essays and lectures, which also tend to receive less attention than his fiction, should also serve as an important part of any complete assessment of his thought. Seidman's observations about the significant differences between *Night* and *Und di welt hot geshvign* are meaningful because they remind us of the importance of audience, the difficulty of testimony and the difficulty of translating experience linguistically and politically.

Seidman's critics argue that claiming that *La Nuit* is in many ways fundamentally different from the testimony Wiesel wrote for fellow Jews is to accuse Wiesel's *La Nuit,* and even Wiesel himself, of inauthenticity. Wiesel himself—and quite unfairly—even made this accusation of Seidman's research.\(^{10}\) Authenticity is hardly the crux of Seidman's argument. Rather, she is making larger claims about the culture specificity of genre, identity politics, and language. She is quite careful to remind us that the content of the translated text was only lightly—albeit meaningfully—edited and that Wiesel's account of his *external* experience remains much the same. According to Seidman, it is Wiesel's account of his *internal* experience that changes in subtle ways, and these changes in part result in a text that is positioned within a literary genre whose readers were comprised of entirely different demographic. She claims that “…from the historical and political specificities of the Yiddish documentary testimony, Wiesel and his French

\(^{10}\) Seidman's work was also taken up by Holocaust deniers, who felt they had discovered a supporter of their cause in Seidman. Neither of these unforeseen responses were what Seidman intended. It is ironic that Holocaust deniers would fail to see that Seidman's attempts to deeply explore the complications of survivor accounts expressed support for the rage of survivors as legitimate and, as yet, still largely unheard.
publishing house fashioned something closer to mythopoetic narrative.”

Seidman is suggesting that in order to gain the non-Jewish audience to whom Wiesel wanted to tell his story, he had to reframe that story by means of a different genre altogether, a genre whose audience was much more likely to find Wiesel's unabashed rage as it is expressed in Und di welt threatening. So while there is no reason to assume that Wiesel's testimony as it is expressed in Und di welt or La Nuit is anything but factually authentic, the problems unrelated to factual authenticity to which Seidman draws attention make either text a problematic primary source for any investigation of Wiesel's ethics or his theology.

Second, Night (in all of its manifestations) is a testimony. It is not a novel or a midrash or a political essay, genres which are frequently used to explore ethical problems. And while one could certainly derive certain theological or ethical points of view from someone's testimony, the fact remains that testimony, as Seidman reminds us, is not a genre that is immune to the problem of audience. And Seidman is not alone in emphasizing this. This is by now a well-known point. The problem of telling the story of Auschwitz is complicated even further when survivors want to convey their experiences to anyone Jewish or non-Jewish who has never even been held against their will. This is a problem that survivors once faced with great frequency, but we tend to forget that fact in the twenty-first century, especially since the “Holocaust experience” is now a phenomenon people in the West have heard much about. Survivors who attempted to tell their stories faced additional ethical dilemmas beyond those of language and representation. Who should speak for the dead victims of the Nazis? And should the

survivors, who are also victims of the Nazis, be presented as merely victims? Should the compromising situations into which victims were forced be brought to light, as Primo Levi, Liana Millu and others did, or does such an act constitute a betrayal? Who is meant to judge what is said and not said? Would survivors reading the testimonies of others feel that these accounts should reflect their own experiences? Would non-survivors and non-Jews be interested in reading these texts, and if so, why?

Wiesel's Night did not discover a sizable audience nor did it successfully “cross over” to a non-Jewish audience until the mid-1960s. It is not clear whether Wiesel consciously chose to de-emphasize the rage experienced by Jewish survivors in favor of reaching a wider Christian (and otherwise non-Jewish) audience, but as Marc Ellis points out, Night has “earned a significant place in the post-Holocaust Christian world.” Ellis speculates that “...If Christianity had rejected the Holocaust as a claim on Christian conscience the Holocaust dead might have vanished from the memory of Western civilization.” Ellis also points out that in most forms of tragic literature, “there are places of redemption, but not in the Holocaust. Could the Holocaust,” he asks, “invest itself in literary hope?” Accordingly, Wiesel and others may have been—consciously or unconsciously-- expected by Christian audiences to “leave room for them to repent and affirm their own heritage. The difficult relationship between Jews and Christians had just culminated in the Holocaust...[but] writing on the Holocaust not only “precipitated a new, more positive encounter for Jews and Christians. It also served as a means for Christian

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renewal in the post-Holocaust era and secured Jewish life in America to an unprecedented degree.”

I disagree with Ellis' contention that Wiesel heavily weighed the concerns of “Christian” readers, even if La Nuit was edited with the goal of dampening down his rage. I think that Wiesel gave—and continues to give—far more thought to the survivors of the Holocaust and their children and grandchildren than to Christians and other non-Jews living in the wake of the Holocaust. In fact, as we shall discuss at length in part two of this chapter, this is a shortcoming of Wiesel's ethics. Wiesel never discusses how we might prevent the creation of perpetrators or how perpetrators may be rehabilitated. The innocent victims and the bystanders of the atrocities committed against the innocent are Wiesel only concerns. His success at “crossing over” to non-Jewish audiences can instead be attributed to his ability to show the value of Jewish thought, culture and practice to the broader Western world by pointing to the value of particular identity in general. Nonetheless, Ellis' broader point remains valid: Night has come to be understood as allowing it's non-Jewish readers to atone for the sin of anti-Semitism and to move forward into a new future, even if the author of the text does not intend to do so. The same could not be said for Und di welt hot geshvign. That text was written for Jews, and possibly even for Jewish survivors in particular, and expresses rage and contempt for the “German murderers” without compunction. And unlike Primo Levi and Liana Millu,

14 Ellis, “Jewish Future,” 27.
15 Such painstaking concern regarding the thoughts and feelings of a Christian (or Gentile) audience can more easily be attributed to Ellis' former teacher, Richard Rubenstein, whose work we will analyze in Chapter 4 of this study.
Wiesel kept silent on the morally questionable acts of fellow Jews he may have witnessed. Wiesel is on the side of the survivors, no matter what; Ellis' depiction of him as carefully contemplating how he might provide opportunities for “redemption” for non-Jews for the sins of the Holocaust is simply inaccurate.

To sum up, the role of Night in bringing the Holocaust to the fore of the literary, political and ethical imagination of the West is indispensable. The “job” of a testimony is complex and fraught with concerns and the authors of Holocaust testimonies are traumatized individuals whose concerns are multiple: perceived authenticity, reception, demographics of their audience or audiences, and remaining “loyal” to fellow victims to list only a few. But is not wise to found the lion's share of our understanding of Wiesel's thought on Night alone.

The Din Torah: Wiesel's Post-Holocaust Ethic

Wiesel’s work combines depictions of the absurd16 with traditional Jewish

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16 The term “absurd” has been defined in a number of ways in philosophical discourse. This project uses the term “absurd” in the Kierkegaardian sense: life is absurd because does not appear to have obvious, coherent meaning even though mankind desperately seeks it. This is quite different than life is absurd because it has no meaning at all and the universe is completely indifferent to human existence, as Sartre would later claim. Also, the Camusian description of the absurd as having been “born out of this confrontation between the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world” (The Myth of Sisyphus) can be found in much of Wiesel's work as well. Wiesel would also agree with Camus that the absurd “makes fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.” (Ibid). Understood in this more nuanced way, the idea that life is absurd places emphasis on the temporal world and man's responsibility for it rather than on the transcendent and its role in creation. In other words, absurdism neither confirms nor denies inherent, transcendent meaning. Instead, it focuses on the world of experience and on man's ability to make this world as just as possible.
imagery and narrative forms. Contrary to readings of Wiesel's work which overemphasize and misunderstand the role of silence in his work and thought, the absurdity of the world and the intrinsic meaninglessness it arguably indicates point neither to man's unbreachable separateness from man and creation, nor to a fundamental inability to communicate. Rather, because life is absurd, man must by means of his free will *choose* to develop not only shared meaning but shared ethics as a defense against the murderous abyss created by fanatical ideologies and the undeserved suffering they create. Hope is possible only when “the silence of the world,” as Albert Camus once said, and as Wiesel would later say, “the silence of God” are met with mankind's sincere interrogation and protest, and action even when no concrete solutions to man's suffering are forthcoming. Put another way, humankind's silence in the face of tyranny and underserved suffering is not inevitable. If Wiesel's work can be said to constitute a single project it is to rescue ethics from the ideological malaise and loss of innocence that define life after Auschwitz, but not by denying that the world is absurd. Rather, he insists that the world has *always* been absurd. For Wiesel, the centuries-long history of Jewish persecution in Europe and of the persecution of other minority groups around the world is proof of the fact that human experience is not monolithic and that the problem of useless human suffering is not new.

While Wiesel could not be considered an absurdist by trade for many reasons, he incorporates salient aspects of absurdism's approach to ethical obligation and the power of meaning in human communities. Not unlike Camus, Wiesel insists that the silence of the world must be met with protest, if for no other reason than the ethical climate of
human society is in our control and is therefore our responsibility. Of course Wiesel's inclusion of God in the absurdist landscape is not unique, and other thinkers like him who are representative of existentialism also feel that belief in God and religious practice are not antithetical to philosophical absurdism, particularly as defined by Kierkegaard and Camus. What makes Wiesel’s thought unique is that he grounds ethics in suffering.

For Wiesel, it is not only the storyteller who is expected to engage in and advocate for ethical activity. Wiesel would agree with Jean-Paul Sartre's claims that a reader must engage with any story ethically by bringing “the gift of his whole person...[including] his scale of values.”\(^\text{17}\) Only then can the listener judge whether what she hears is ethical or unethical. Then she must decide if her future actions will be altered in light of the new understanding gained through her engagement with the story. Stories are often, in the words of Daniel Taylor, “flares sent into the night sky.”\(^\text{18}\) Taylor states that “a reader's willingness to empathize with characters in a narrative or the speaker in a poem is itself a moral act...as is the writer's willingness to portray at least some of the characters sympathetically...It is parallel to attending to the story of a friend.”

The implicit hope of the “oppressed writer,” according to Taylor, is that true empathy and understanding can be created between people if only “the story [is told] well enough.”\(^\text{19}\) Wiesel, who Taylor considers an “oppressed writer,” has expressed that he feels he has a story to tell that he tells and retells, only to feel he hasn't gotten it “right” yet. It is not the

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.
“facts” of his experiences that he hopes to get “right.” This is especially true because most of his texts are fiction. What Wiesel struggles with is the delivery of the moral imperative his stories are intended to deliver.

Taylor argues that the relationship between literature and ethics is the strongest in “the literature of oppressed,” which he defines as “literature that arises out of and is a conscious response to dehumanization and the denial of individual value.” According to Taylor, “this literature covers a great variety of writings and writers and historical contexts” but in spite of these variances contain “recurring emphases and strategies...[which] link these otherwise divergent works, each with profound ethical implications.” Taylor identifies these three emphases as:

1. The concept of “telling ones story, both one's own and the community's”; Taylor rightly frames this shared strategy as itself an act of hope, especially since this claim relies on the notion that it is an “ethical responsibility to listen to these stories, and to listen without prejudgment.” Telling one's story is complicated by the frequent expectation that these stories be told in “the public language,” or what Adrienne Rich called “the language of the oppressor”20 which may not even contain references to the concepts and experiences the storyteller is attempting to describe.21 The experiences of the oppressed are not a part of mainstream discourse—and I would argue that these


21 Wiesel once said, “I believe that the subjects I try to deal with, at least in some of my books, are beyond language, so I have to find a new language. The story defies imagination, so I have to invent a new kind of imagination.” Franciosi, Shaffer and Wiesel, “An Interview With Elie Wiesel,” 290.
experiences are not a part of philosophical discourse, either— but telling one's story can change language itself since the storyteller may be required to develop new terminology or adapt existing terminology, thereby changing cultural and ethical expectations of human behavior. Storytellers like Wiesel might also face the problem of translation from one's mother tongue into other languages from other cultures. For Wiesel, telling one's story of survival involves rejecting the pressure to be silent by insisting that only talking, telling, and listening can heal the sufferer and the sick or broken society that has unfairly forced him to suffer. The telling of one's story can therefore heal society and its victims.

2. An unembarrassed appeal to moral criteria; In Taylor's words, “Simply put, this literature is not cowed by fashionable contemporary relativism. It frequently invokes standards of right and wrong which would be an embarrassment for...many academics and shapers of contemporary culture, except for the irony that these claims are coming from people whom these same academics support on political and social grounds in their calls for justice.” Like Mendelssohn-Maoz, Taylor claims that the tendency to guard against mixing morals and literature often makes academics nervous. But Taylor adds that the “literature of the oppressed” creates even greater anxiety than a philosophical novel written by a member of the majority group might, in part because in the West “moral order they appeal to has often been the Judeo-Christian one, broadly conceived” in which these oppressed minorities are, in spite of
their “seeming powerlessness” are often seen as “representatives of moral order.”

They are, in biblical terms, prophet-like in that they are often outsiders who suffer, and who suffer even more because they are driven to deliver a prophetic imperative which most of society is likely to ignore. His or her delivery of the message of man's responsibility for his fellow man might even bring about more suffering for the prophet. And yet in the Western tradition, the prophetic imperative must be delivered—and will be ignored at the mainstream majority's peril. As we will discuss in greater depth momentarily, Wiesel's works rely heavily on the role of the suffering victim as a kind of prophet who delivers messages we might not want to hear. And finally,

3. The emphasis on community. This sense of community “gives writers a feeling of mission not often found among other contemporary writers.” These writers frequently feel they are helping to perpetuate the survival of their entire people—or at least the communities they grew up in—by means of their writing. Especially in writing of Und di welt hot geshvign, the first version of Wiesel's Holocaust memoir, Wiesel sought to preserve the history and memory of not only his little town but also his people as he remembered them before the catastrophe. Yet Wiesel's drive to preserve his people runs throughout his work. The world of Shamgorod in The Trial of God may be fictionalized, but the preservation of Jewish history, culture and tradition as it took shape in Eastern Europe—a world now long gone—was another

22 Ibid.
important goal of the play.

Although Taylor's interest lies more in arguing that the marriage of ethics and literature does not create a substandard literature, Taylor's project also focuses on the usefulness of literature as a tool for ethicists. Taylor's work also helps us to place Wiesel within a tradition of oppressed writers and storytellers in the West who have used literature in much the same way he has. The “literature of the oppressed,” because it is concerned with the dissemination of ethics, is a vital part of the existing tradition of “philosophical literature” to which novels like Camus' *The Plague*, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* also belong. The “literature of the oppressed,” to continue to use Taylor's term, is both continuous with the broader tradition of philosophical literature at the same time that it disrupts it by interrogating traditional philosophical assumptions and forms by insisting that the genre of philosophical ethics does not—but should—typically include minority voices and experiences.

Wiesel uses opposing forces of stasis and disruption in order to portray the painful absurdity of senseless human suffering and the ongoing ethical crisis it creates as continuous in human history. *The Trial of God* in particular consciously employs conventional ways of conveying meaning while simultaneously preventing the reader from denying the potentially inherent meaninglessness of man's position. The argument that the absurd is fundamental to human experience but nonetheless worth fighting
against requires history because proving repetition of political and philosophical patterns which create and justify human suffering requires hindsight. In The Trial of God, history is used to contextualize the absurdity of the present. The greatest challenge of such a world-view, especially for someone like Wiesel who defines the Holocaust as a historically unique event in history lies in allowing the present time its unparalleled place in the trajectory of history without denying the eternal nature of the human struggle against the absurd.

Conversations among Jewish thinkers regarding the Holocaust have, in accordance with Jewish tradition, automatically been framed by larger questions regarding disruption and continuity in both history and covenant. But World War II and the Holocaust can be seen as the single most devastating event in modern general European history as well. European romantic nationalism, especially as it developed in Germany, bred a modern fascism that threatened to become the new ethical center of a damaged Europe. These realities shaped the philosophical and political landscape to a great extent for Jews and non-Jews alike. Wiesel began his studies in secular philosophy

\[23\] For a relatively recent exploration of Nazi ‘ethics,’ see The Nazi Conscious by Claudia Koonz (Cambridge, MA, 2003), referred to in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. She makes the persuasive argument that Nazis did indeed possess an “ethic,” that is, a plan for rightness of action supported by a carefully developed moral framework. Koonz argues that the race ethic was central to Nazi thought, making any action in defense of the preservation of his “race” and “nation” a moral act that superseded all other acts in worth and value. See also the compelling work of David Redles on this subject: Hitler’s Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation (New York, 2005). Redles’ work is powerfully convincing and explores the messianic and millennial aspects of Nazism that many scholars have left unexplored. The slaughter that took place during the resulting war far surpassed even the worst of expectations set by the horrific precedent of the Great War: By 1945, an estimated 55 million lives were lost world wide as a result of death camps, POW camps, ghettos, concentration camps and battles in two theaters. Please see http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm for an efficient break down of lives lost to battles fought in both theaters along side estimates of numbers of lives lost the Holocaust. This site also includes a helpful bibliography of recent texts that include statistics regarding total number of lives lost during World War II.
at the Sorbonne in 1948, the year after Camus finished writing *The Plague*, where he says he “devoured books on philosophy and psychology…” and went to hear “Sartre and Buber...lecture on religious existentialism.” Wiesel was immersed in the very tradition Camus was helping to create. The most popular philosophical approaches of the time, phenomenology and existentialism, were not felt to be in direct opposition with modern Jewish identity and practice—at least, not by everyone. In the meantime, Wiesel also continued his Jewish studies, and earned extra money by teaching young boys Talmud.

Camus, whom Wiesel acknowledges as having deeply influenced him as a writer and a thinker, also uses shared human experiences of oppression and violence from both contemporary times and recorded history to create an ethic which can be shared among diverse groups of people. Camus uses French national history specifically and European history in general to explore the ethical implications of France's prolonged cooperation with Nazis and the power of fascism in twentieth century Europe. *The Plague* offers an ethic that relies on leftwing, post-colonialist—and even, in its own way, religious and theological—sensibilities to provide some kind of organizing principle around which atheists and the religious might unite. For Camus, the bubonic plague (rather than a raging pogrom) becomes a metaphor for the sweeping de-humanization of fascism and

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26 A great deal of secondary literature has been written regarding Camus’s political beliefs and activities. Some critics do not see Camus as at all post-colonialist, and cite his reluctance to support the Algerian revolution as proof of his colonialist mentality. Others disagree. To explore this aspect of Camus’s personal life further, please see Emily Apter, “Out of Character: Camus’s French Algerian Subjects,” *MLN* 112, no. 4, French Issue (Sept., 1997): 499-516, and David Carroll, “Camus’s Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People,” *MLN* 112, no. 4, French Issue (Sept., 1997): 517-549.
genocide that took over much of the world that is a unique manifestation—a genetic
mutation, if you will—of the ever-present possibility of the re-emergence of other
plague-like diseases of social collapse, despair, and abject brutality that permeate human
history. Since France’s own relationship with the plague is intimate and longstanding,
Camus is not unique in his use of plague history and plague metaphors to illustrate
political and philosophical points of view. 27 The visibility of the plague in French culture
and the terminology often utilized to describe its horrendous symptoms (including the
feverish madness renown for de-humanizing its victims even more than its buboes did)
created a language that could also be used to discuss Europe’s social, political, and
ethical concerns. 28 For Camus as well the plague becomes a symbol of the absurd and of
undeserved human suffering against which human beings must actively band together if
they want to make life meaningful—and therefore worth living. The act of doing rather
than the act of searching, Camus argues, is the source of happiness, and happiness that
comes from engaging with others is the source of real meaning 29.

Wiesel's work shares this belief in the inevitability of undeserved suffering, man's
inescapable responsibility for his fellow man, the invaluable role of communal identity
and meaning, and the power of friendship. Both The Trial of God and The Plague create
new ethics from the ruins of the old because they write about periods of ethical collapse.
The liminality of such events is devastating, but are also ripe with possibility, especially

27 In 1630, French writer Raymond Besard calls the Black Plague “the prototype of all inhumanity.”
Besard, Raymond, Discours de la Peste (Dole, 1630). Found in Paul Delsalle, La Franche-Comté au
temps des archiducs Albert et Isabelle: 1598-1633, Collection Didactiques (Besançon, France: Presses
Universitaires Franc-Comtoises, 2008), 156.
28 Ibid.
since the “liminal” can be defined as a threshold between here and elsewhere, a bridge representing a blurring of the possible and the actual. *The Trial of God* is based on a real *din torah* with God that took place in Auschwitz. Wiesel writes that he was a witness to the trial, and describes having watched silently for several nights as three Jewish scholars put God on trial. At the conclusion of the trial, God was found guilty of crimes against creation and humankind.\(^{30}\) In several of Wiesel's earlier texts, trials also figure prominently, often to underline the centrality of man's role as guardian of God's Law—a law code which in Judaism deals with both religious and civil law—especially when God appears absent or is Himself in violation of that Law. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, according to many strains of post-Holocaust Jewish thought, God promised so many years ago that the children of Abraham could count on His protection but did not keep His promise when the Nazis waged their war against European Jewry. In the most literal sense, He broke the very covenant upon which all of Judaism is built. Even more disruptive is the gaping wound the death camps left in the fabric of the human universe.

What has become of the crown of God’s creation? If humans are such beasts, then what is God? *Where* is God? In such a context, liminality also makes us aware of the nightmare of our own human potential for base cruelty and our abject helplessness and utter dependence on the unreliable good will of man.

Wiesel, who feels he struggles to “get it right,” finally wrote about the *din torah* in Auschwitz in *The Trial of God* in 1979, a play that operates as a kind of *Purimschpiel*

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within a Purimschpiel. But why is Purim the best time for such a tale? Purim is the Jewish holiday most characterized by the ambiguity, openness, and the indeterminacy of true liminality. On that day, boundaries fall away and are then re-drawn. So along with blurring the lines between good and bad, self and other, Purim also allows for the negation of traditional categories. While the Sefer ha-Mo’adim cautions us that, “Fever is no sickness and Purim is no holiday,” we cannot help but be reminded that the dangerous, boundary-less space of the liminal cannot hold forever. This temporary dissolution of everyday identity brings about a disorientation that, theoretically, makes anything possible. So what better day to put the Holy One on trial? If we are brave enough, out of the sloppy realization that boundaries and limits are social creations comes the real possibility of new ethics, new dialogues, and new selves. The deepest pit of despair can also, incredibly, offer the opportunity for speech, for new acceptance, even for new ethics constructed out of the ashes of the old.

It is precisely these things Wiesel attempts to illustrate with his Purimschpiel. Wiesel’s trial has no unrealistic designs on ending human suffering. At best, perhaps, it aims to impact human response to undeserved suffering. God is not even expected to show up and bluster about as He did when Job accused Him so long ago. The Trial of God explores the horror of the Holocaust specifically by exploring both the broader history of the senseless suffering created by anti-Semitic violence.\(^{31}\) In so doing, Wiesel

\(^{31}\) Wiesel’s use of history submerges readers and audience members in an ongoing conversation about what David W. Weiss calls the “earlier holocausts” in Jewish history (murder of Jews in the Rhineland in the eleventh century, for example). Both Wiesel and Weiss see these events as crucial parts of a long trajectory that eventually led to the unparalleled brutality of the twentieth century Holocaust. Like Weiss, Wiesel sees the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, the murder of innocent Jews in European
insists that there have always been bystanders and massacres of innocents in human history, even if the Holocaust is a “mutation” and therefore unlike what has come before it. In other words, although God is the defendant in Wiesel’s trial, *The Trial of God* is really about man, the creature made in God’s complicated and troublesome image. Wiesel's seventeenth century characters may gnash their teeth over the absence of God but they place the responsibility for the prevention of human suffering squarely onto the shoulders of man. The trial is not concluded at the end of the play because the reader is to have no illusions that the real-world conditions that warranted the trial have disappeared—or ever will, for that matter. Elsewhere, Wiesel stated that “...society has not changed [since the Holocaust]...but one person? That's enough...” And so the trial’s value lies not in its conclusion but in the fact of its having happened at all. The dialogue of the trial, shaped and guided by ethics, must, in the end, be enough to help humanity survive the next Holocaust.

But how can any ethics that cannot promise to stave off future resurgence of utter

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33 See Robert McAfee Brown, *Messenger to All Humanity*, 163 for Wiesel’s assertions about the impossibility of “easy denial” and “easy belief” for people who live consciously. Wiesel often claims, as he does here, that the best questions don’t have answers. Here Wiesel positions himself as post-modern—more interested in eternal questions than in eternal answers.
34 Franciosi, Shaffer and Wiesel, “An Interview With Elie Wiesel,” 293.
35 While Wiesel specifically draws on halakhic regulations for court proceedings, Maria the gentile’s loyalty to Berish and his daughter shape a significant part of the landscape of the play. That she is considered a moral character whom herself was wronged in love by a Jewish man suggests that Wiesel hopes for a universal human ethic grounded firmly in the best Judaism has to offer and to which Judaism—as well as other traditions—could continue to contribute. This universal ethics has everything to do with the governing of diverse communities who agree to abstain from abusing one another in exchange for the right to practice their particular religions and philosophies unmolested.
destruction—and Wiesel's ethics certainly does not—be worthwhile? In Wiesel's own words, “I do not like to offer false hope. Why do it?” What matters, he would claim, is the way in which he ends his tales. Wiesel states that “…there's still a question mark. [My stories] end...on a question mark.” An absurdist ethics does not necessarily reject universal truths but it does reject transcendent absolutes that claim to provide unquestionable assertions regarding beyond those confirmed by shared experience. After all, Wiesel continues to champion much of the ethics prized by traditional Judaism. Ultimately, though, he relies on humankind's experience of its shared condition as the only thing we can really be certain about, the only thing we can do something about, rather than on an omnipotent God who is expected to intervene in history to prevent undeserved suffering, or on a monolithic state whose judicial aim is always true. Wiesel does not claim that God is not omnipotent, nor just, nor benevolent, although his work continuously problematizes these traditional notions of God. Instead, he shifts the focus of the conversation from theology and the essence of God—something he would claim we cannot state with certainty—to human practice, the nature of God's Law and our responsibility to uphold it in the temporal world.

So while Wiesel's ethics are derived in part from Judaism, a technically non-absurdist tradition, he simultaneously forsakes reliance on something outside of or above individual human agency to provide the foundation for the ethics he promotes, a point of supported by some streams of traditional Judaism as well. Herein lies the usefulness of an ethics based primarily on shared experience that nonetheless makes use of traditional

36 Franciosi, Shaffer and Wiesel, “An Interview With Elie Wiesel,” 299.
narratives and forms: it can be used to urge mankind toward assuaging suffering without requiring him to believe in God or to rely on God or his fellow man to act first. This ethics, rather than traditional notions of monolithic truths, provides meaning because it is derived from shared experience. In *The Trial of God*, characters and narratives integral to the Western biblical tradition bridge the gap between traditional ethical foundations and the notion that the world is absurd—a perspective we have come to associate with the post-Holocaust landscape. Wiesel successfully uses Job and the age-old discussions surrounding his plight as the foot of his ethical compass. Few texts written in the Western world that treat the theme of undeserved human suffering fail to discuss and somehow utilize the story of Job. Wiesel's use of Job is particularly interesting because *The Book of Job* is arguably one of Western literature’s earliest forays into the absurd.

Wiesel here and elsewhere uses Job’s story to openly refute the Deuteronomistic approach to suffering in favor of an alternative anti-theodicy approach that urges


For a well known discussion of Holocaust survivors as modern day Job, see Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 4-5; see ibid., 5 and 68-69 for the necessity of the faith of “Job’s brother” (i.e. the Jewish non-survivor) in light of the suffering of the “Job of the Gas Chambers.” This short bibliography does not even begin to do justice to the thousands of pages of discourse dealing with Job and the way in which his suffering—and his respectful but questioning spirit continues to resonate with human beings.

38 See Zachary Braiterman's *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish
mankind to take responsibility preventing and easing his fellow man’s suffering.

Job's story begins as a treatise on the importance of correct and upright behavior, with Job as the perfect example. Job is a “good” man and is subsequently rewarded. Job believes that being “good” works. The reader is plunged into the abyss of the absurd when God and Satan\(^\text{39}\) enter the story. After chatting with Satan like a gossip in the marketplace, the Almighty is goaded into doubting Job's faith and love for him, and readily hands Job over to Satan for purposes of experimentation. God’s ego allows Him to be a bystander to the suffering He gave Satan the permission to inflict. The Almighty appears shallow, insecure, vain, weak and starved for love. Job’s behavior continues to outshine God’s when, in the course of one day, all of Job’s children and their flocks are ruthlessly slaughtered as part of God’s bet with Satan. Job does not “cast reproach on God.” Instead, he throws himself on the ground and worships.\(^\text{40}\) But God doesn’t seem to live up Job’s praise of Him. When God and Satan meet again, God merely sputters and fumes,\(^\text{41}\) and is convinced to allow Satan to continue to test Job, insisting only that Job’s life must be spared. Soon Job is covered in “severe inflammation” while his wife urges him to “curse God and die.”\(^\text{42}\) Job angrily replies that they should accept both “good” and

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\(^{39}\) In Hebrew, the term “ha-Satan” means “the adversary.” The image of Satan as a kind of demon or devil in direct warfare with God is not native to the Jewish tradition, but developed out Christianity as it evolved in Europe. In the story of Job, Satan operates not as a devil or a supernatural being with his own kingdom, but as a foil or adversary to man, God's favored creature. The Satan who makes an appearance in Wiesel's play is depiction is likewise an adversary of man and not a demon or devil.

\(^{40}\) “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord,” Job, 1:20.

\(^{41}\) Job, 2:3.

\(^{42}\) Job 2:9. The words of Job’s wife are problematic in translation (and even in the original Hebrew).
“evil” from God. This is the first time we are reminded that Job sees a depth to God’s character that his friends and family—and perhaps even his own religious tradition—can sometimes miss.

When Job’s friends, known as “the comforters” come to sit shiva with him, the story takes an intriguing turn. Job is so transformed by his suffering that even his three closest friends “did not recognize him.” Job’s suffering had transformed him into someone—or something—so completely different from the man they knew that they are silenced. The enormity of Job’s losses and the apparent pointlessness of his suffering render the entire experience ineffable. No one says a word for seven days and nights. The story then takes an intriguing turn. The enormity of Job’s losses and the apparent pointlessness of his suffering render the entire experience ineffable: no one says a word for seven days and nights. The story's use of silence in the immediate aftermath of tragedy followed by urgent demands for dialogue also makes Job's tale useful for Wiesel's purposes, especially since Job's silence is not permanent. In fact what follows his silence is a deluge of discourse. Job shakes his fists and weeps and roars his doubts and questions and disappointment at anyone in proximity. It hardly seems to matter whether those nearby listen. What matters is that Job is talking and that someone might eventually talk back.

Job never learns of God’s cheap bet with Satan, but the reader cannot forget it; it

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The Hebrew word she uses does not mean “curse.” She uses the word for “bless”—ךרב. At any rate, Job responds to her as though she has spoken against God in some way, and the passage in traditionally interpreted as translated above.

43 Job, 2:10.
44 Job 3:1.
is too absurd, too morally outrageous, even for God. What can it mean that God sought to spare Job’s life, while destroying everything that gave Job’s life meaning? Any traditional explanation based on notions of God’s omnipotence and complete goodness is absolutely absurd. For example, when Eliphaz the Temanite insists that if Job is suffering, he must have sinned, Job cannot accept it, and states angrily, “I will not speak with restraint...I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.” Job reminds God that He has broken His end of the bargain. Like Wiesel, Job threatens that if God cannot forgive Job his small iniquities—iniquities yet to be made clear, even—Job will forsake his end of the bargain, too. Job then begins a makeshift trial devoted solely to debate. For how long, Job wants to know, will it be allowed for God to break the very rules He has insisted men follow for His sake? Is it an act of love to allow God to break His own rules, or is it self-deception and weakness? “See now,” says Job to God in 13:17, “I have prepared a case; I know that I will win it.”

We enter The Trial of God, Wiesel’s “anti-theodic” Job story, after Berish—Wiesel's Job-- and his daughter Hannah have become the sole Jewish survivors of Shamgorod. We are not firsthand witnesses to their undeserved pain, humiliation and loss, and unlike his biblical predecessor, Berish’s fortunes have not been restored. There are other marked differences between Wiesel’s more modern Job and the ancient Job as well. Berish and his severely traumatized daughter are the sole survivors of a pogrom that destroyed their entire community, not just their family; Berish’s “comforters” do not

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45 Job 4:7-11.
46 Job 7:11.
appear until the one year anniversary of the pogrom, and, notably these comforters are fellow survivors of their own undeserved, unspeakable traumas, not Deuteronomistic mouthpieces;\textsuperscript{47} Lastly, God never shows up, even to threaten and storm about. But Satan, the only character who is willing to play God’s defense attorney, does make a lengthy appearance. Satan, known as Sam\textsuperscript{48} in Wiesel's story, takes up the role of the Deutoronomist by claiming that, because he is alive and well, Berish is a recipient of God’s grace rather than a victim of His indifference and ineptitude. These key differences between the narrative of \textit{The Trial of God} and the narrative of the \textit{Book of Job} illustrate how Wiesel develops an ethics of engagement out of the wreckage of meaningless collective suffering in a way that is both theologically orthodox and innovative.

\textit{The Trial of God} differs in these key ways from its proof text because it emphasizes human, rather than divine grace. Job is given some recompense (such as it is) by God, but receives no real support or kindness from humankind. In fact Job is gracious on God's behalf even when it is arguably undeserved. Berish has been living as a lone survivor of a minority community; his life is absent of real dialogue with peers who

\textsuperscript{47} Wiesel's ethic tends to emphasize the experience of victims and how their experiences can be shared for the sake of individual and communal healing. Wiesel notes that in his earliest years as a writer, his motivation was to get survivors to speak out, not only for the sake of their own spiritual and mental health, but for the sake of society as a whole. He felt very strongly that if they told their stories, people would surely listen and try to prevent further atrocities. See Rittner, \textit{Between Memory and Hope}, 12. Over the years, he became less certain that people were indeed listening and would in turn try to prevent future suffering, however. See part two of his memoirs, \textit{And the Sea is Never Full}.

\textsuperscript{48} Wiesel chose the name Sam as a reference to the figure of Samael, who appears in various Jewish texts and pieces of folklore over the centuries. Most but not all of these sources consider Samael to be the major name of Satan. The name first appears in the Ethiopian \textit{Book of Enoch} 6. The name stems from the root of the word סמי meaning “blind.” Samael serves as a tempter, the Angel of Death, the leader of all the demons, and the creature responsible for bringing death and poison to the world. Note that in Wiesel's tale, the words of the “tempter” figure are the Deuteronomistic messages which aim to convince the innocent that they are guilty.
share his experiences. Though he is never granted a new wife and children as an apology from God, the *Purimschpielers* provide human grace and much needed engagement with the survivors of the pogroms. The main action of the play is not the *din torah*, but the rest of the dialogue around which all the other secondary action occurs. The longer the *Purimschpielers* manage to continue drinking at the Inn, the more Berish and his Gentile worker Maria share about the grisly history of their lives in Shamgorod. The more Berish divulges, the more each fellow survivor—including Maria, who survives a different undeserved humiliation—admits to feelings of shame, grief, despair and extreme isolation. After a series of moody silences when “everyone remembers his own experiences”49 we finally hear something about Berish’s life before the fateful pogrom:

…Before, it was different—I was different. The sap of the earth enriched my own; the blood of the world flowed in my veins. I loved my steady, faithful customers…I was happy and I liked seeing happiness around me…I loved to give. Why not?...And God in all this? You want to hear the truth? It happened that He would touch me, on the shoulder, as if to remind me: See Berish—I exist! I, too, exist! Then I would give Him something just to make Him happy…And so, both of us satisfied, we would go on with our separate, daily routines…I hardly thought of Him; now I do—and I hate myself for it!50

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49 Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 44.  
50 Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 45.
The men continue to dig deeply into one another's memories, mimicking the structure of the *Book of Job* while simultaneously reinventing it, making it into the tale of a suffering people who feel abandoned even by God. When Berish asks Mendel why he does not fear God, who in Berish’s opinion has so clearly positioned Himself on “the side of the enemy,” Mendel insists that it is “Man” who “steals and kills,” not God. Mendel’s emphasis on human rather than divine cruelty serves as a turning point in the play: the action moves out of a past marked by the shamed silence of victimhood and into the present of the active cacophony of engagement in spite of continued suffering.

From here, the *Book of Job* and *The Trial of God* differ radically. When God finally shows himself to Job, He offers no apology, and provides no real answers to Job heartfelt questions. Instead, He provides a lengthy list of His many skills as Master of the Universe. He employs the same argument in His own defense that the comforters had offered up before: divine justice is not comprehensible to humans; humans are mere creatures while God is the source of all life and being. Job suffered because he needed discipline (and not, as the reader well knows, because God needed to prove something to Satan). When God finally thunders, “Shall one who should be disciplined complain against Shaddai? He who arraigns God must respond!” Job is left to answer for his own actions because, after all, God is God and Job is Job. Job’s words are as follows:

> Indeed, I spoke without understanding Of things beyond me, which I did

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52 Job, 40:2.
not know…Therefore I recant and relent, Being but dust and ashes.\(^{53}\)

God does restore his wealth and position, and provides him with children equal in number to those he had already lost. God also punishes the comforters because they did not speak “the truth” about Him,\(^{54}\) even though it’s unclear how the comforters’ defense of God is significantly different from the excuses God made on His own behalf. God never mentions the bet with Satan and never takes responsibility for Job’s plight, and the reader is left with the horrible weight of that knowledge. God allows Job to believe that he needed and deserved the “discipline.” God's actions are unjust, at least in the human sense of the word.

God never even shows up in Shamgorod. The *Purimschpielers* insist that God have an attorney to represent Him, but one by one, the men refuse. Wiesel’s constructed trial takes yet another crucial turn when Berish is asked if he is speaking as Berish the prosecutor or Berish the innkeeper and Berish responds, “Berish is Berish…I am I. Isn’t that enough for you?”\(^{55}\) Berish has responded almost exactly as God did when Moses asked Him for His name, “I am that I am.” Allusions to a kind of similarity or sympathy between Berish and God don’t end there. When Maria describes Berish’s response to watching the brutal rape of his daughter during the first pogrom, Berish sounds uncannily like the suffering God to whom Wiesel has referred more directly in other writings. This God is a loving father bound by His own creation as His children torture one another

\(^{53}\) Job, 42, 3-6.

\(^{54}\) Job, 42:8.

before His eyes. The text suggests that just as Berish was helpless to save Hannah, God might have also been helpless to save His people. This comparison serves as a reminder of the notion that man was made in God’s image, but Wiesel takes this fairly common reminder that we are made in God's image even further. He asserts that God shares our suffering as much as we share many of His perfections and faults. Moreover, we share at least some—if not most—of the responsibility for the protection of Creation.

But again the play, even the trial—Job's trial, Berish's trial or the din torah in Auschwitz Wiesel has described numerous times-- is not really about God, or at least not only about God. It is about humanity. Wiesel's Mendel tells us, “The verdict will be announced by someone else, at a later stage. For the trial will continue—without us.” The important thing about the trial is not the verdict, but the continuity of the trial itself, the willingness to interrogate both our Creator and ourselves, and the commitment to remaining in dialogue. Engagement—and verbal engagement in particular—is the ethical act par excellence. This imagery also suggests that we are as mysterious to God as He is to us, precisely because we share many of His perfections and, likewise, many of His faults, and that moreover God needs us. Wiesel uses the tragedy of the European pogroms in tandem with the story of Job to address timeless ethical and theological issues made more even more immediate by the catastrophe of the Holocaust: When things fall apart, is it God’s fault or ours? Does catastrophe always indicate God has failed us, or does it mean we have failed the whole of Creation? The trial represents our willingness

56 Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 106-107
57 Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 158.
to interrogate both our Creator and ourselves. According to this model, the goal of dialogue is not agreement but connection.

_The Trial of God_ is primarily concerned with the survival of the victims, and Wiesel's ethics certainly begins with and is founded on the experience of victims. In fact, his ethical system would almost cease to exist in a society without victims of serious persecution. For reasons we will explore in a moment, this is in part due to Wiesel's understanding of Judaism and Jewish sources. For Wiesel, the ethical imperative is called for _because of_ the experiences of innocent victims, and it is an ethical act to tell one's story of victimization for several reasons. First, those victims who did not survive will live on in memory if the witnesses to their demise tell the world what happened, not once but many times. Demanding dignity for the dead victims of atrocity keeps the remembrance of the atrocity in temporal terms. Real lives were lost, real people suffered unfairly, and real children never lived to see adulthood.

Next, the survivor himself is charged with telling the truth of their suffering because as witnesses to and victims of atrocities, they should work toward the prevention of further undeserved suffering. Commitment to this task provides meaning for the sufferer and for her listeners. According to Wiesel, anyone who hears the story of a victim is also in turn charged with this duty, the completion of which is a moral act. And finally, the victim must speak because his or her experience is a reminder of humanity's role as a steward of a troubled creation. The victim’s questions are humanity's questions, and his suffering, however unique to his particular experience, is nonetheless representative of humanity's suffering and confusion. Talking about one's suffering eases
the suffering of others, connects us with others and, subsequently, provides meaning. Wiesel asserts that an ethic of engagement capable of operating across religious, racial, and ethnic lines is not only possible but also necessary. Engagement with other humans is the only thing that can guarantee meaning and the only thing that might stem the ubiquitous primal tide of violence in human culture. As Wiesel stated in 1987, “...violence is simply another form of language. When the ordinary language has no more role to play, then people resort to violence. As long as we can talk we don't hit each other.”

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**God in Wiesel's Ethic**

We might well ask, to quote Mendel from *The Trial of God*: “And God in all this?” Wiesel's God is omnipresent even when we cannot find Him. For Wiesel it is possible, and in fact sane, to affirm the existence of God while maintaining our right to openly express our rage and disapproval when we feel God ignores, allows or even creates meaningless human suffering. Wiesel pushes believers to relieve God of the entire burden of human’s suffering by remembering their own part of the covenant: God’s moral law is still the law even when God does not—or perhaps cannot—uphold it. Instead of wrestling exclusively with the question, “Why did God let the Holocaust happen?” Wiesel attempts to deal with the more temporal and ethical question regarding what we should do now that the Holocaust happened and God seemed to be nowhere.

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Remaining morally responsible for self and other is humanity’s most important job, especially when God Himself appears neither concerned nor engaged. If we wait for God to act first, says Wiesel, we might very well remain reprehensibly paralyzed just when our fellow man—and God—needs us most. According to Wiesel, commitment to the ethical and moral imperatives of ancient contracts should bind humans to one another as much as they bind us to God, if not more. Wiesel has no illusions that the world will be peaceful, but he does seem to hope that wars and other atrocities could be less horrific if we adopt an ethic that operates *in spite of* the constant uncertainty caused by absurdity and in spite of what we know about the volatile nature of humanity. Wiesel’s *The Trial of God* pleads for meaning-making, ethics-building, and moral responsibility *despite* God.

For many, especially those unfamiliar with Jewish theology, Wiesel's assertions, particularly because they borrow heavily from twentieth century absurdism, might seem antinomian. But this simultaneous utilization of post-modern philosophy and traditional Jewish learning is not unusual in modern and contemporary Jewish thought. It is in fact a defining trait of the genre. While traditional Judaism can be interpreted as subscribing to the idea that all life’s structure and meaning are derived strictly from a divine Torah, as

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59 This concept is central to the thought of Hermann Cohen, whose most well known work, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, focuses entirely on the role of correlation between God and man and man and man in the ethical constructs of Judaism. Cohen very much believed that Judaism’s mission was to spread ethical monotheism throughout the non-Jewish world. He does this even as he neutralizes the intolerance that often typifies monotheistic theology and practice. For more on Cohen's work, see chapter 1 of this study and the accompanying footnotes.

60 Please see Peter J. Haas’s *Morality After Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) for an excellent analysis of *The Trial of God* as a demand for the end of bystanderism. I agree with Haas when he asserts that in *The Trial of God*, Wiesel unequivocally claims that “to abdicate our own moral response and so to accept the atrocities committed on earth is to align ourselves with evil. Only when people recognize their moral duty and do it no matter what, even despite God, is there hope for universal redemption,” 227.
Josephine Knopp points out, this perception may be “accurate” in the most basic sense, but is ultimately far too simplistic because it ignores those texts that support “the well established Jewish tradition of challenging God and all His ways.”\textsuperscript{61} Knopp is correct in her assertion that a long precedent of questioning God not only exists but also constitutes a significant piece of Jewish theology. It is important to note here though that in general this questioning is limited to ethical matters and did not, historically speaking, extend to halakhah. Recall Wiesel's memory of the din torah in Auschwitz. The men felt free to question God, and even to find Him guilty of crimes against humanity, but they did not feel free—and did not want to be free—to forgo the halakhic requirement of the ma'ariv. Generally, fulfillment of halakhah can be understood as required under all circumstances. In other words, whether one meets happiness or sorrow, he is obliged to praise and bless God (\textit{Berakhot}, 48b).\textsuperscript{62} According to Wiesel, questions about meaning and ethics which can be separate from questions regarding religious observance, exist alongside questions about theodicy found in the traditional texts like the \textit{Book of Job}, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, and

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\textsuperscript{61} Josephine Knopp, “Wiesel and the Absurd,” \textit{Contemporary Literature} 15, no. 2 (Spring, 1974), 212.
\textsuperscript{62} The matter of Jewish religious observance during and after the Holocaust has been a topic of great interest among scholars of the period, and is a topic that will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4 of this study. Some scholars estimate that as many as 3 million of the 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust were observant of halakhah. What is certain is that after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, just as in other periods of persecution in Jewish history, the numbers of she'elot written to rabbis considered competent in matters related to halakhah proliferated. There are many accounts of practitioners seeking immediate teshuvot from rabbis while in the camps. One of the most important collections of Holocaust responsa is entitled \textit{Teshuvot Mi-Maamakim} (Responsa From the Depths), a three volume set collected by Rabbi Ephraim Oshry. These volumes were published by the author in 1949, 1963 and 1969. For more on this see Irving J. Rosenbaum's \textit{Holocaust and Halakhah} (New York: KTAV Press, 1976). On a more theoretical level, the distinction between ethics and law in Jewish tradition in practice shifts somewhat over the centuries; during the modern and contemporary periods, the conversation often focuses around whether Jewish ethics can be separated from the practice of the law and from religious observance in general or whether all ethical concerns and obligations can be met through the keeping of the law itself. Textual support can be found for both perspectives in biblical and rabbinical texts.
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numerous discussions in early and late rabbinic literature.

These texts specifically can be seen as “anti-theodic”—a term created by Zachary Braiterman used to define texts that refuse to religiously “justify, explain or accept the relationship between God and evil.” Anti-theodic texts may not even be antinomian, although they often disrupt “the dominance of theodicy in religious thought.” They also disturb traditional conceptions of collective punishment and divine retribution that Wiesel’s work argues against. To this end, anti-theodic readings of canonical texts, along with the tales of 17th century Hasidic masters like Reb Levi Yitzak, as well as the philosophical methods and texts he began to study as a very young man, form the backbone of a theology that Wiesel uses to explore alternatives to abandoning belief in God in the face of absurdity. The same collection of primary texts that inspired Wiesel allowed thinkers like Martin Buber to continue to believe in a God who “allowed [the Holocaust] to happen” while asking nonetheless to know how “one…can still speak to Him.”

Among the many who concern themselves with God and ethics after Auschwitz, Wiesel’s is unique because he speaks as a survivor and a writer and not only as a theologian or philosopher. Therefore he “brings to task entirely different intellectual tools from those of other thinkers.” Wiesel builds on an extant tradition of an imperfect creation and a constrained God in order to address the building tension between Israel as God’s chosen people and the brutality that human beings face as inhabitants of that

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63 Braiterman, (God) After Auschwitz, 20.
65 P. Haas, Morality After Auschwitz, 227.
imperfect creation. Wiesel’s re-telling attempts to address this tension without finally believing these two realities cannot reasonably co-exist. When Wiesel creates a trial that features not one by many Job-like characters as prosecutors, witnesses, and jury members with an absentee God as the absent defendant, Wiesel is insisting we learn something from Job's personal ethics, who railed against God but never disengaged from Him or from his fellow human beings; but when Wiesel places the trial in seventeenth century Poland, he re-tells Job's story in hopes that we will see that human suffering has multiplied exponentially, making it our responsibility to redouble human efforts to remain engaged with ourselves and with God. In modern times, there is not one Job, but many.

_The Trial of God_ picks up where Job leaves off in the Jewish conversation about theodicy because it addresses in a way that canonical texts do not the magnitude of the collective injustice inflicted on victims of the Holocaust. But while the _Book of Job_ addresses theodicy in a way few sacred texts have, even Job does not really offer instructions for Jews who survived the murder of millions of fellow Jews while God—and nearly the whole of His creation—appeared to be standing by, if not directly aiding and abetting the slaughter. While Wiesel specifically draws on _halakhic_ prescriptions for court proceedings, Maria the Gentile’s loyalty to Berish and his daughter shape a significant part of the landscape of the play. That she is considered a moral character whom herself was wronged in love by a Jewish man suggests that Wiesel hopes for a

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66 See Brown, _Messenger to All Humanity_, 163 for Wiesel’s assertions about the impossibility of “easy denial” and “easy belief” for people who live consciously. Wiesel often claims, as he does here, that the best questions don’t have answers. Here Wiesel positions himself as post-modern insofar as he is more interested in eternal questions than in eternal answers.
universally applicable human ethic grounded firmly in the best Judaism has to offer and to which Judaism—as well as other traditions—could continue to contribute. The primary goal of Wiesel's ethics is to connect diverse communities who agree to abstain from abusing one another in exchange for the right to practice their particular religions and philosophies unmolested. But is there real structure to Wiesel's ethic, and if so, is it really as universal?

**Beyond Fiction: A Deeper Analysis**

Literature has historically been considered a legitimate and useful means to explore new solutions to moral problems. Philosophical fiction has enjoyed a resurgence of interest since the end of World War II. But rarely—if ever—has a body of fiction served as the *sole* source of an ethics in its entirety. Albert Camus' fiction, for example, while certainly absurdist, is not the sole progenitor of absurdism. Camus himself wrote essays and journalistic pieces meant to illustrate the absurdist point of view, and Sartre and others did likewise; and while absurdism does not constitute a mainstream approach to ethics, it nonetheless informs many modern ethical norms and systems in the West. Yet its precepts and applications were not articulated in well-written fiction alone.

Wiesel's assertions about the role of literature in the dissemination of moral imperatives and the inescapable responsibility of the writer to uphold moral standards are well known. But he has also been a prolific public speaker since the 1960s, and with the
exception of the class lectures he gave as a professor at Boston University, nearly all his other lectures, addresses, interviews and speeches are, at least in part, in-depth explications of his ethics, and usually include suggestions for the ways in which the most important components of his system should be interpreted and applied. This makes these lectures and speeches an excellent, often more straightforward, source of information about Wiesel as an ethicist, and helps us to address questions regarding the universality and the real-world applicability of his project.

In a 1975 lecture on the role of morality in literature, for example, Wiesel stated unequivocally that literature “should become an aspiration to and for morality.”67 And again in a lecture entitled “The Trial of Man”:

> Literature today, more than ever before, is and must be an act of conscience. Whether the writer knows is or not, whether he wants it or not, his work acquires an ethical or an unethical dimension. Words are endowed with meaning and therefore with power. They may kill or prevent killing. They may push mankind into despair or save it...68

Wiesel has expressed this sentiment elsewhere. But it is important to note that in this lecture, Wiesel does not define literature in this sense—that is, literature as a vehicle for ethics-- as exclusively fiction, the genre for which he is most known. After asserting that

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literature and morality go hand in hand, Wiesel goes on to discuss at length the documents left behind by the Sonderkommandos of the Nazi death camps as an example of this relationship.\textsuperscript{69}

The documents of the sonderkommandos are simple, sober, and heartbreaking. Why did they write them? They wanted not to be forgotten. They were convinced that if we remembered, our people would be saved and the whole world as well. Therefore I say: He who does not engage in remembering actively becomes an accomplice of the enemy. We must remember. If we remember we will make others remember as well.\textsuperscript{70}

These documents were not novels, poems or sonatas. They were records of personal experience, and hardly fictional or fictionalized; and yet Wiesel refers to them in as an example of powerful literature intended to impact social morality. I would argue that Wiesel believes that not only fiction but words and texts in general constitute acts which should tied to one's “conscience.” This makes the application of Wiesel's ethics easier in

\textsuperscript{69} Sonderkommandos were camp victims who were chosen to feed the crematoria at the camps with the often thousands of bodies of those who died or were murdered there. These unfortunate people often placed the bodies of their own families and neighbors into the ovens to be burned to ashes. In exchange for this work, they were given two or three additional months to live. The documents Wiesel mentions were written by a few of these sonderkommandos and contain many of their private thoughts and feelings. Wiesel references these documents repeatedly in the decade following their discovery. We must therefore assume the fact of their existence and their content were very meaningful to him and formed some integral aspect of his thought. For more of Wiesel's references to these documents, please see Against Silence, vol. 1, Irving Abrahamson's 1985 three volume set of Wiesel's lectures, addresses, and speeches.

\textsuperscript{70} Wiesel, Against Silence, vol. 1, 137.
some sense. The word itself, spoken or written is imbued with the same responsibility. This has perhaps been one of the most successful aspects of Wiesel's moral teachings thus far because they can be delivered anywhere and anytime there are people present to deliver and receive them.

Wiesel's claims about text and language are tied to his claims about memory. Much attention has been paid to the concept of memory as memorial in Wiesel's work. To be sure, memory as memorial for those who were murdered by the Nazis—people Wiesel, not unproblematically, considers martyrs—is central for Wiesel. Yet as evidenced by Wiesel's response to the sonderkommando documents, memory serves another central function in his work. Humanity's ability to remember stories—regardless of how they are conveyed to them—and our desire to recount them is precisely what makes it possible to construct ethics at all. For Wiesel, stories of suffering are the most reliable ground for ethics. Recounting the memories of our own suffering and the suffering of others prompts moral action. People suffer and then testify. When we listen to their testimony of suffering, Wiesel hopes we remember it. When we remember it, the memory may prompt us to intervene when we see someone suffering. This is because without the precursory act of remembering, especially in Wiesel's system, there can be no ethics;\(^7\) the imperative to care for one's fellow human being is shaped by remembering the stories of his or her sufferings. What makes the sonderkommando documents so

\(^7\) See John Silber's “Memory, History and Ethics” in Obliged by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics, A Collection of Essays in Honor of Elie Wiesel's Seventieth Birthday, edited by Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 53-64. Silber briefly explores the relationship between memory and ethics by pointing to the relationship between history, memory and intention. Silber's essay also touches on what he sees as the difference between memory and history.
compelling for Wiesel is that the experiences of the *sonderkommandos* survives even though *sonderkommandos* themselves do not. Their suffering was not in vain if it can be used to prompt moral action.

This brings us to the role of dialogue in Wiesel's ethics. Remembering victims' testimonies of suffering is the first step toward envisioning, demanding, and creating a moral society, but it is not enough to simply remember. For Wiesel, dialogue is the most powerful of all ethical tools and constitutes another well-known application of his ethics, particularly in classroom settings. This notion, like that of the “suffering servant” who is God's unwilling messenger to mankind, is also found in traditional Jewish sources, and provides the underpinning for the entirety of Wiesel's ethics and his Judaism. The Jewish thinkers who have most influenced Wiesel's relationship to the ethical value of dialogue are the Baal Shem Tov, the Kotzker Rebbe, and perhaps most of all, Rebbe Levi Yitzak of Berditchev, all Hasidic masters from the 18th century:

Hasidic masters were no less eloquent than [the sages of the Talmud]. The first ones, including the Baal Shem Tov, protested from within, but they protested. Rebbe Levi Yitzak of Berditchev would stop the prayer in the middle of Yom Kippur and he would say, “If You do not stop persecuting Your people, I will stop praying.” And we remember his famous outcry at Rosh Hashanah, when he said in Yiddish—he always spoke Yiddish to God, because, you see, God always writes in Hebrew but speaks Yiddish--
“Ribono Shel Olam, what do You want from Your people? Why is it always we? And how long will it continue? You prefer Ivan, the gentile Ivan? Zol Ivan blozen shofar. Then let Ivan blow the shofar. In our prayer during the High Holy Days, we say “You are right and we are ashamed. Rebbe Levi Yitzak translated and interpreted it differently: “You are right, O Master of the Universe, because we are ashamed to tell You that you are not right.” There are countless examples and sayings of sages and teachers and simple Jews who could take it no longer and in their pain and anguish spoke up for their people and through their people for humanity when the human value of eternity was threatened by the Eternal.  

Like Wiesel's character Berish, Rebbe Levi Yitzak rages and shakes his fist at the sky but remains engaged with God. A significant difference between Levi Yitzak and Berish, though, is that the former is known for following the Law scrupulously, even as he frothed and fumed at God for His shocking lack of morals. In The Trial of God, Berish does not directly state that he no longer keeps halakah, but he makes it clear that he is no longer interested in pleasing God, which is at least part of the purpose of halakah. Levi Yitzak's behavior, as previously stated, is well within the bounds of what Jewish tradition would consider an acceptable response to unjust suffering. And although Wiesel's body of work, including his many lectures and speeches, indicates that he keeps the Law

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72 Wiesel, “The Trial of Man,” Against Silence, 176-177.
73 See excerpted quote from The Trial of God in this chapter.
himself, he does not invite us to reject or shun Berish because he may have chosen a
different path. In fact, Berish's rage and deep need to talk and to shout and to fight brings
together a motley crew of survivors (two of whom are not themselves Jewish) to share
and perhaps ease their suffering. Berish's rage may make us uncomfortable, but Wiesel
wants us to respect him for it and find righteousness in it.

In *The Trial of God*, dialogue has practical value; it allows Berish to communicate
his experiences. Berish's point of view is derived from his experience, and experience
shapes ideology and practice. As Wiesel stated in 1967:

> All doubts, all angers are permitted, provided they remain within the
> Jewish conscience. Elisha ben Abuyah remains part of our spiritual
> heritage because it was the Jew in him who turned against God, saying to
> Him: I no longer understand Your justice, I no longer accept it...One can
> say everything, explore everything, provided one remains bound, at the
> root, with those who speak and act differently from us but who, like us,
> evoke *Ahavat Yisrael*. Thus what you transmit will not from the realm of
> knowledge but from the realm of experience...To transmit experience is
> the very essence of Judaism...\(^74\)

Wiesel validates his reliance on the transmission of experience as an impetus for ethical

action by claiming that such transmission constitutes the “very essence of Judaism.” And in some ways, what Wiesel claims rings true. The Jewish liturgical year is full of holidays in which Jews celebrate by re-enacting events in Jewish history that were initially experienced by an ancient Jewish collective. These re-enactments are meant to inform contemporary Jewish identity and practice. One takes on the historical collective memory as one's own memory, and “remembers” experiences one did not actually have as their own. In a very real sense, Jewish theology relies on the successful transmission of collective experiences that generations of Jews will continue to experience as authentic to their own lives. But this understanding of the value of transmitting experience is one-dimensional and speaks more to its role in identity development rather than to its role in the foundation of ethics. And although Wiesel clearly emphasizes that suffering is the foundation of his ethics, it is less clear how this actually works in the transmission of ethical imperatives.

The act of remembering spoken and written testimonies of suffering is central to Wiesel's ethical system, but the sufferer him or herself is the foot of the compass. Perhaps this always the case when we responsibly concern ourselves with the problem of suffering. After all, abstract thoughts of suffering and actual concern for the sufferer are two different things. In the words of Joseph Anthony Amato, “...victims represent what we owe and also are who we owe.” In the broadest sense, the prophets—who suffer in order to convey God's message—are the ultimate sufferers in Wiesel's system. They are

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God's messengers to humanity and yet both God and man make them suffer for playing the role of the prophet, a role most prophets did not ask to play. A Hebrew Bible prophet's suffering is itself representative of the disconnect between collective human behavior and God's teachings for humanity, and for Wiesel, survivors of the Holocaust are also symbols of that disconnect and, like the reluctant prophets, “teachers” of morality:

We [as teachers] could...have asked for the impossible, for we had lived the impossible. We could have imposed our will, our vision, on mankind. We could have asked for the ultimate redemption. We had an authority unmatched in history, *the authority of cumulative suffering and the authority of remaining human*....We had the power, the moral strength, to speak up and demand and compel mankind to change, to give up intolerance and hate, bigotry and fanaticism. We had the right to say “We are your teachers.” ...and we had the...metaphysical power to say that we shall teach all of mankind how to survive without linking survival to betrayal.  

Sufferers possess a “moral authority,” a “metaphysical power” that links them to the

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“redemptive process.” Wiesel refers specifically to child survivors of the Holocaust as messianic in that their experiences—and their survival—point simultaneously to the profound immorality of God’s creation and to humanity’s inherent ability to save it if only we would act. Within this duality lies the key to Wiesel’s reliance on the moral value of suffering. Sufferers who survive and do not themselves become killers should, according to Wiesel, be our most important teachers.

Wiesel goes on to say that:

Many survivors today will tell you they are tired...After the liberation all illusions were hopes. We were convinced that on the ruins of Europe a new world would be built, a new society would be formed. There would be no more wars, no more hatred, no more bloodshed. We thought people would remember our experience, our testimony, and how we managed to suppress our violent impulses to kill or to hate.77

According to Wiesel, the hopes that survivors of the Holocaust once had that their survival would make a difference in the way the Western world re-formed after the catastrophe were dashed by the world's inability to commit to even the first step of what he believes is required in the development of an ethical society: remembering the experience of their suffering. And for Wiesel, “...only the memory of what the world has

done to us [victims of the Holocaust] may save the world from catastrophe.” Great emphasis is placed on the value of the suffering of victims and on their prophetic ability to remind humanity what it owes its victims. But is this view of suffering enough to constitute a workable ethical system? Wiesel clearly believes that humanity is drawn to stories of suffering because in some way we are all sympathetic. Wiesel never explores why we are sympathetic or how listening to the sufferings of others activates our sense of shared humanity with others. The shared experience of human suffering in general is not emphasized here; it is the suffering of Holocaust survivors specifically upon which Wiesel's ethic balances.

II. Analysis

World War II, the war to which, as Viktor Frankl wrote, “we are indebted..for enriching our knowledge of the “psychopathology of the masses” also “gave us the war of nerves and it gave us the concentration camp.” It was Frankl's desire that people other than himself might “distill the contents” of the first section of his bestseller, Man's Search for Meaning into “dry theories...[which] might become a contribution to the psychology of prison life.” Frankl's interest in psychology began early in his life, like Levinas and Wiesel and others who survived the Holocaust, his methodology and theoretical approach were shaped by his experiences during the war. And yet his “existential psychology” resonated far more broadly than he ever imagined. In his 1992

78 Wiesel, “Trial of Man,” Against Silence, 176.
preface to *Man's Search*, he states with dismay:

...I do not at all see in bestseller status of my book an achievement and accomplishment on my part but rather an expression of the misery of our time: if hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under their fingernails.\(^8\)

Frankl's *Man in Search of Meaning* contains his personal account of his time in the concentration camp system of the Third Reich as well as abbreviated case studies of clients he worked with after the war. Throughout, Frankl claims that man needs meaning, not only to survive traumatic circumstances like those experienced by the victims of the Reich, but to ease the burden of other kinds of suffering as well. He also claims that if a sufferer can suffer with dignity, and even feel proud of the way in which she conducts herself in spite of her suffering, then this in itself can give meaning and, if not happiness—which Frankl feels is less important to humans that meaning—then pride in ones own inner strength and value. Frankl attributes his own survival of Auschwitz to his ability to focus on reasons to survive, or at least suffer honorably. With regard to ethics, Frankl is less forthcoming, although he makes the following statement in the preface of the 1992 edition of *Man's Search for Meaning*:

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\(^8\) Frankl, *Man's Search*, 11.
On the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who, after years of trekking from camp to camp, lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every mean, honest and otherwise, even brute force, theft, and betrayal of friends, in order to save themselves. We who have come back, by the aid of many lucky chances or miracles--whatever one may choose to call them—we know: the best of us did not return.\textsuperscript{81}

Lawrence Langer, whose \textit{Versions of Survival} explores the ways in which survivor narratives—and all forms of telling in the narrative mode—modify what is being told. He spends a significant amount of time on Frankl's work, which he asserts clings to old, pre-Holocaust categories of meaning so that the experiences of the Reich's victims can “fit into the old world order (as well as the old \textit{word} order)...” In Frankl's determination to “establish such a continuity,” Langer writes, “Frankl narrows the event to the familiar challenge of finding meaning in suffering.”\textsuperscript{82} For Langer, Frankl's account lacks the “ambiguity and contradiction” of many other survivor accounts “because he needs to eliminate ambiguity and contradiction to support his version of survival...his language blunts the menacing blade of atrocity and simplifies the threat of extermination into a conventional encounter between the heroic free spirit and human morality.” Frankl's

\textsuperscript{81} Frankl, \textit{Man's Search}, 18.
“rhetoric” transforms victims into “noble creatures” who have “defeated genocide.”\(^{83}\)

Langer’s treatment of Wiesel’s work is more gracious. Like most analyses of Wiesel’s work, it is almost reverent, in fact. Like Frankl, Wiesel's writing imparts dignity to those who died. As discussed above, for Wiesel the dead are martyrs whose deaths take on a metaphysical importance to which survivors must remain loyal. Langer cannot see the victims of the Reich as martyrs because, by definition, martyrs choose to die for something. What Langer objects to is any attempt to assign meaning to the event or to posit the illusion of control on the part of the victims of the Holocaust. Any attempts to do this indicate an inability or unwillingness to see the event as a “rent in the in the apparent seamless web of history and man's spiritual destiny.”\(^{84}\) Any other view of the Holocaust, he argues, is a denial of the profound uniqueness of the event. According to Langer, human dignity could in no way flourish in the shadows of the crematoria. The survivor might justifiably “masquerade a dignified image of the humiliated self”\(^{85}\) in order to go on living, to give meaning to their own survival when none can be found. But it would only be a masquerade, Langer insists.

Langer's refrain is familiar: The Holocaust, as an event imposed upon millions of victims who had no choice but to be victims, defies meaning. The “Concentrationary Universe” disrupts all of our social, spiritual and physical expectations, and as such may not be an event that can be described or understood in the usual ways. Langer’s assessment is hardly unique (although it was groundbreaking when first published). And

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\(^{83}\) Langer, *Versions of Survival*, 17-18.  
\(^{84}\) Langer, *Versions of Survival*, 17.  
\(^{85}\) Langer, * Versions of Survival*, 10.
yet it is compelling. Many survivors have attempted to give meaning to their survival, or have dedicated their life's work to shedding light on its atrocities, giving voice to the dead victims, or, as in the case of Levinas and Wiesel, to preventing the advent of another genocidal era with the tools they have at their disposal. As Langer points out, students and readers should proceed with caution, since the realities of survival are complex. When faced with meaningless, pitiless persecution, the likes of which have arguably never been seen or described before, it is only natural that survivors struggle to regain meaning and purpose, and recall their experiences to outsiders in a way that spares the dead yet another humiliation, or spares the listener the horrifying truth of the survivor's despair.

Yet there is something doxastic about Langer's treatment of survivor narratives. Note Langer's response to the following passage from Wiesel's *Legends of Our Time*:

> At the risk of offending, it must be emphasized that the victims suffered more, and more profoundly, from the indifference of the onlookers than from the brutality of the executioner. The cruelty of the enemy would have been incapable of breaking the prisoner; it was the silence of those he believed to be his friends—cruelty more cowardly, more subtle—which broke his heart. ⁸⁶

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To this Langer responds:

Such a comment seems to fall under Wiesel's own charge...that to “find one answer or another, nothing is easier; language can fix anything.” For who among us, after Auschwitz, fears a broken heart more than a mutilated body? What victim of physical torture suffered more from the indifference of his torturers than from the pain inflicted by their cunning devices? *Retrospectively* the survivor may suffer more from the indifference of the world (which he came to understand fully after his return) than from his remembered pain; but who will ever be convinced that the immediate threat of physical extermination and cremation was not the greatest source of terror to the potential victim?87

Langer goes on:

The Nazis were so determined to exterminate the Jews that one wonders whether any protest, short of direct invasion and liberation, could have inhibited the machinery of death *once the victims were at the mercy of the executioners*. The illusion that moral opposition might move such executioners, like the illusion that one could keep one's moral nature intact

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87 Langer, *Versions of Survival*, 141-142.
in the death camps, dies hard, because the cynicism implicit in the alternative is so contrary to the coherence of the humanistic vision.\textsuperscript{88}

Langer continues by attributing Wiesel's claims to “the ambiguity of his own position, which seeks some basis for cause and effect in his fate.” Wiesel's work is indeed marked with ambiguities, and the need for meaning—punctuated by the insistence that there can be no meaning in Auschwitz—is a familiar and mournful tune in Wiesel's work. But Langer's analysis is not without problems. Langer responds to Wiesel's text as though it were a discussion about fear and terror; it isn't. The excerpted passage from \textit{Legends of Our Own Time} is about suffering.\textsuperscript{89}

In various contexts, Wiesel refers to the shock, despair and suffering he and others experienced when they realized upon release that, contrary to what they had believed, much of the Western world knew something about their plight and yet failed to intervene. He is explicit about the fact that many camp victims found solace in the belief that no one really knew what they suffered in the camps, and that their friends and neighbors were eagerly awaiting their return. This belief was false, but they believed it,

\textsuperscript{88} Langer, \textit{Versions of Survival}, 142.

\textsuperscript{89} In her important book \textit{Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining} (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15, Shelly Rambo defines trauma as the “suffering that does not go away.” Rambo goes on to aptly state that, “In the aftermath of violence, persons and communities are challenged to orient themselves in the aftermath of events that shatter familiar frameworks of meaning and trust. In turn, people surrounding them struggle to witness the effects of suffering that often cannot be brought into speech and symptoms that persist long after an event is over. Witnessing the suffering that remains involves encountering the ways in which death pervades life…Looking through the lens of trauma, the pressing questions for theology are: Can theology witness to this suffering that does not go away, to the storm that is “always here”? If so, how?” Here Rambo refers to theology in broad terms, although her book is an exploration of Christian theology specifically. Rambo’s insights here can also be applied to the problem of Western ethics: Can Western ethics witness to trauma as a storm that is “always here”?\textsuperscript{90}
and believing it enabled them to bear what they experienced. It enabled them to believe that the entirety of Western civilization was not corrupt and that only Germany and her closest allies were aberrations. With all due respect, Langer cannot claim that the suffering caused by the realization that governments who were quite capable of bombing the train tracks to the camps on behalf of European Jewry and did not do so was not finally greater than the horrific physical suffering Wiesel and others suffered at the hands of the Nazis. And does it matter if Wiesel could make this claim only in retrospect? Survivor narratives will not all fit into a philosophically nihilist perspective on the events of 1933-1945, just as they will not all relate historically accurate information with regard to certain kinds of details. Langer rightly asserts that:

To accept any single [survivor's] voice is authoritative is to betray the complexity of the event and to risk diminishing the full horror of the doom of its victims—and the world that destroyed them.  

Likewise, his claims about the unreliable nature of memory and the human tendency to protect itself against truths that are too painful to face are critical issues that the student of genocide must take into account at every step. But again: Is it impossible to believe that survivors who watched their loved ones murdered and experienced unimaginable dehumanization would have suffered more still after realizing that most of the Western

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world—and not just the Reich and its allies—did not feel compelled to intervene on European Jewry's behalf? What might it have been like to re-enter the world which created—or at least did not interfere with the creation of—death camps and yet, at least not in the 20 years or so following the end of the war, never spoke of them?

In a very real sense, survivors left the unprecedented hell of the Reich's camp system and re-entered communities whose members had either actively tried to kill them, stood by while they were stripped of family and possessions and freedom, or at the very least had no interest in knowing what they had been through. Suffering did not end for the survivor after liberation. It merely changed register. That they had enough to eat, and were no longer beaten and tortured meant respite, certainly. But according to what many survivors report, they re-entered society to find that people did not really want to hear about what they'd been through. This was the “after” to which they returned, with which they had to “make do.” And in a sense, their suffering and annihilation did and does have meaning, or at least pointed toward a larger reality: It meant that Europe was morally bankrupt in the deepest sense and that as a result fascism had taken over the continent; and it meant that the Germans had built a network of camps, brothels and other systems of death and dehumanization which murdered and tortured millions of innocent victims at lightening speed while the world looked on. For people like Wiesel, who grew up in communities that were remote from Central and Western Europe and managed to survive until the end of the war, the depth of Europe's moral insolvency might not have been clear until after liberation. As Wiesel points out in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech:
...there are no plausible answers to what [victims of the Holocaust] endured. There are no theological answers, there are no psychological answers, there are no literary answers, there are no philosophical answers, there are no religious answers. The only conceivable answer is a moral answer. This means there must be a moral element in what we do.\textsuperscript{91}

Again, the “meaning” of the Holocaust may not be metaphysical or theological, but its occurrence proves a moral bankruptcy for which moral action is likely to be the best response. Wiesel indicates that for him, morality, rather than religion or philosophy or culture is universal. Put another way, morality is the universal, while religion, philosophy and culture are not.

Wiesel's work attempts to understand how European anti-Semitism culminated in the Holocaust, but his greatest preoccupation is how the experiences of victims, when shared with those who will listen, might shift the course of Western culture away from possibility of another Auschwitz. In many ways, the emotional or philosophical “objectivity” of his memories (or the ways in which he relates those memories) is less relevant to that task than Langer's work suggests. As much as Wiesel tries to make the suffering of the 6 million meaningful by depicting them as martyrs, and as much as these attempts are problematic, his greater goal, and perhaps his greatest contribution to the Western conversation regarding ethics, is his insistence that the universality of human

suffering can provide the foundation for ethics. Wiesel's distrust in the non-victim's ability to grasp the depth of the world's ethical bankruptcy without aid is palpable.

Langer's argument regarding “versions of survival” arguably overemphasizes the accuracy of nihilistic response to the Holocaust; Wiesel overemphasizes the role of Holocaust survivors specifically and victims more generally in the activation of moral response to suffering. Ultimately both thinkers rely too heavily on uniqueness and the Holocaust as a support for their claims and, as a result, the long-term universal applicability of their theories are somewhat problematized. Much has been said about the ineffability of the Holocaust experience, and yet survivors do use language and images and music to tell their stories. Survivors and soldiers who fought in the European theatre and encountered the camps and historians who study the Holocaust do find ways to describe it; and perhaps we may never describe the Holocaust—or any world-changing event—with complete accuracy. One could argue that even describing mundane incidents in ways we could all agree on is impossible. Nonetheless, as Wiesel himself has argued, the Holocaust is now a part of the fabric of history. To continue to insist that it cannot really be spoken of, or that there is a single way to understand or categorize it is equivalent to sacrilizing it in a way that even Wiesel would reject. We must talk about it. We must find the words. Otherwise, it can teach us nothing.  

92 We have discussed the claim that, in many ways, we lack a vocabulary for describing both the Holocaust and the ethical and theological questions it raises. Yet discussion regarding the Holocaust and its repercussions abound. Survivor accounts differ from one another, but they also tend to have a great deal in common. It is reasonable to state that the sense of ineffability coupled with the necessity of bearing witness associated with the Holocaust is a paradox of some magnitude. But is discussing the Holocaust with any accuracy an entirely insurmountable task? Outcries against cosmic injustice are not new to humanity, although they may have become all the more urgent for some communities since the
**Literature and Ethics**

Wiesel is often referred to as the “the great voice of the Holocaust,”\(^{93}\) “a prophet...and moral authority for humanity,”\(^ {94}\) and a “messenger to all humanity,”\(^ {95}\) but he is not widely considered a philosophical ethicist. As Levinas has “blurred” the lines of distinction between philosophy and theology, so has Wiesel obscured the boundaries between literature, theology and philosophical ethics. The relationship between general philosophical ethics, literature and theology has long been enmeshed, despite post-Enlightenment efforts to separate them into discrete disciplines. Wiesel has openly proclaimed that he not only intends to use what he writes to disseminate moral messages, but that literature's one purpose is “to correct injustices.”\(^ {96}\) Certainly, literary fiction is read by audiences much larger and more diverse than those who read the ethical treatises of trained philosophers.

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\(^{95}\) Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger To All Humanity* (Notre Dame, 1983).

Wiesel's theory of moral activation is compellingly poetic, particularly within the context of the Holocaust. But broadly conceived, Wiesel's ethics do not include an understanding of humanity as innately moral *per se*. Unlike Levinas, Wiesel depicts a humanity that is passive, so passive in fact that individuals lack ethical momentum unless a victim of tragedy has activated their conscience. Wiesel almost never mentions those who *did* rescue Jews and other victims from the Nazis, despite the fact that many thousands were saved by everyday heroes who risked their own lives to save the lives of people who were often strangers to them. In Wiesel's thought, there is little focus on the period “before” a tragedy occurs. There is only the catastrophe of “after” populated with victims, bystanders and perpetrators. While this may describe Wiesel's experiences after liberation, it does not accurately portray humanity in day-to-day life. People *do* receive moral instruction and as a result of this instruction often do the “right” thing, even if governments do not always do the right things. Of course this may be because, as Levinas claims, human consciousness and conscience are both shaped by smaller-scale suffering that makes ethical behavior possible. According to this view, all people *do* suffer, even if they are not the victims of genocide, rape, physical or sexual abuse or hate crimes. Wiesel's ethics doesn't ever deal with the ability of smaller-scale, day to day suffering to activate our empathy and sense of responsibility for others. Wiesel describes suffering as “redemptive,” but who is being redeemed? Did the victims of Auschwitz or the rice paddies of Cambodia need redeeming? Or does the suffering of the innocent have the power to redeem the non-victim or the perpetrator? And if so, how? Because Wiesel does not offer an answer to these questions, it seems likely that for him,
redemption's power is metaphysical in some way, and therefore, in spite of Wiesel's efforts, not entirely temporal in nature.

An ethics grounded in suffering takes into account human affectivity more than many ethical systems grounded in metaphysics for several reasons. First and foremost, suffering is often observed as an affective response, as shown by Levinas' phenomenological accounts of the spectrum of human suffering. Just as important to an ethics grounded in suffering is the emotional response of the “I” to the suffering of the other. If I cannot feel empathy when others suffer, or cannot at least identify suffering in others, I cannot respond ethically to it. Consider also the role of personal narrative in Wiesel's ethics. Wiesel's own personal narrative of survival has been a powerful ethical tool not just because of its content but also because of the effective manner in which he delivers it. As discussed above, as an author of “literature of the oppressed,” Wiesel delivers ethical imperatives to mainstream Western society via fiction, and as a member of a minority group, his messages have a prophetic dimension with which Western audiences are familiar and identify as authoritative. Wiesel's texts and speeches are not philosophical treatises but they can and do play a vital role in moral education and development for many Westerners. Anthony Cunningham writes:

...novels [can] provide a rich picture of the interior life of the mind, something akin to access to the innermost reaches of someone's character, even if the character is a fictional one. In this arena, emotions are critical to the portrait and the appreciation. Ultimately, character is more than just a matter of what you
choose and what you do. Thoughts, desires, inclinations, attitudes, and emotions are important to the assessment of the character, a rich picture with all these elements is precisely what more traditional philosophical case studies generally leave out.

Applied ethics textbooks, Cunningham argues, don't tend to contain the elements most likely to engage our emotional or cognitive empathy. Case studies are written in such a way that one person can easily be substituted for another, “provided the substitute has the same illness or beef.” But:

...in real life, people with the same afflictions and concerns might be quite different and may see and respond to their circumstances differently. To do justice to particular people and their circumstances, we must paint the kinds of subtle, detailed pictures that one can bring to life in all their complexity, the kinds of pictures literature can paint.

Wiesel uses literature to provide insight into the emotional and physical experiences of victims, but he also provides non-Jewish readers who may know nothing about Judaism with information about Judaism as it is understood and experienced by practitioners, something many non-Jews may have no other opportunity to experience. The non-Jewish reader not only learns about Judaism, but is given the opportunity to see past the particularities of belief, culture and practice into those aspects of human emotional life
and experience shared by most human beings: love of one's parents, friends or children; nostalgia for childhood or things long past; and the suffering caused by hunger, physical and emotional pain, or the abject humiliation of being subjugated against one's will.

Moreover:

The right kind of novel—one with detailed character portraits of particular people embroiled in complex, meaningful situations—can help us refine our moral vision by giving us a studied opportunity to practice seeing and appreciating diverse ethical loves.  

Literature's ability to appeal to our emotions constitutes its moral power. Cunningham rightly insists that literature could not—and should not—replace traditional philosophical literature which “appeal[s] directly to reason to convince a reader...[since] emotional appeals are seen as manipulative attempts to persuade by non-rational means.” Literature illustrates the way in which eliciting emotions in the reader can assist us in ethical judgment. And right feeling can lead us to right judgment, good character, and right living.

Much has been written on Wiesel's role in programs like *Facing History and Ourselves* and other genocide education curriculums. While his assertions about the nature of Jewish election and the role of particularity are, for reasons already discussed,

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problematic with regard to the development of a universal ethics, we need not make use of his entire system to utilize those aspects which have effectively addressed the problem of ethics after Auschwitz. Yet beyond exposing ourselves to the experiences of others and responding empathetically to stories of suffering—and then retelling those stories to others—what can we do to live moral lives once we have sorted out that preventing undeserved suffering before it begins and intervening on behalf of those who already suffer unjustly is our most important moral imperative?

**Wiesel's Judaism**

As Michael Berenbaum notes, “...the uniqueness of Wiesel's authority and the charisma of his person, an understanding of his theological thought within the context of contemporary Judaism is...imperative if not all the more difficult.” Very few studies even attempt to realistically discuss the drawbacks and benefits of the ways in which Wiesel's ethics—as well as his approach to Holocaust education—have been applied. With regard to Wiesel project in general, few studies exist which don't seem to finally dissolve into tribute. This is probably because scholars of contemporary thought often label survivors' theological responses to the Holocaust as more authentic and therefore more legitimate. It is not without good reason that they do this, of course. The theological responses of survivors are not monolithic by any means, but many reported experiencing continued, even strengthened faith while living in the camps and after even

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liberation. And often the first impulse for those responding theologically to the Holocaust is to honor the experience of the victims in any way possible.\textsuperscript{100}

For some, it is important to see Wiesel as theologically radical. Berenbaum claims that while Emil Fackenheim “preserves the midrashic framework in his reference to God's presence at Auschwitz...Wiesel shatters it in his depiction of the revelatory nature of the Auschwitz experience.” Berenbaum states that this is in part because Wiesel expresses:

...a sense of despair concerning the human condition, the ontological foundation of the universe, and the possibility of redemption. Wiesel's overwhelming despair has not led to either impotence or the death of Judaism. For Wiesel despair is the prerequisite for the Jews' adoption of a revolutionary relationship with both man and God.\textsuperscript{101}

Berenbaum goes on to claim that, unlike Rubenstein, who “breaks with the mythic pattern and the symbolic forms of Judaism,” Wiesel continues to adhere to the structure of traditional Judaism even though he radically alters its content.”\textsuperscript{102} Berenbaum is mistaken in his understanding of Wiesel's revolutionary theological language. As discussed in Chapter 3 of this study, Wiesel's Judaism—in form and in content—is Orthodox, even if he chooses to emphasize aspects of Judaism that are less normative.

\textsuperscript{100} See the work of Emil Fackenheim and Eliezer Berkovits.
\textsuperscript{102} Berenbaum, \textit{Vision of the Void}, 160.
As pointed out by Zachary Braiterman and discussed at length above, an anti-theodic tradition exists in Judaism from which Wiesel draws with great frequency. Wiesel’s affinity for Hasiduth offers a wellspring of interpretations of biblical and rabbinic themes that may be outside the purview of mainstream orthodoxy but by no means constitute a radical break with the traditional content of Judaism. Even Wiesel's understanding of God as suffering with His children comes from rabbinic and hasidic depictions which Wiesel embellishes to suit the theological needs of the post-Holocaust era as Wiesel understands it. Wiesel may be a “revolutionary” but the same could be said for the many traditional Jewish texts and figures that demand worldly and divine justice for those who suffer unjustly.

Berenbaum's claim that Wiesel “shatters” the midrashic tradition is not really accurate. Wiesel has in fact engaged in the midrashic tradition by adding to it, as do many others.\(^{103}\) Therefore, he has, if anything, expressed a desire to broaden it. Wiesel wants Judaism to include the Holocaust (along with Sinai, liberation from Egypt, and the Churban) among things included in the imperative “to remember things you did not know, did not live.” Wiesel wants the Holocaust to enter liturgy, to enter the canon of post-Biblical Jewish tradition. For example, Wiesel's claim that “Auschwitz is as important as Sinai”\(^ {104}\) is quoted \textit{ad infinitum}, and yet it is not always understood as a proclamation that the Holocaust has become, whether we like it or not, a part of Judaism's historical continuum, and therefore part of Jewish collective memory. As such, the

\(^{103}\) Please see Wiesel’s \textit{Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) for the best-known example of Wiesel’s midrashim. He has also written a number of books on hasiduth, several of which have already been referred to in this dissertation.

Holocaust creates neither the beginning of a new Judaism, nor the end of an old Judaism. According to this way of thinking, the Holocaust is unique in Jewish history specifically and human history in general, and therefore as impossible to extract from Jewish history as Sinai, or the Exodus, the loss of the first and second Temples, or the creation of the modern Israeli state in 1948. Wiesel's theology is not a “Holocaust theology” but a Jewish theology that incorporates the Holocaust as a watershed moment in Jewish history. It seems impossible to understand the Holocaust as anything less than such a moment, even if there are no substantial changes to Jewish theology as a result.

There are even those who are unconvinced that Wiesel's Judaism, because of its orthodoxy, is an authentic response to either the Holocaust or Israeli political struggles in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some reject Wiesel's unwillingness to give up traditional theology or speak out more forcefully against Israeli policy in the occupied territories. So while many Jews may consider Wiesel's orthodoxy a strength, it does not guarantee that his Judaism can necessarily garner broad appeal among Jews and non-Jews. And while Wiesel's earlier work is associated with progressive, left-wing, post-World War II Paris, his positions on Jerusalem with regard to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the second Iraq war have placed him on the right wing end of

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105 This topic is beyond the scope of this study, but there is a growing body of work that questions Wiesel's effectiveness as political spokesperson for persecuted minorities in light of his muted response to the plight of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza. See Mark Chmiel's Elie Wiesel and the Politics of Moral Leadership (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001) for one of the better examples of this point of view.

the political spectrum in the minds of many. Setting aside the question of whether or not either of these associations are accurate, it must be said that Wiesel's political activism has made him a high-profile figure whose political opinions are of great interest.

Can the Particular be Universal?

We recall that for Wiesel, the Jew is meant to embrace an experience that is both separate from that of the mainstream and yet has universal implications for humanity. In his own words, “...the Jewish and human conditions become one. It is a matter of concentric circles, one within the other, not one against the other or replacing the other.”\textsuperscript{107} Furthermore, Wiesel asserts that the Jewish experience is unique, but “only to the extent that it attains universality, and it is only as Jews that we can best make our contributions to society. Let the Jew be a better Jew and the Christian be a better Christian.”\textsuperscript{108} Now we must try to discern what this means in practical terms. This brings us to one of the most important questions we should ask ourselves about an ethics that aspires to universality: Does it, in fact, possess universal accessibility, appeal, and applicability? This question takes on complicated dimensions with respect to Wiesel's ethics and theology for a number of reasons. First of all, Wiesel's Judaism heavily emphasizes this notion of the particular within the universal, a theme found in the work of many modern and contemporary Jewish thinkers. But what does this mean, exactly?

The notion that Judaism is both particular and universal, while often perplexing to

\textsuperscript{107} Wiesel, “A Sacred Realm,” \textit{Against Silence}, 188.
people who know nothing about Judaism, is not exclusive to obscure philosophical treatises. In fact, the idea goes hand in hand with the concept of Jewish mission in the most mainstream Jewish sources. Consider this from jewishhistory.org:

Judaism is uniquely universal and particular—and establishes this pattern in the Book of Genesis...Judaism differs from all religions in that it is simultaneously universal and particular. Christianity and Islam, the other monotheistic religions, do not have any national base. They are ostensibly for everybody. In fact, in their pursuit of converts they have attempted to convert the whole world to their respective faiths. Judaism on the other hand, is particular in the sense that it deals with a particular people who have a particular set of rules that does not apply to other people and who are based in particular land. Yet, it has very dominant universalistic aspects along with its particularistic ones. This combination is not found in any other faith....Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach used to reach out to Jewish youth on college campuses and...when someone would come up to him and say, “I’m a human being,” then Rabbi Carlebach knew that he was a Jew. This is typical of the contemporary Jew accessing his universalistic instinct while eschewing his Jewish identity and his people's dreams...there are people who are very particular about their Judaism...[and] do not look outside their own society or even their own neighborhood...
they...have only taken part of the message of Judaism.\textsuperscript{109}

Or this from the sermon of Rabbi David M. Glickman of the North Dallas synagogue Shearith Israel:

[As Jews} we need to worry about the universal and the particular. We need to be concerned about our own well being, our own people's survival, and we need to save the world. We cannot have one without the other, or the other without the one...We are not a religious community if we allow the universal to eclipse the particular, nor if we are only concerned with the particular at the expense of the universal...I have not seen Judaism successfully passed on past one generation when the sole expression of Judaism is “to be a mensch”...and there is not serious commitment on the part of a family toward particularistic Jewish rituals and practice. [But]...I think we have missed the point of what the Torah is here for if we simply stay inside our home koshering our homes....checking our tzitzit and mezuzot and never leaving the front door to see what might be outside...The purpose of the Torah and the mitzvoth are to teach us how to

engage with the world, not simply to keep us occupied at home.\textsuperscript{110}

And as expressed on the website of Manhattan's Congregation Da'at Elohim:

Although TUJ holds its prayer services in the Park Avenue Christian Church (where we suitably convert the altar to a bimah), we are a totally Reform Jewish congregation. We respect the religious beliefs of our host congregation, but we faithfully follow the tradition and the beliefs of our ancestors.\textsuperscript{111}

The first two excerpts express an approach to particularity and universality that is typical of the American Conservative Jewish movement. The excerpt from Rabbi Glickman's sermon, for example, makes it very clear that keeping the Law is not a negotiable part of Jewish practice for him, and that maintaining a distinct identity is also, for him, central to an authentically Jewish life. The latter comes from a website for a Reform congregation whose understanding of Judaism is \textit{not} focused on keeping halakah in conjunction with taking part in the solution of universal human problems. For example, they define their community in the following way:


Our community is inclusive and welcomes Jews, non-Jews and Jews by choice; intermarried and intramarried, couples and singles; and all who wish to worship with us in seeking peace, justice, righteousness... \(^{112}\)

What these three excerpts share, in spite of the significant differences between them, is the centrality of *tikkun olam* to the theologies they express. Reform Temple Da'at Elohim invites their Jewish, non-Jewish, gay, straight, single and married congregants to share the community's “concern for “repairing the world” (*tikkun olam*) but make no mention of the importance of keeping kosher, for example. \(^{113}\) Rabbi Glickman urges his community to “save the world,” and although he never specifically employs the phrase *tikkun olam*, there can be no doubt that when he urges them to “create links between your social action in the community and the Jewish spiritual life that is your birthright,” this is the concept to which he refers. “Seek out those who are different than you, and show them love. This is the call to create a just society,” exhorts Rabbi Glickman. All this must be done in conjunction with keeping the Law in your home and in your daily life. Finally, jewishhistory.org claims that “In today's Jewish world...there are people who are very interested in what they call *tikkun olam*...This is a universalistic concept”\(^{114}\) which, similarly to Rabbi Glickman, the author feels should be embraced but not at the expense

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\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) Ibid.

\(^{114}\) http://www.jewishhistory.org/the-end-of-the-beginning/
of forsaking the Law. And while these groups might disagree about what parts of the world need mending and how we might best mend them, they would certainly agree on the centrality of Jewish mission to Jewish thought, practice and identity.\footnote{115} And in the modern context especially, the Jewish “mission” is to “heal the world.”\footnote{116}

Wiesel would not disagree with this. In fact, the universality of Wiesel's ethic arises first and foremost out of the theological concept of Jewish mission. Consider this from a symposium in 1967:

Our mission involves other peoples. Jews do no live alone. As a result of what the world has done to us, it may find a way to save itself. By now it must admit that we do have in our possession a key to survival. We have not survived centuries of atrocities for nothing. In a world of absurdity, we must invent reason...and because there is murder in this world—and we are the first ones to know it—and we know how hopeless our battle may appear, we have to fight murder and absurdity and give meaning to

\footnote{115} \textit{Tikkun Olam} becomes an especially important ethical imperative in Judaism after the popularization of the thought of Isaac Luria, the 16th century Kabbalist whose understanding of Creation included a dramatic “breaking of the vessels” of Creation when God expanded too quickly during the process in order to behold Himself. As a result, the sparks of God's divinity were scattered throughout Creation. Humanity's job is to gather those sparks together so that the world can be what God first intended it to be. Luria’s ideas are complex and a careful explication of his thought is beyond the scope of this project. But one of the more useful aspects of Luria’s theory is that it sees Creation as an ongoing process in which humanity is urged to participate. This constitutes one of the more creative and fruitful streams of Jewish thought that is often understood as anti-theodic.

\footnote{116} While references to Jewish mission to be “a light unto the nations” go back stories of Abraham and the original covenant, ideas about what it means to be a “light unto the nations” change over time. There have been times when the salvation of the nations was strictly theological. At other times, that salvation has been considered ethical. Generally speaking, however, Jewish mission is usually connected to some understanding of messianic future.
Here Wiesel is drawing a direct parallel between God's mission for Abraham to be a “light among nations” and what he feels is the Holocaust survivor's mission specifically, and the modern Jew's mission in general: to teach lessons in physical and moral survival in the face of murder and absurdity. In very broad terms, the Jews are all survivors given their long history of persecution, according to Wiesel. And what he perceives as the Jews' ability as a people to retain its humanity in the face of brutality and despair is potentially a great lesson to mankind, a lesson their history makes them qualified to teach. He has drawn this connection between Abraham and the modern victims of the Holocaust directly, in fact:

In the very beginning the Jewish people hoped to save the world by being what it was supposed to be. Abraham wanted to build a moral society. He was alone, the Bible says so. The Bible says he was Abraham ha-Ivri, and the Talmud explains why he was called “ha-Ivri.” Ivri comes from the word “side.” He was on the side, and the entire world was on the other side...to build a moral society within the context of what seemed to be all too often an immoral universe. What kind of immoral society did the Germans and their accomplices create?...in that immoral society a kind of

antinomian process occurred...what had been evil became good...in which culture lost all ethical dimensions and therefore turned against man and against humanity...Jewish tradition has taught us that it is possible to build on ruins...\(^\text{118}\)

Wiesel's assertions here are both old and new. Jewish thinkers who have been interested in engaging with greater society without sidelining their Judaism have consistently argued that the moral component of Judaism should serve as a model for mainstream ethical norms, but this argument is only compelling if one already feels that the mainstream is ethically lacking. In this case, Wiesel's claims are *apropos* in light of the late nineteenth and twentieth century collapse of European morality and civilization, because one could hardly argue that, at least in Europe, the “normal” ethical imperatives to which those societies had seemingly once subscribed were enduring in any sense. But for Wiesel, the Holocaust becomes not only a unique event in history, but also a unique event in the moral and *theological* history of the West. Holocaust survivors, and by extension, Jews who live after the Holocaust, are charged with the mission to save the world for the sins it has committed against the Jewish people. So, as much as Wiesel asserts that one need not concern oneself with God in order to adopt a universal ethics, morality, theology and metaphysics are inextricably intertwined in Wiesel's thought. In Wiesel’s estimation, the Jews, after having suffered at the hands of the rest of humanity,

are destined to save it nonetheless, in part because, unlike other peoples, they have
managed to remain human, i.e., moral, in the face of degrading attempts to de-humanize
them. It is this ability to remain particular and moral in the face of homogenization and
amorality that makes the Jew unique (and for Wiesel, this uniqueness is at least in part
metaphysical). These assertions are, in some ways, not unlike those of Hermann Cohen
from a century ago:

We want to consider Judaism's share in the origins and further
development of Christian culture...to refute the prejudice that the Jew must
flee the general culture in order to be able to remain an independent, self-
sufficient Jew. The Jew retains a good, perhaps the best, part of own
world, in its deepest intellectual essence, so far as he offers himself, spirit
and soul, to the general culture. 

Although suffering is not referred to explicitly in this excerpt, the concept was central to
Cohen's work too, and for some of the same reasons it is central for Wiesel. As Alan
Mittelman points out, suffering maintains this position in Cohen's system only insofar as
we must obey the moral imperative to alleviate it. And yet because Cohen also
developed a system of ethics that relies on a careful marriage of philosophy, theology and

119 See the early quote regarding the role of the Holocaust survivor in the salvation of the West in this
chapter of this dissertation.
120 Alan Mittelman, ““The Jew in Christian Culture” by Hermann Cohen: An Introduction and
history, it is difficult to reduce the role suffering plays in Cohen's thought. The suffering of Isaiah's “suffering servant” in the Hebrew Bible, for example, is not merely theoretical. And for Cohen, the suffering of Jews in general European history as well, is not theoretical. So while the lesson Cohen most wants to teach in his system is that we are all beholden to one another and therefore commanded—first by God and then by reason, God's gift to humanity--to ease one another's suffering, this is but the final outcome of adherence to his system of ethics.

First and foremost, the Jew has been charged with a mission not unlike that of the prophets: to manifest in his or her mind, body and spirit the damages wrought by undeserved human suffering, the by-product of an immoral society. Like Wiesel, Cohen makes it quite clear that the most important indicator of a society's overall moral health and fortitude is its treatment of those individuals and groups it considers “outside” its own norms. The suffering Jew in Cohen's work becomes a symbol of the lessons that victims, survivors and moral messengers are to teach the broader, largely non-Jewish world. The ultimate moral and philosophical discovery in Cohen's system is the correlation between God and humanity and between man and man, a lesson that Cohen believed Judaism was uniquely positioned to teach. To be fair, Cohen ultimately claims in his later work that the lessons of Judaism need not necessarily be transmitted by Jews. Jewish sources possess all that is needed to impart ethical monotheism and responsibility for one's fellow man to all of humanity. In many ways, this enables Cohen's system to reject notions that Judaism's uniqueness relies on the idea of a metaphysical uniqueness of the Jewish people while embracing claims that the culture and traditions of Judaism
are unique but teachable. Retention of the lessons of Jewish culture and ethical practice does not require Jewish identity.

We cannot say entirely the same for Wiesel's sense of Judaism, at least not as he has articulated it so far. Nor is it clear that the kind of suffering upon which he feels a new ethic can be built could be anything but the collective, undeserved suffering of Jews in the Western world. Recall Wiesel's urgent claims that “...only the memory of what the world has done to us [victims of the Holocaust] may save the world from catastrophe.” What underlies this philosophical and historical claim is the theological claim of the uniqueness of Jewish people and the nature of their mission in the world God created. On one hand, Wiesel is making claims about the nature of Holocaust as an historical event. What happened to the victims of the Reich and their many collaborators was so abysmal, so beyond imagining, that, according to Wiesel, if their suffering cannot force humanity to see that Western society has lost its moral compass, then nothing will.

This argument is not unique to Wiesel, although he makes it more forcefully and with different emphases than some. But even if we agree that, in the mid-twentieth century, the West proved that it was no longer—or perhaps had never been—a moral society, what can Judaism offer us in that regard if it can only really be practiced by Jews, or do its job in the world as a system if the Jews are engaging in the practice of a

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121 Emil Fackenheim is among the best-known philosophers to make this claim. Eliezer Berkovits and of course all three thinkers discussed in this dissertation are the other better-known proponents of the idea that the Holocaust is unique in human history, not just in Jewish history. The question remains contested. For discussion on this topic, please see Alan S. Rosenberg's edited volume Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008). This volume includes essays that attempt to compare the Atlantic Slave trade, the Stalinist terror, the Armenian genocide, recent atrocities in Rwanda, and the Pol Pot regime to the Holocaust.
particular orthodox form of Judaism? And if so, what would that morality look like? Would it include special imperatives for non-Jews, like the Noahide commandments, and another set of imperatives for Jews, such as the 613 commandments of the Torah? If Wiesel adheres to the strict interpretation of Jewish mission toward which he often gestures, then separate groups might indeed require separate directives. This idea is not unacceptable necessarily, but this is not exactly universalism as it is typically understood. Nor would it be appealing to both the religious and non-religious, the Jewish and non-Jewish alike. In fact, the theology from which this kind of moral framework is derived is so specific to religions of the West that it is challenging to imagine even describing “Jewish mission” to people who are completely unfamiliar with Western theology without considerable difficulty.

While it is clear that Wiesel feels it is all of humanity's job to intervene on behalf of any human who is suffering unjustly, his ethics fails to consistently address incongruities that arise from aiming at universality while being derived in large part from theological claim that a specific people to which he belongs (to which most humans do not belong) is meant to save the entire world. Part of the problem is that Wiesel unequivocally claims that the Holocaust is all part of the traditional theological and historical narrative of Judaism and therefore pushes Jews and Judaism closer to fulfillment of messianic mission; but he also claims that the Holocaust represents a fundamental aberration from which Judaism and the world at large cannot emerge unchanged. Things have changed and things remain the same. The Holocaust is both a radical break from history and a fulfillment of it.
It is important to pause here and say a bit more about the problems Wiesel's ethics clearly possess when we attempt to apply it as universal, something Wiesel very much strives for and believes is possible. But in order for such an ethics to become universal, it must be clear how suffering specifically works to engage human beings with one another; moreover the suffering and redemption of non-survivors, bystanders and victims must also be addressed. The world is made up of more than Holocaust survivors and those who work to prevent another Holocaust. Finally, what motivates a non-Jew or an atheist to intervene on behalf of those who suffer if the victims are not members of his or her ethnic, national or ideological group? As Anthony Cunningham points out:

…the content of morality and the motivation to be moral [are often most effective with they work in tandem]...If faced with someone for whom moral concerns have no motivational force, someone with no sympathy or any interest in survival...such demands would have no real relevance.

In other words, moral rules, laws and ideals should matter to us or we won't follow them.  

But before we reject the possibility that Wiesel's Orthodox Judaism specifically—and particular identity generally—could offer universally applicable concepts and values, let us consider Wiesel's insistence that, because the only plausible “answers” to the

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122 Cunningham, The Heart of What Matters, 15-16.
Holocaust are moral, the best response to the Holocaust is also moral. Wiesel describes morality as something that encompasses but is not exclusive to any one religion, philosophy, theology or culture. According to this point of view, that which is truly moral is likely to be universal. We can extrapolate that this understanding of morality has a vested interest in the existence of multiple theologies, multiple philosophies, multiple religions and multiple cultures. Consider the following excerpts from Carol Ritter's 1988 interview of Wiesel. When asked what it means to be a Jew today:

...the mission of the Jew was not to make the whole world Jewish but to humanize it, to make it warmer, more hospitable...That is true for every...Jew as well as for all the Jewish people but again, I would say that this also must be true for others in their own way. My mission and your mission are the same: to humanize the world.

When asked what his spiritual ambitions were:

...since I come from [a religious] background, everything must be translated in spiritual terms...We are here to search for truth from God, about human beings, about life. And that truth should never diminish anyone; quite the opposite; it should elevate everyone; it should bring
people together, it should not separate them. There is a point where peace and justice are synonymous, when all lofty ideals and ideas converge. To reach that point is a spiritual ambition.

And when asked what we have learned since 1945:

Everything should be related to [the Holocaust], but nothing should be compared to it. It must maintain its uniqueness, otherwise, who knows what will happen? The danger is always cheap comparisons, easy analogies...I don't wish to be in a position in which it seems that I am begrudging another's suffering. On the contrary, I respect another person's suffering more when I respect the individuality, the genuineness of his or her suffering. I think every group and every person has the right to be remembered, but why play with comparisons and analogies, why mix sufferings together?123

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this section, Wiesel asserts that morality requires that the “Jew be a good Jew” and the “Christian be a better Christian.” Wiesel shares Levinas' belief that cultural and ideological heterogeneity is a precondition

of a truly ethical society, and part of what makes this possible is that all traditions contain ethical imperatives to respect heterogeneity, even conversion-oriented religions like Christianity and Islam. When ethics are grounded in the universal experience of suffering, each individual's experience of that suffering is nonetheless contingent on the time and place in which that individual lives and on his or her role in society and any number of other factors. Extensive comparisons can lead to cultural homogenization, to inappropriate analogies, and, perhaps worst of all, lead to a failure to respect valuable theological, philosophical, religious and cultural differences between the specific culture groups that make up the world. We are at our most ethical when the differences between us (however odious they may be to us) do not prevent us from intervening on behalf of an innocent victim. For Wiesel, the degree to which we allow peaceful existence for the other, even if we don't like him much is a test—perhaps the test—of our humanity. For Levinas and Wiesel, no ethics will be truly universal—and no society will be truly ethical—without first and foremost respecting the innate pluralism of humanity as an unchanging universal truth. Particularity is universal. Herein lies the moral value of the particular to any universal ethics. Perhaps more to the point, both Wiesel and Levinas contend that when ethics are based on experience rather than on detailed ideology, pluralism can thrive.

But what about Cunningham's assertion that an ethics must provide us with motivation to adhere to its laws and adopt its ideals? Ethics grounded in religion, politics or specific cultural norms often have a built-in motivation. For example, if the Torah states that God commands us to intervene on behalf of those who suffer unjustly, the
motivation to obey an ethical imperative that is also commandment is “built-in” for the religious Jew (even if this fact is not the sole motivation for ethical action). If you are an atheist, your motivation to fulfill the imperative will be different, and there are many reasons why intervening on behalf of innocent victims is ethical. Recall that Cunningham poses the question of how ethics can motivate an individual who does not feel especially empathetic toward others. What would motivate such a person to intervene on behalf of those who suffer if he is not a religious practitioner and is not especially invested in the cultural norms and values of his community? What if you don't care whether or not people you don't like or know personally are suffering? Wiesel doesn't broach this issue in any significant way. And while it may make sense to argue, as Levinas does, that we all have the potential to be ethical, we know from experience that not all human beings internalize moral codes, and therefore cannot be relied upon to behave ethically in the absence of authority. Because people are not all alike, any ethical system requires a multiple motivations, especially in the absence of a unifying set of beliefs and practices. If pluralistic society is not itself a shared value—and we can assume that it will not be, even in societies that are successfully pluralistic--something else must serve as a motivator. Neither Levinas nor Wiesel directly addresses this concern.

Besides failing to account for how an ethics grounded in suffering can provide the motivation to be ethical whether we are victims, rescuers, bystanders or perpetrators, Wiesel's ethics focuses very little on anything beyond the prevention of collective suffering. But for those of us living in more stable times and places than fascist Europe, ethical dilemmas of an entirely different sort must be dealt with as well. If I discover that
my best friend is dating a woman who is married to a colleague of mine, what should I do? It is likely that someone will suffer whatever choice I make. If my small child takes something from a store without realizing that this is wrong, how should I handle it? My child will suffer embarrassment if I force him to return it, but in this case such suffering would be instructive and cause no lasting harm to the child. If I need to complete personal business on company time and this is against the regulations of my company, what do I do? Wiesel's ethics emerge from the most horrific era in modern Western history, and is informed by profound trauma. While this does not mean that Wiesel's thought is useless in more stable times, it serves us well to recall exactly what kind of damage Wiesel experienced and is in turn attempting to repair and prevent. The urgency of his imperatives and his laser sharp focus on victims may seem excessive to us if we subject his ethics to moral problems of a different nature. But this should not prevent us from valuing the insight he offers. Having lived through not only the torture of Nazi persecution but also the steady collapse of European civil society endows Levinas and Wiesel with insights that could be of considerable assistance to the development of an ethics. But what about Rubenstein? What can he, as an American Jew born and raised in the United States offer us?
Chapter 4  

“There is Nothing Final About the Death of God”: Richard Rubenstein's Post-Holocaust Ethics

There are many reasons why [the] insistence upon the ethnic and non-privileged character of Judaism must be welcomed. If Jewish existence is not self-validating, there is real danger that what we take to be theological justifications for our existence may turn out to be extensions of thoroughly unhealthy and irrational non-Jewish myths about Jews and Judaism. For two thousand years the assertion that Jewish existence is specially related to the Divine has been a commonplace of both Jewish and Christian theology. The difference between depended upon whether one accepted the belief of Jewish theologians that this relationship continued to be one of special love and concern on God's part for Israel, or whether one accepted the Christian version of the same myth, namely, that the Church had become the true Israel and that the Jews, for the crime of rejecting Christ, had become the rejected of God...the only proof the Church could offer was the historical facts of Jewish degradation and disaster. Too often the human psyche has attempted to make reality conform to its
myths.¹

In part one of this chapter presents an exegesis of texts selected from Rubenstein's corpus to support the following claims about his project:

1. Rubenstein grounds ethics in suffering.
2. Rubenstein offers an ethics that attempts to account for how society can prevent the creation of perpetrators.
3. Rubenstein develops his ethics from the sources of Judaism, but ultimately demands radical changes in Jewish belief and practice.

Part two is a critical analysis of the texts and ideas presented in part one of the chapter. Final conclusions regarding Rubenstein's project are provided in Chapter 5.

I. Exegesis

Richard Rubenstein's radical theological prescriptions for Jews and Judaism after the Holocaust have perhaps come to appear less treacherous over time. As the first Jewish theologian to respond publicly in an innovative way to the theoretical problems posed by Auschwitz, he paved the way for thinkers like Irving Greenberg whose ideas

were embraced by far more Jewish intellectuals and practitioners than Rubenstein's, in spite of his reformist claims about the long-term effects of the Holocaust on the Abrahamic covenant. This is not to say that Greenberg didn't send shock waves by stating that God broke the covenant when He allowed the Nazis to wage a successful war against the Jews of Europe. Many believed Greenberg was antinomian when he claimed that, after Auschwitz, following the Law was no longer compulsory for world Jewry. But unlike Rubenstein, Greenberg worked as a pulpit rabbi and as a professor at Yeshiva University during the years he made these radical statements. He also founded and chaired the department of Jewish Studies at City College of the City University of New York. In other words, his teachings were not wholly rejected, even if some felt he could not legitimately belong to the modern Orthodox community.\(^2\)

Rubenstein, on the other hand, experienced significant professional difficulties after the publication of *After Auschwitz* in 1966. After having served as pulpit rabbi for at least two communities, he came to believe that the controversial nature of his ideas caused a “bureacratic excommuncation.”\(^3\) In spite of the fact that Rubenstein had earned advanced degrees from Jewish Theological Seminary and Harvard University, Rubenstein worked as an adjunct from 1969 until 1971 when he was finally hired by Florida State University's religion department. Rubenstein never entered the Jewish establishment, even as a tenured professor. And it is the single, explosive claim that

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Judaism must abandon the notion of Jewish mission or potentially suffer further manifestations of genocidal rage from embittered Christians that has shaped Jewish intellectual response to Rubenstein as a thinker and to his entire corpus.

To understand the enormity of Rubenstein's demands, consider that, for Wiesel, even today, 43 years after the conference in question, Jewish mission remains central to his understanding of Judaism at the same time that it informs his ethics—an ethics which relinquishes expectations of God's direct involvement in human history and yet cannot conceive of a temporal reality without the imperative to heal the world and to direct mankind toward God's intended path for it. As Eliezer Schweid rightly states:

> The idea of the chosen people established the self-consciousness of the Jewish people from its inception in the Babylonian exile to its second return to Zion. It seems that the Jewish people cannot recognize itself in any other image, but after the Shoah, the idea of a people created to fulfill a universal mission for humanity became for the majority of Jews a meaningless pretense.\(^4\)

It is precisely this reality—the reality that, for many Jews, most especially the younger

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\(^4\) Eliezer Schweid, “Is There a Religious Meaning to the Idea of a Chosen People after the Shoah?” *The Impact of the Holocaust in Jewish Theology*, Steven T. Katz, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 5. It must be said that Schweid published this essay in 2005. And although he has published earlier essays on this and other post-Holocaust theological concerns, his path, too, was made easier by Rubenstein's largely unwelcome 1966 bombshell.
generations, the concept of Jewish mission was an embarrassment—that pushed Rubenstein to “assume to burden of facing the problem” of re-integrating or ultimately abandoning what had for centuries been a theological linchpin of Judaism and a foundation of more secular constructions of Jewish communal identity as well.

As Schweid points out, not even the Enlightenment and its representation of Jews and Jewishness as the “main challenger of a traumatic conflict in the self-understanding of Western nations and societies” could force Jews to relinquish this most cherished aspect of Jewish identity. Chosenness was ultimately re-adopted through “reinterpretation of its traditional meaning” in various ways. For Reform Judaism, assimilation became the vehicle by means of which Jews could “teach humanity the values of humanism, and the right way to implement them into reality.” This understanding of Jewish chosenness permeates the work of Jewish philosophers from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, as well. The secular Zionists would also take up the concept of Jewish chosenness, partly because the “idea of normalizing an exiled people is indeed abnormal.” Zionism adopted what Schweid terms “a self-sacrificial

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5 Ibid. Schweid asserts that, although the idea of Jewish mission in its traditional formation remains intact for many actively religious Jews, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, “the question of whether [one's] Jewishness endows him or her with a sense of universal mission will be answered with great embarrassment.”


7 Hermann Cohen felt that the Jewish mission in Europe (and in Germany in particular) was to spread ethical monotheism to non-Jews. Broadly speaking, Cohen felt that Judaism could teach a great sense of responsibility on the part of man for his neighbor. He also felt that Judaism could “help” Christians embrace a relationship with God that would not require Christ as an intermediary. Cohen felt that Jewish values, culture and “choseness” could be taught, learned and embraced by anyone who wished to do so. Modern Jewish philosophy—and even post-modern and contemporary Jewish philosophy—relies heavily on the idea that Judaism's mission is to impart its unique ethics to the world, thereby improving the state of God’s creation. This goal would make little sense without the understanding that there is a “Jewish mission” which Jews “choose” to fulfill.
idealism” that Zionists hoped would catapult “the Zionist movement” toward making “the Jewish people like all the other nations, through a heroic universal understanding that at one and the same time would normalize the Jewish people and would make it “a light unto all the nations.” The Jewish nation would show the world that it was possible to transform from what was seen as the “sickest,” weakest and most politically disorganized of all nations into the most morally upright, democratic, organized and militarily strong of all nations. “This may explain the fact,” Schweid writes, “that on the brink of the Second World War almost all movements within the Jewish people adopted the idea of chosenness, each in its own interpretation.”

To be very clear, tikkun olam, Schweid correctly states that the Jewish mission for each and every of these groups was “to mend the world.” Whether one meant to mend the world with God or without Him, from within Israel or from outside Israel was far less relevant than the fulfillment of the command to mend the world, all of it—not just Jewish individuals and Jewish communities.

How then, according to Schweid, does the notion of Jewish mission, so ubiquitous in Jewish thought of nearly every stripe and caliber become an “embarrassment” to the younger generations of Jews? Schweid argues that the concept becomes camouflaged by way of its fulfillment. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Emil Fackenheim, for example, who continued to believe in the idea of a particular Jewish mission to disseminate Judaism's universal moral messages to the world also believed that the Holocaust was

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8 Schweid, “Chosen People,” 7.
9 Ibid.
only possible because “it could only be thought about and then executed only against the Jewish people, because of its specific condition in exile and its specific moral-theological mission.”

What is most “broken” about the world, then, according to this view, is that humanity was—and may well remain—able to slaughter a people precisely because its traditions represented, at least in the West, the pinnacle of moral teachings and because it was also a people in exile whose position was particularly precarious. Fackenheim argued, as did many others, that the best way to “mend the world” was to “normalize” the conditions of world Jewry. If the Jewish people entered the family of nations and became strong enough to protect itself against any threat, thereby becoming “normal,” then not only would the Jews ultimately survive, but the world itself would be “on the mend,” so to speak. The Jewish people, once they became a “real nation,” provided it kept a higher moral standard than other nations, could continue to embrace the notion of Jewish mission because it could continue to be a moral guidepost for the Western world.

It must be reiterated that these ideas can found in Zionist literature well before Fackenheim expressed them in 1982. Early secular Zionists like Moses Hess, who wrote his *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last National Question* in 1862 believed very strongly that if Jewish emancipation proved incommensurate with Jewish nationalism, then emancipation must be sacrificed for the greater good of Jewish state. Yet Jewish mission remained central even for Hess, who argued vehemently that only the “redemption of the soil” could cure the Jewish people of its spiritual and political illness while insisting that only the Jewish people could teach the rest of the West how to build and maintain a truly

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10 Schweid, “Chosen People,” 8.
moral nation. There is nothing remotely theological in Hess' claims, yet front and center remains what Fackenheim would restate after the Holocaust: that the Jews were charged with a special mission which involved saving themselves through “normalization” while saving the world with the strength of its moral ascendency. Schweid argues it is the very success of this mission to “normalize” the Jewish people through self-reliance, political strength and individual and community wellbeing—put into place, one could argue, since the Emancipation of European Jewry—that has led to a perceived sense of embarrassment about the idea of Jewish mission among younger generations of Jews. In a very real sense, the attempts of the mission to save the world by saving the Jews (by means of a Jewish state) create the end of the understanding of Jewish mission as continuous in time.11

Despite these very real changes in the place of Jewish mission the lives of young contemporary Jews, when Rubenstein published After Auschwitz in 1966, Jewish mission remained, as Schweid states, the one idea which continued to unify otherwise disparate Jewish groups in spite of the catastrophe. The Holocaust was often seen as proof of the lasting importance of Jewish moral mission, especially for thinkers like Wiesel. Again, per Schweid:

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11 Luria's understanding of the task of “mending the world” was metaphysical as well as temporal ones. Humanity mends the world by engaging in temporal acts of charity like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and housing the homeless. Humanity also mends the world by simultaneously engaging in metaphysical acts of healing, like seeing divinity in even the meanest and most cruel people and places in the material world. This “gathers” the sparks and contributes to the completion of creation. Creation, though, is never “complete,” just as, one might say, the messiah never comes. The task of mending the world is not finite, but infinite.
In the Shoah [all the movements of the Jewish people] came even closer to each other. The common experience convinced them that Hitler declared his war specifically and mainly against the Jewish people because it symbolized for him the universal humanism that he rejected. The chosen people incarnated all that Hitler hated in the name of German racist superiority. The Shoah was, then, in the eyes of victimized Jews, the struggle between Jewish moral chosenness and German racist monstrosity. Thus the final victory was also considered to be the success of the Jewish people to withstand its trial, to resist absolute wickedness, as the representative of true humanity created in the image of God.12

To repeat, it is Jewish mission, a concept which Schweid rightly states is one of the only unifying concepts related to Jewish identity left to the world's remaining Jews—a concept Wiesel actively utilizes as a spiritual life-raft in the immediate wake of the Holocaust and a guidepost for his universal ethics---which Rubenstein most vehemently insists is a “myth” of “privilege” that after the Holocaust is “unhealthy” and “irrational.”13 I start the discussion of Rubenstein's ethics with the question of Jewish mission because it is one of the ways in which he differs most radically from Wiesel, whose ethics rely on the very tenet Rubenstein unequivocally throws away. Yet for Rubenstein, the concept of Jewish election is not only illogical but also immoral.

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12 Schweid, “Chosen People,” 7.
13 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 85.
According to Rubenstein, to believe in the God of the Jews after Auschwitz is to either believe that the 6 million were guilty as charged or to believe that God is not, after all, omnipotent or active in human history.

The Debate: Rubenstein’s Judaism

I turn now to the debate between Wiesel and Rubenstein regarding the problem of Jewish mission after the Holocaust—well-known among students of post-Holocaust thought—at the first annual International Scholars' Conference on the German Church Struggle and the Holocaust, held at Wayne State University in 1970. As speakers scheduled at different times to address conference attendees, Rubenstein and Wiesel engaged in an unplanned dialogue regarding Rubenstein's proclamation that Auschwitz proved “God is dead.”14 Roth and Berenbaum are right when they call this exchange “part of the lore of Holocaust scholarship.”15

“Lore” has it that on Wednesday evening of the conference when Wiesel was scheduled to speak on “The Literature of the Holocaust,” he chose not to speak on the predetermined topic but to address, at least in part, the lecture given earlier in the day by Rubenstein in which he attempted to advance his claims regarding the death of God and the subsequent need for the abandonment of the age-old concept of Jewish mission. I

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14 There are many accounts of this exchange, but I site here the text that reproduces the “debate” itself. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, “Richard Rubenstein and Elie Wiesel: An Exchange,” Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1989), 346.
15 Roth and Berenbaum, “Exchange,” 347.
will examine the “exchange” between them here because the analysis is quite fruitful; by comparing Rubenstein and Wiesel to one another, particularly within the context of a conference such as the International Scholar's Conference, we understand their work in general and their ethics specifically in greater depth.

The content of the debate can be summarized as follows: Rubenstein discussed the problems of faith in the “God of History” after Auschwitz, much of which he already described in *After Auschwitz*. Rubenstein related his first and second visits to Europe in 1960 and 1969 respectively. When he encountered German families while vacationing in the Netherlands, he found himself plunged into a slowly deepening crisis of faith, in part because his young son began asking him questions about Auschwitz and the US government's failure to intervene on behalf of Europe's persecuted Jewry. His children knew that his wife, herself a Dutch Jew, had barely escaped the Netherlands during the war. His youngest son, Jeremy, accompanied him on his second journey, and Rubenstein recounts that while touring the plaza of the Cologne Cathedral, Jeremy suddenly shrieked, “Daddy, get me out of here. I don't want to be anywhere near these people.” Rubenstein states that he “understood his reaction. It was a shudder of utter horror when he realized the enormity of what the people around him had done...” Rubenstein goes on to say that “there is more to the problem” than trying to comprehend the enormity of the crime of the Holocaust. Rubenstein then describes, very succinctly, the breadth and depth of the problems posed by Auschwitz, problems that, until Rubenstein published *After Auschwitz*, had not even been voiced, let alone discussed with any alacrity.

The first question Rubenstein poses is: How should Jewish parents instruct their
children to engage with and think about Christians? It is this question which leads Rubenstein to recount the experience he had with Probst Dr. Heinrich Grüber, the only German to testify against Adolf Eichmann at the 1961 trial in Jerusalem (about which Hannah Arendt's controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was written). Grüber, who spent time in a concentration camp for helping “non-Aryans” escape persecution, asserted that Germany was being “punished” by God for making refugees out of much of Europe's population, and “commenced with his biblical interpretation of recent history...[and] could not stop until he asserted it had been God's will to send Adolf Hitler to exterminate Europe's Jews.” This proclamation, Rubenstein says, does not prove that Grüber is an anti-Semite. Rather, it proves that “the logic of Covenant Theology” is impossibly and irrevocably flawed for Christian and Jew alike:

The only morally defensible motive for a superior to inflict pain on an inferior would be punitive chastisement which has its purpose altering the victim's mode of behavior. If one takes Covenant Theology seriously, as did Dean Grüber, Auschwitz must be God's way of punishing the Jewish people in order that they might better see the light, the light of Christ if one is a Christian, the light of Torah if one is a traditional Jew...If the God of the Covenant exists, at Auschwitz my people stood under the most fearsome curse that God has ever inflicted. If the God of history does not exist, then the Cosmos is ultimately absurd in origin and meaningless in purpose...I have elected to accept what Camus...called the courage of the
absurd, the courage to live in a meaningless, purposeless Cosmos rather than believe in a God who inflicts Auschwitz on his people. ¹⁶

As for Jewish identity and Jewish mission, Rubenstein states:

As human beings we are divided by historical and geographical accident into the tribes of mankind, to no ultimate reason or purpose. We are simply there for but a moment only to disappear into the midnight silence of Eternal Chaos.

Identity is random; Jewishness is random and as a result cannot be imbued with the kind of meaning that the concept “chosenness” imbues. And unlike all the Jews in Europe's past who could at least “elect...for martyrdom” when faced with persecution, the Nazis deprived their victims of any such opportunity:

In the camps it made no difference whether you were Dr. Edith Stein, who had become a Carmelite nun, or a Hasidic rabbi. All Jews were slaughtered without distinction. Even baptism provided no escape. It must be sadly noted that the pathetic attempts of the Jewish community to see the six million as martyrs is a tragic albeit understandable

misperception.

Rubenstein goes on to say that his use of “language indifferent to the moral dimension” when discussing the nature of Auschwitz as an event in human history is “deliberate;” he has “attempted to use language as did the Nazis when they spoke of exterminating people.”\(^\text{17}\) Rubenstein makes this point in order to clarify that for him, morality is neither inherent nor reliable, especially in times of political and social upheaval. Here Rubenstein is extending Arendt’s theory that the idea of inherent “human rights” is no longer credible in a post-totalitarian world\(^\text{18}\) to similar theological claims that God “endows man with a certain irreducible measure of dignity.” For Rubenstein, the Germans proved that concepts on inalienable rights are of “no consequence when such talk might really matter...[because it would] neither deter future emulators of the Nazis nor comfort realistically their victims.”\(^\text{19}\)

It is this perspective—that “rights” in the Enlightenment sense of the term or even in the theological sense of the term are not innate—which leads Rubenstein to his support of the Israeli state. For Rubenstein, “the possession of power is indispensable for human dignity” because mankind is, by nature, clannish and violent. There could be no future protection of the world's remaining Jews without a Jewish state powerful enough to defend its citizens—and, presumably, world Jewry—from any and all threats. “I do not

\(^\text{17}\) Roth and Berenbaum, “Exchange,” 357.
\(^\text{18}\) See Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt experienced the realities of statelessness in Nazi Europe, and her ideas about human rights as contingent on the power of one's political community reflect those experiences.
\(^\text{19}\) Roth and Berenbaum, “Exchange,” 358.
see,” said Rubenstein, “how one can escape the sorrowful conclusion that he alone has rights and dignity who has the power to enforce those rights or belongs to a group that possesses such power.” Rubenstein states that he feels freed by his new understanding of humans as creatures marked by the “psychological reality of the Fall.” He claims that, as such, he is “neither disappointed nor resentful when people behave in a way that is both predictable and consistent with their nature. In times of stress,” he avers, “it is unrealistic to expect much virtue or magnanimity from the generality of men, no matter how praiseworthy such behavior may be when it surfaces unexpectedly.”

Finally, Rubenstein offers his “own confession of faith,” and describes himself as a pagan, which he defines as “find[ing] once again one's roots as a child of Earth and to see one's own existence as wholly and totally an earthly existence.” He goes on to state:

[Being pagan]...means to find once again to understand that for mankind the true divinities are the gods of the earth, not the high gods of the sky; the gods of space and place, not the gods of time; the gods of home and hearth, not the gods of wandering, though wanderers we must be. Though every single establishment Jewish theologian rejects this position, the Jewish people have given their assent—with their feet. They have gone home. The best part of that people has ceased to be wanderers. They have

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20 Roth and Berenbaum, “Exchange,” 359.
once again found a place of their own on this earth. That is paganism.\textsuperscript{22}

He compares this confession of paganism to the burying of his Lithuanian Yiddish speaking grandmother with a small bag of dirt from mandate-era Palestine, and closes by musing that she “was as thoroughgoing a pagan” as he is.

It is not difficult to anticipate Wiesel's response to Rubenstein's hand grenade of an address. Wiesel began by immediately obscuring not only his audience's access to the experience of the survivor, but also his own access to “the Event” \textit{as} a survivor, a move familiar to readers of Wiesel's work. In this context, however, it is easier to see why Wiesel often chooses to obfuscate his own experience for the sake of his larger message. “I don't know,” he began, “what happened to Moishe the-beadle\textsuperscript{23}. I don't even know what happened to Him, the One he addressed. I don't even know whether \textit{I} am here.” Wiesel goes on to explain that the person he feels himself to be today feels, at times, disconnected from the child who went straight from the Yeshiva to Auschwitz who wonders “whether there was a Holocaust at all.”\textsuperscript{24} Wiesel's emphasis on this disconnection could be justified in a number of ways; one could say, for example, that it is a way of highlighting the profound trauma of the experience i.e., Auschwitz was so disconnected from normal human life and experience that to try and connect with the survivor experience even as the survivor who experienced it is impossible. Yet Wiesel

\textsuperscript{22} Roth and Berenbaum, “Exchange,” 360.
\textsuperscript{23} Moishe the beadle, as he explains somewhat briefly in this address and at greater length elsewhere, is one of Wiesel's madmen who is a kind of modern day prophet whose presence and message are rejected and yet herald an unwanted and unforeseen catastrophe which is about to befall the Jewish people.
\textsuperscript{24} Roth and Berenbaum, “An Exchange,” 363.
means to do more than that, because in the next breath he describes what he believes other survivors believed about the world outside the camps during those fateful years:

...all the Jews who were trapped there had no idea that outside world knew what was happening. I listened today to Dick Rubenstein. Of course I share his anger and his despair...it is fortunate that Jews in the camps did not know what was happening in the world. Had the Jews known that Roosevelt and Churchill and De Gaulle and the Pope and everybody knew, and no one cared, I think they would have...chosen not to survive.25

Wiesel goes on to make at least one of the reasons for his downplaying the details of survivor experience clear. He claims that he “never speaks of God now”:

I rather speak of men who believed in God or men who denied God. How strange that the philosophy of denying God came not from the survivors...my dispute, my bewilderment, my astonishment is with men. I didn't understand how men could be so “barbarian” as you called it, Dick. I still don't understand it.

Wiesel wanted to focus on human response to the suffering of other humans, not on God

or on the experience of suffering itself, because it is our response to our fellow human's suffering which can be, in some way, measured and, perhaps in the future, shaped by education and experience. In other words, both Rubenstein and Wiesel place the focus on humanity with regard to the problem of ethics. But while Rubenstein proclaims God is dead (and Rubenstein would rather believe Him dead rather than unable to or uninterested in meeting his expectations of the God of History) Wiesel proves himself to have far fewer expectations of God's “behavior” and far greater expectations of humanity. Rubenstein does place some faith in human collectives, or at least in the brute strength of a collective when it is motivated to protect its members from harm. But this hardly seems to be an expression of hope for humankind's moral future. Wiesel moved on to discuss, if indirectly, Jewish identity:

Let me reassure you, Dick, a Jew is incapable of hate. In the Bible, whenever hate is mentioned, it always refers to self-hate. The only hate that a Jew is capable of—unfortunately—is self-hate. But then he does it well. We cannot hate our neighbors; we cannot even hate our enemies. Look at Israel; Israelis do not hate Arabs...Strange as it may sound, there was no hate involved in the relationship between Jew and German...we didn't hate them because we are incapable of hate, especially as they represented the *Malach Hamavet*, the Angel of Death. How can you hate
Wiesel's apparent certainty that Jews are metaphysically incapable of hate is, even 43 years after he spoke these words, shocking for a number of reasons. First, he attributes innate qualities to Jews that are arguably politically convenient stereotypes of the 'un-angry' Holocaust survivor--discussed earlier in this study and described so well by Naomi Seidman. If Jewish victims of the Shoah can be said to be free of hate and the desire for revenge, then they will not only appear less threatening to members of perpetrator societies; they can also be used as moral examples. But this depiction of the survivor as free of hate, even free of anger, is patently inaccurate, as proven by Wiesel's own early work. It is also philosophically problematic given that Nazism attributed innate social and personality characteristics to biological “identities.” Such claims are risky even when the characteristics deemed innate are positive in nature. Second, by claiming that Jews cannot hate or seek revenge for undeserved persecution, even hyperbolically, is to deprive Jews of their humanity. But beyond the potential political benefits of this position, why does Wiesel say this, here and elsewhere?

Wiesel tells the story from the Babylonian Talmud about Rabbi Ishmael, a tannaitic sage and martyr from the Roman period. According to the story, as Rabbi Ishmael is led to his death, he hears God's voice telling him that if he sheds even one tear while being murdered, He will “return the universe to its primary chaos.” Rabbi Ishmael

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did not cry, and Wiesel ends his discussion by telling us why he believes Rabbi Ishmael did not cry: 1.) He was a martyr and did not cry so the world would be saved; 2.) he obeyed; and finally, and most importantly, 3.) he wanted to teach that:

The world deserves to be destroyed. But to be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to destroy the world and not to destroy! To be a Jew is to have all the reasons on the world to hate the Germans and not to hate them! To be a Jew...is to have all the reasons in the world not to have faith in language, in singing, in prayers, and in God, but to go on telling the tale, to go on carrying on the dialogue, and to have my own silent prayers and quarrels with God.27

Wiesel's sweeping statements about what it means to be “a Jew” are first and foremost definitions and endorsements of a specific interpretation of Jewish mission. Wiesel's muddling of descriptions of the Holocaust experience as well as his explicit avoidance of stating much that is truly definitive about the nature of God as he understands it are, among other things, tools which enable him to focus on the notion of Jewish mission specifically and on human ethical engagement more broadly. If Jewish mission remains intact, the way forward after the Shoah—at least for world Jewry—remains or becomes clear: Jews should remember the suffering of their dead martyrs and try to save the

Jews—and the world that would subject them to it—from another Holocaust. If Jewish mission remains intact, then the suffering of the victims is not entirely in vain because what they experienced will enable them to “mend the world.” The distinctions between Wiesel's understanding of Jewish mission and the pre-war and interwar understanding of Jewish mission as briefly outlined by Schweid are nuanced but ultimately more similar than dissimilar.

This is exactly what Rubenstein is rejecting. The Jews died by the millions in Europe and God did not intervene; God no longer “chooses” them, and for Rubenstein, to continue to believe He did was ludicrous. If we apply the same logic to the matter of God in Rubenstein's argument, God is dead because God as Rubenstein understood Him would have intervened and God did not intervene. Therefore, He must be dead. Victims of the Shoah were innocent and their deaths did nothing to alter the true nature of the world of mankind as a chaotic, cruel, empty place wherein the only things human beings have in common are the suffering they inflict on one another and the desire to protect themselves from it. To sum up the whole of Rubenstein's argument as presented at the International Scholars' Conference, leaving aside for the moment any objections to his conclusions:

1. If you believe victims of Nazi persecution were innocent, the only way to take the covenantal theology of Judaism seriously is by rejecting the idea of Jewish mission and the continued existence of a God of History completely.

2. The way Dean Grüber and those who think like him define, understand and identify
Jewish chosenness accurately: The Jews and only the Jews are God's favorite and most beloved people and possess a special relationship with God that, for the non-Jew, is impossible to attain, even if he or she converts. It would therefore be foolhardy and dangerous for any Jew to subscribe to the idea of Jewish mission in any of its permutation as meaningful (presumably even if his or her understanding of chosenness is different than Grüber's) if he or she wants to avoid further anti-Semitic violence.

3. Jewish victims of the Holocaust, although innocent, are not martyrs because they could not choose death over conversion or flight, as did their persecuted ancestors. To believe victims of the Holocaust were martyrs is to misunderstand martyrdom and the nature of the Reich's policies.

4. The whole continuum of Jewish history can be understood as culminating in the Holocaust. In fact we must understand Jewish history in this way if we understand the Holocaust accurately.

5. Morality is not inherent nor is it transcendent/transcendental.

6. Humanity does not possess an innate tendency toward morality.

7. Following Arendt, human beings do not possess inherent “rights.” Human rights are an extension of the state, and then only insofar as that state can defend itself against all aggressors.

8. Paganism can be understood as a more or less unified set of beliefs that are in direct opposition with the central tenets of traditional Judaism; whereas paganism represents rootedness and connection with land, bodies, materiality and presence in the temporal
world. Judaism represents landlessness, abstraction, ideas, and disconnection from modern society.

9. Jewish support of Israel and the popularity of making *aliyah* is a rejection of the tenets of traditional Judaism.

10. The presence of useless human suffering on the scale of that inflicted by the Third Reich proves that life has no inherent meaning or purpose, and if there are metaphysical truths, we have failed to grasp them as a species.

The above are the basic concepts most scholars discuss regarding Rubenstein's project. Although *After Auschwitz* does not contain a separate section on ethics, the problem of ethics after World War II is as central to the text as Rubenstein's prescriptions for Jewish theology and remains as yet untapped by most students and critics of post-Holocaust thought. Rubenstein's theological ideas often differ significantly from Wiesel's—particularly with regard to expectations of God's involvement in the matters of humanity, as discussed above—but both feel that at bottom “man is a problem to himself” since “human evil has done far more harm throughout the ages than natural catastrophe.”  

We must remember here that for Rubenstein, the matter of God's existence is directly connected to human ethics. For example, when discussing Rabbi Jack J. Cohen's important Reconstructionist contribution, *The Case for Religious Supernaturalism*, Rubenstein insists that, contra Cohen who felt that study of the physical

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sciences proved modern people could not insist on the existence of a personal God, “the moral and psychological objections are more telling than the objections arising from the physical sciences.” What makes belief in a personal God immoral for Rubenstein is not the belief itself but rather what he understood be the resulting lack of moral agency:

[My ancestors] attempted to solve [the problem of the existence of undeserved suffering] by projecting an existence of another world wherein this world's cruelty would be rectified. We cannot accept this solution and we would do well to recognize the disguised yet nonetheless strong criticism of God's government of this world implied in their fantasy of another world in which He would ultimately do a better job.

As we might expect from Rubenstein, his conception of traditional Judaism's treatment of theodicy is, at least as he delineates it in *After Auschwitz*, both limited and static, and seems to ignore that one need not reduce theodicy to a single, outmoded understanding of the idea in order to reject the need for theodicy completely. Moreover one need not reject traditional Judaism in order to reject theodicy. Rubenstein does not even mention the many thinkers who, by 1966, also rejected theodicy precisely because of the moral implications of embracing it. Rubenstein goes on to laud Paul Tillich for believing that “[the God of theism] is dead and deserved to die,” for “praising...Nietzsche” and for

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contending that a personal God “is the enemy of human freedom.”

In short, “human moral autonomy is incompatible with the traditional conception of a personal God.”

Rubenstein conflates the idea of a personal God with acceptance of traditional Deuteronomistic theodicy. In addition, Rubenstein claims:

1. The “Christian religion, alone among the religions of the world, begins with a murder—the murder of God”; 
2. that the “murder of God is an immensely potent symbol of man's primal desire to do away with his impediments to instinctual gratification”; 
3. that the “perversity of the human heart finds its ultimate expression in the myth of the murder of God”; 
4. and finally that “The death camp,” only possible in a world devoid of God, “became the place where the morally impossible became the commonplace and even the trivial for the Nazis.”

Rubenstein shrinks from the notion of deicide present in Christianity and yet embraces what he sees as the “moral autonomy” he feels must result from such an action. The implication is that humans will be more ethical if they are not modeling their ethics after

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
34 Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 12 Emphasis original.
36 Rubenstein follows Arendt here.
God's. Killing God—or proclaiming Him dead—makes us, so Rubenstein, morally responsible for one another and ourselves. And yet one possible logical end of a world without the moral boundaries Western society embraced before 1933 is the Nazi death camps. Rubenstein's lack of theological nuance and his unwillingness to portray Jewish theology as far more than traditional Christian understandings of it weakens his argument rather than strengthens it; God is a punishing God, and therefore makes “sinners” suffer in ways that do not fit the “sin.” His understanding of many of the doctrines of Judaism read like misunderstandings of Jewish religious thought and practice from an almost anti-Jewish Christian perspective. In other words, his “traditional Jewish theology” is quite like Dean Grüber's anti-Jewish Christianity. It is likely that the reasons for this are complicated, and perhaps related to Rubenstein's personal need to work though the crisis of the Holocaust by theological means; and while one cannot in fairness claim Rubenstein is anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic (indeed he is in crisis because he is grieving the murder of 6 million Jews and wants to prevent another Shoah), the theology he suggests often adopts the very approach and tone of rhetoric he wants to fight. Even Rubenstein's assertions that Jews should support Israel because Israel can protect world Jewry with its military might come dangerously close to twentieth century fascist claims that “might makes right.” Just as he lauds the moral responsibility brought on by the death of God and yet claims that the “aim of creating a world in which God is dead (or, more precisely, in which the Judaeo-Christian God is negated) was at the heart of the Nazi program,” he also responds to fascism's claims that the strongest will and should prevail by sadly proclaiming that they were right to think so. This aspect of Rubenstein's work
remains troubling.

What is Suffering?

Setting aside for a moment that Rubenstein errrs here in much the same way he errrs with regard to the doctrine of chosenness and the problem of the covenant,\textsuperscript{38} there is much to be gleaned from Rubenstein's system with regard to the problem of suffering and the contingent problem of ethics. Rubenstein objects to God because he objects to the reality of the world as a place of great undeserved suffering, suffering which even the radical evil of Auschwitz has not stymied. Rubenstein's understanding of the world as a place full of undeserved suffering has caused him to reject God—or even the premise that God exists—on ethical grounds. For Rubenstein, humanity's only true common denominator is the ubiquity of suffering; Rubenstein's understanding of the world is nihilistic insofar as he believes we live in “an unfeeling and silent cosmos.”\textsuperscript{39} He does not view human morality or even the tendency toward morality as innate. Like Wiesel, Rubenstein feels a call to respond to that suffering not for God or on account of God, but for and on account of humanity, in spite of the “perversity” of the human heart. “The real objections against a personal or theistic God,” writes Rubenstein, “come from the irreconcilability of the claim of God's perfection with the hideous human evil tolerated by

\textsuperscript{38} The issue of chosenness as it appears in Rubenstein's work is discussed at length in the section of Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{39} Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 225.
such a God.\textsuperscript{40} Like Dostoevsky, Rubenstein firmly believes God is implicated in man's cruelty to man if He has the power to control it. It follows that the most important ethical imperative in Rubenstein's ethical system is the necessity of human intervention on behalf of those who suffer unjustly.

And while he discusses the possibility that a Jew living after the Holocaust might choose to reject Jewish identity for the sake of their children's survival,\textsuperscript{41} he states:

Had I rejected myself as a Jew, I would have had to enthrone the opinions of others as ultimately decisive for my inner life. I could not grant the world that tyranny over me. I am prepared to do many things that society requires of me, granted their consistency with the canons of human decency, but I am not prepared to bestow upon others the right to determine how I shall think of myself or my community. By accepting myself as a Jew, I have liberated myself from the most futile and degrading of servilities, that of forever attempting to appease the irrational mythology that the Christian world has constructed of the Jew.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 86.
\textsuperscript{41} Rubenstein writes that “Judaism is simply no longer worth the price of martyrdom for far more young Jews than most of us can possibly imagine...martyrdom has gone out of fashion among Jews and it has been replaced by the possibility of massive defection.” Whether or not Rubenstein's claims have turned out to be true is another matter. But this establishes his understanding of the nature of Jewish identity after the Shoah.
\textsuperscript{42} Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 224. Rubenstein's understanding of Jewish identification here is undoubtedly shaped in large part by his experiences as a Jew in interwar and post World War II America.
Perhaps this seems surprising, given Rubenstein's embrace of many aspects of Protestant Death of God theology, and his rejection of Jewish chosenness and by extension the value of particularity in general. Yet Rubenstein's desire to remain a Jew for reasons of personal authenticity is not unlike Moses Mendelssohn's continued practice of Judaism for reasons of filial piety, or Leo Strauss’ claims that is impossible not to remain a Jew. A kind of honor is found in remaining who one is, in spite of what the wider world would like one to be. Moreover, when Rubenstein cites his behavioral boundaries as defined by the “cannons of human decency,” we can be sure that much of what his personal canon of decency contains has its origins in Jewish culture, thought and practice.

While Rubenstein's Judaism may not, as far as I can tell, feel authentic to many people who identify as Jewish—and he may do away with or completely ignore those texts, practices and ideas upon which most Jewish thinkers rely when constructing an ethic from Judaism-- he nonetheless, like Levinas and Wiesel, believes that Jewish sources and traditions provide necessary alternatives to Western ethics derived almost exclusively from philosophy. Unlike Wiesel and Levinas, who both draw heavily on the prophetic books and traditions, Rubenstein identifies the “archaic elements [of Judaism]” associated with cultic or Temple Judaism as “the most meaningful” part of the tradition. He views humankind as “[in]capable of much improvement through homiletic exhortation” associated with the prophetic tradition because man “needs the drama and the consolation of religion as much to share his inevitable failings as to be encouraged for
Rubenstein views humankind as prone to hate “the very disciplines and limitations he recognizes as absolutely necessary for his own preservation”; since God is understood in Rubenstein's system as a kind of metaphysical super ego, man's hatred of limitations translates into a “hatred of God” and the perceived necessity of submission to Him and the limitations His power imposes upon us. For Rubenstein it is Judaism's traditions of sacrifice and atonement that have the most to offer contemporary society and therefore make it unique among the Western faiths. In this, as in many things theological, Rubenstein goes against the grain.

He is correct when he points to the “aura of embarrassment” which “hangs over the treatment of sacrifice in contemporary Jewish liturgy.” Nonetheless, Rubenstein insists that there are “important reasons why the symbolic assertion of the primacy of sacrifice ought to be retained as a central element in Jewish religious life.” Rubenstein cites several possible reasons for contemporary Judaism's reluctance to retain, let alone augment, its liturgical or practical applications of the concept of atonement through sacrifice. The first is the Protestant influence over nineteenth century enlightenment-inspired Judaism, which is indeed partly responsible for Judaism's ambivalent relationship to its priestly tradition, and thinkers like Hermann Cohen and Leo Baeck are two of the philosophical figures most representative of the school of thought which considered the prophetic tradition far superior to the priestly tradition with regard to ethics and spirituality. The prophetic tradition was considered the culmination of

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43 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 92.
44 Ibid.
45 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 93.
mankind's development toward “ever more significant religious and moral attainments.”

The Scriptural readings in the synagogue for the Conservative and Orthodox traditions on the morning of Yom Kippur are a verbal re-enactment of this sacrificial rite of atonement during which the Priest would cast lots between two animal victims. One would become the offering within the Sanctuary while the other would act as the scapegoat for the sins of the entirety of Israel. This second animal was the vehicle for collective vicarious atonement, a concept which Rubenstein suggests “few Jews can feel altogether comfortable with” given that the Jewish people “itself has been the vicarious victim” of and for guilty parties. This historical reality, Rubenstein pointedly states, has “lent a very real measure of repugnance to the scapegoat theme.” And indeed, sacrificial worship is a “thinly disguised surrogate for an original human sacrifice.”

Sacrificial worship is murder, and replacing an innocent human with another innocent animal does not make the ritualization of the murder of innocents less execrable. The “prophetic moralist,” to use Rubenstein's term, remains in a state of dissatisfaction with the “moral state of the community,” the “priest” or the practitioner of ritual sacrifice insists that it is “very doubtful that that much can be done to change human nature; his effort is directed primarily at making the best of a not entirely perfect creation.” For Rubenstein, herein lies the greatest strength of the priestly tradition:

At the heart of the sacrificial system lies the unspoken conviction that

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46 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 94-95.
47 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 95.
48 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 106.
human beings are more likely to repeat their failings and their characteristic modes of behavior from one generation to the next than they are to improve upon them.\footnote{Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 106. Emphasis original.}

And although Rubenstein asserts that sacrificial worship does not actually cleanse the community of guilt or evil, it can provide what he calls “controlled magic.” Such “controlled magic” does not and would not result in “greater rationality” but might prevent “outbursts of devastatingly uncontrolled irrationality.”\footnote{Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 106. Emphasis original.} According to Rubenstein, the death of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust is “a colossal ritual murder carried out on the vastest possible scale” which took place because of humanity's unmet—and unavoidable--need for vicarious atonement. Ritual murder—rather than actual murder—that takes place in a religious context is “the magic attempt to avoid guilt and danger by the death of another” could prevent the large-scale social and moral catastrophes associated with the modern period. The “scapegoat offering of the ancient pagans,” because the pagans (unlike the post-Enlightenment West, perhaps) recognized human nature for what it was and “never let it get out of hand.”\footnote{Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 107.}

Herein lies one of the most important points of Rubenstein's argument for a return to some aspects of priestly Judaism. “The veneer of civilization, rationality, and morality in any society [is thin]” Rubenstein writes, and “in times of great communal stress, such as war, depression, or national frustration,” people are not who they are in better times.
The way to avoid mass murder at such times is not to “exhort them to a goodness which
the stress of events precluded,” but to “satisfy...their magic hunger for a victim, and a
scapegoat...[thereby]...limit[ing] the destructiveness of these periods of stress.”52

The suffering of potential perpetrators must be addressed if we do not want them to victimize
innocent people; like Levinas, Rubenstein agrees that unmediated suffering creates both
victims and victimizers. We cannot prevent the latter without preventing the former.

Recall Wiesel's treatment of “liminal” times in human history in *The Trial of God*
specifically indicates a similar belief in the danger of those times when, in the words of
Chinua Achebe, “things fall apart.” Wiesel draws similar conclusions about the fragility
of social norms and constructs and also suggests that humanity's thirst for violence is
unquenchable (although in Wiesel's work the most frequent victims of such violence in
the past, present and future are Jews and Rubenstein paints in much broader, more
intentionally inclusive strokes). And yet for Wiesel, who believes unequivocally that “we
are less likely to hit one another if we are talking,” it is dialogue rather than ritual that
disrupts potential mass murder. To be sure, modern understandings of the prophetic
tradition (upon which Wiesel heavily relies) would certainly place the prophet in the
middle of a burning city because it is then, when humanity is indeed at its weakest, that it
is most in need of “prophetic exhortation.” These exhortations consistently remind us of
our duty to our fellow human beings, and of the broader value of collective responsibility
for even the least ethical among us.

Yet it is within the collective experience of ritual sacrifice—whether it is actual or

liturgical—and not within the language of prophetic imperative that Rubenstein finds the most potential for teaching the value of collective responsibility. Rubenstein argues that collective ritual sacrifice prevents an individual member of the community from feeling alone in his or her guilt; conversely, it prevents the community from avoiding responsibility for the repercussions of the guilty individual's actions, since for Rubenstein, “there is no such thing as a world of isolated rugged individuals in the sacrificial tradition.”

Recognizing that everyone is guilty of something and is likely to be guilty again in the future prevents the kind of cultural alienation and despair described by Fritz Stern and others who attempt to map Europe's path from the Enlightenment to widespread fascism. According to this understanding of guilt, we must have a place to express our rage and shame and disappointment for consistently falling short of our own necessary standards. If we do not have safe, socially condoned places to do that, then we will make the world our public stage for bloody atonement rituals. “World War II was not,” Rubenstein warns,

...a fortuitous accident but a deep revelation of the night side of human existence. The more we know about what took place, the greater does the stigma of guilt seem to be and the more far reaching does its extension become. [Modern] men do not have more insight [than did ancient man]. We are caught between the realization of the gratuity of the magic and the inability of mankind to rise above magic. Ultimately the choice may be

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only between the compelling magic symbols of death, such as the swastika, and the compelling magic symbols of life, such as were represented in the religious tradition...if the symbol makers and magicians of life refuse their task because of its ultimate...fictitiousness, they will by no means be joined by the symbol makers of death, who stand ready to give modern man what he thirsts for most, an integrated psyche in which his personal goals, both conscious and unconscious, are at one with the goals of the larger community. That such a community might well be a community of human lemmings, led by a demonic Pied Piper to its collective death, will hardly stop the power and the fascination of the masters of irrationality. In the Götterdämmerung ending of Hitler's Third Reich, we have seen one instance of the power of such symbols.\textsuperscript{54}

Rubenstein asserts that the “rabbinic compromise” between the priestly and prophetic traditions represents the “very best response to this dilemma. Judaism never did away with sacrifice entirely until modern times, but Judaism progressively limited the gratuitous harm which the system could do.”\textsuperscript{55} Rubenstein also urges his readers—and presumably most of these readers were, at least immediately following the book's initial publication, Jewish--not to do away completely with those aspects of traditional liturgy which honor what he considers man's irrational need for magic.

\textsuperscript{54} Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 110.
\textsuperscript{55} Rubenstein, \textit{After Auschwitz}, 111.
And yet if one could argue that that one of Judaism's strengths is its unwillingness to forsake liturgy of sacrifice, one could also argue that Christianity, too, has faithfully retained both the prophetic and priestly traditions (at least with regard to vicarious sacrifice). Christianity has embraced the ritualistic value of sacrifice so much that a human sacrifice (and its many theological implications) is at the core of the tradition. And yet Christian anti-Judaism is the primary source of the modern anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust. Clearly a repeated liturgical re-enactment of the sacrifice of one innocent Jew was not enough to stave off the death of 6 million innocent Jews. If Christianity, a religion focused on the universal redemptive value of vicarious sacrifice, did not benefit from the cathartic value of the sacrificial tradition, then what religion or culture would?

What never fails to resonate about Rubenstein's work, though, is the urgency of its exhortation: We must all reflect deeply on our culture, reflect deeply on the darkest parts of ourselves, and gaze with clear eyes into our most cryptic, destructive urges, because only then can we thwart them. Rubenstein may laud the value of atonement through ritual sacrifice, but he beseeches his reader like a modern day Jeremiah. In this sense, Rubenstein is not unlike Wiesel or Levinas, who champion the prophetic tradition for reasons that extend beyond its tendency to threaten listeners to heed the call or risk eminent doom. But this is not the only thing Rubenstein's system shares with those of Wiesel and Levinas. Like his cohorts, he rejects the possibility of an ethics grounded in metaphysics or theology. Likewise his worldview is existentialist and abandons all attempts to derive inherent meaning either from the experience of undeserved suffering or
from human existence itself; meaning is not given but made, and ethics must be an important part of what gives meaning to our lives. Despite the fact that Rubenstein finds answers in the priestly tradition rather than the prophetic tradition, he nonetheless believes that the gifts of Judaism have not been sufficiently embraced. He too would say that Judaism, in spite of its emphasis on nationhood and election in all its iterations, is nonetheless interested in universal care for “the other,” if for no other reason that “the other,” if left too isolated for too long, may rise up against the collective in order to destroy it. This is the one, invaluable tenet missing from the work of Levinas and Wiesel. Levinas attempts to account for the existence of victimizers by providing a phenomenology of their response to suffering. Wiesel not only fails to provide reasons for the existence of perpetrators, but explicitly states that perpetrators are not his problem. Perhaps there is much to be salvaged from Rubenstein's system after all.

Like Wiesel, Rubenstein is wary of ideologies which over-value assimilation and homogeneity of thought and practice and ultimately undervalue “the facilities of each man's specific human situation” and thus “ignore...the actualities of present day Jewish fate and destiny.” The preservation of particularity is itself an ethical matter; metaphysical violence of enforced ideological homogeneity leads to physical violence. Yet despite the fact that Rubenstein's goal is to offer new ethical imperatives derived from Judaism that will impede the next genocide, his work almost never refers to or makes use of the experience of the victims of the Holocaust. In *After Auschwitz*, his efforts are almost exclusively focused on understanding and addressing perpetrators' 

56 Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 118.
motivations for creating and perpetuating genocidal systems. Rubenstein identifies man's impulse to reject social limitations on his behavior as the primary source of genocidal activity and therefore spends a great deal of energy on considering how we might change extant religious and political systems to both account for and take responsibility for the effective management of these impulses. We recall that it is, at least part, Rubenstein's concern for how non-Jews feel about being “un-chosen” people which motivates him to reject the doctrine of election. In Rubenstein's estimation, the perpetrators of violence are themselves suffering from something and, in turn, take their misery out on the most vulnerable among us. That Rubenstein makes this conjecture in 1961 at the risk of losing his credibility among his peers offers proof of how strongly he believed that ethics can and should be grounded in humanity's shared experience of suffering—the suffering of all humanity, not just the suffering of victims. Rubenstein vehemently insists that we cannot prevent profound loss of life at the hands of disenfranchised “madmen” by shaking our prophet fingers at them. Instead we must prevent their disenfranchisement by considering their suffering, too. In Rubenstein's system, victim and perpetrator are seated, however reluctantly, at the same table, dealing with the same bleak estimations about the nature of man and existence.

In many ways, Rubenstein's project leaves us in much the same place as Wiesel's; while there is no question that ethics must be of greater concern not only for philosophy but for Western culture, it remains to be seen how an ethics grounded in suffering can be utilized in situations which have nothing to do with suffering. The landscape of Rubenstein's system is apocalyptic. Gas chambers and murdered gods and
disenfranchised murderers litter the skyline. His system is set apart, though, by his interest in adopting communal religious ritual from within Jewish liturgy as a preventive measure against violence, and his claim that the perpetrators, too are members of the human family whose actions must be understood, managed, and prevented if we are to prevent another Holocaust. We cannot simply assert that the perpetrators are someone else's problem.

II. Analysis

Rubenstein is the only thinker examined in this study who is not a survivor of the Holocaust, and as Wiesel and others have pointed out, there are often marked theological and philosophical differences between survivors and non-survivors. Rubenstein presents himself as a Jewish member of a trendy Protestant group—the Death of God theologians—at the same time that he rejects Christianity as murderous and theologically juvenile. Rubenstein's argument is articulate and passionate and surely speaks to both his love for Judaism as he understands it and to the depth of his grief about the fact that the world is a place where Auschwitz was allowed to happen. His outrage and indignation are compelling, and his radicalism, although it lacks nuance, is alluring. But if one delves into Rubenstein's thought more deeply, significant flaws in logic emerge (along with no small measure of reactionary gestures) present themselves and must be addressed. If Wiesel's ethics rely on an understanding of Jewish mission that could be alienating to non-Jews, Jews who are not survivors or who share no connections with survivors, or
Jews who simply do not share Wiesel's theology, Rubenstein offers an understanding of Judaism which lacks history and subtlety, and strips it of tenets that most believers (and even most secular Jews who strongly identify with Jewish values) identify with Jewishness. Rubenstein asks brave questions which must be asked, and for this, much is owed to him. But if his questions are successful, as Steven T. Katz aptly points out, his answers are not. For a closer look at Rubenstein's thought with regard to the problem of ethics after Auschwitz, as well as the role Judaism and Jewish thought can play in addressing that problem, I turn to After Auschwitz, which remains the place where Rubenstein's foundational ideas are best articulated.

Let us address the most pressing issues listed above in turn. First, Rubenstein is absolutely correct that the Abrahamic covenant must be taken seriously. Yet again he engages in no discussion of the many ways in which the covenant has been perceived, honored and interrogated in Jewish history and theology. Recall the Hasidic rebbes who influenced Wiesel's theology, for example. When the covenant is understood as a mutual agreement between two parties who may default in their responsibilities, the conversation deepens and takes on a more realistic tone. In periods of persecution, the Hasidic rebbes felt completely justified in telling God that if He did not do better by His people, then His people would no longer worship Him. These are not the beliefs of someone who trembles before God as an ultimate Lord whose ways must always be approved of by His people.

57 On page 17 of “The Issue of Confirmation and Disconfirmation,” Steven T. Katz argues succinctly that Rubenstein's thought relies on the “negative significance of “evil” without any attempt to balance it against the “good” we encounter in history...[and moreover Rubenstein’s] intense focus on Auschwitz reflects an already decided theological choice based on certain normative presuppositions and a compelling desire to justify certain conclusions.”
Rubenstein is aware of Mordecai Kaplan's equally “serious” approach to the covenant, which involved understanding the covenant as a product of the common history of Jewish civilization. Rubenstein was a great admirer of Kaplan and a follower of his ideas, particularly with regard to the problem of chosenness, which I address in a moment. Yet he does not appear to acknowledge that Jewish theology is, ought to be and has been—flexible with regard to certain concepts and that this fact has enabled Jews and Judaism to withstand the trials and tribulations experienced by believers over the centuries.

Avoiding discussion of these alternative understandings of covenant (again, of which Rubenstein is surely aware) even if it is only to state that he does not agree with them, does nothing for Rubenstein's argument. To be fair, there were not as many contemporary voices posing post-Holocaust alternatives as there would be after Rubenstein rocked the theological boat. Innovative re-iterations of covenant, such as the one discussed above offered by Irving Greenberg, the “Neo-Hasidic” understanding of covenant offered by Arthur Green, and even the modern hasidic theology of the Chabad movement were still yet to come.58

Second, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes here, Rubenstein's understanding of chosenness deeply problematic. Rubenstein is inarguably correct when he insists that Jewish theology must be self-affirming. Whether Rubenstein means that Jews must not seek justification for their existence from non-Jews, or whether he is insisting that Jews cannot expect God to affirm their understanding of chosenness is

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58 Greenberg wrote his groundbreaking piece on the voluntary nature of the covenant in 1981. Green does not begin publishing until the late 1980's and early 1990's, and both benefited from Rubenstein's having paved the way, and perhaps learned from his mistakes, so to speak.
unclear. But in either case, Rubenstein would be correct, and would not likely be met with much argument regarding these claims. But Rubenstein’s rejects Jewish mission and chosenness as theologically central to Judaism because “it may be impossible for Christians to remain Christians without regarding Jews in mythic, magic and theological categories.”

Rubenstein insists:

Can we really blame the Christian community for viewing us through the prism of a mythology of history when we were the first to assert the history ourselves? As long as we continue to hold ourselves open to the doctrine of the election of Israel, we will leave ourselves open to the theology expressed by Dean Grüber, that because Jews are God's Chosen People, God wanted Hitler to punish them.

Yet if Judaism relinquishes Jewish mission as central to its theological and moral self-understanding for the reasons Rubenstein offers, they would be doing so precisely because of an over-dependence on Christian/non-Jewish acceptance and comprehension of Jewish mission. And although Rubenstein is correct that many Christian theologians have balked at relinquishing the idea of chosenness, his insistence that Judaism should let go of chosenness for the sake of fighting anti-Semitism would mean seeking the “outside” justification Rubenstein wants Judaism to reject. What Christians like Grüber

59 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 56.
60 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 58.
believe regarding Jewish chosenness is the concern of Christianity; in fact, Christians, Muslims, and the members of all other groups whose theology relies in some sense on their understanding of Judaism are the ones who need to address the moral problems inherent in justifying anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic violence on a single understanding of chosenness which many Jews consider outdated and static. The greatest moral and political problem presented by the Holocaust is that anti-Semitism was acceptable enough that many felt the persecution of Jews was justified. This is not to say that all anti-Semites of the time supported the presence of six death camps, but there is much evidence that many aspects of the Nuremberg laws, for example, were not considered entirely repugnant. This amounts to a justification of violence that is no way the fault of the victims of that violence. Rubenstein comes dangerously close himself to justifying violence against the Jews by connecting that violence to the resentment caused by concept of Jewish mission. It cannot be denied that although Rubenstein wants to “demythologize” the Jews, he also fervently hopes that relinquishing Jewish mission will, above all else, create warmer feelings for Jews on the part of Christians and perhaps work to prevent continued violence against the Jews. And yet a change in Jewish theology could not possibly have stemmed the tide of fascist anti-Semitism or the theologically driven violence of the Crusades. Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism are both grounded in false beliefs, understandings and perceptions of Jews and Judaism fueled by economic and political interests far more than they were fueled by well-articulated theological objections based on genuine understandings of Judaism.

In his address to the 1970 convention discussed in Chapter 4, Rubenstein fails to
mention the most well-known of Jewish theologians to have tackled the problem posed by Jewish mission and chosenness in the modern world: Mordecai Kaplan, whose rejection of chosenness is accompanied by a close analysis of the many benefits Judaism and its adherents derived from notions of chosenness over the centuries. Kaplan's rejection is in itself more nuanced than Rubenstein's; we recall that Rubenstein is a great admirer of Kaplan when we see that Kaplan also associated chosenness with more primitive forms of worship, self-understanding, and nation building. Rubenstein does mention Kaplan in After Auschwitz, but he doesn't he make any attempts to replace the concept of chosenness with another, more acceptable tenet.61 Rubenstein writes the following about Kaplan and Reconstruction:

There is a way out [of being viewed through a prism of a mythology of history] and Reconstruction has pointed to it. Religious uniqueness does not necessarily place us at the center of the divine drama of perdition, redemption and salvation for mankind. All we need for a sane religious life is to recognize that we are, when given normal opportunities, neither more nor less than other men, sharing the pain, the joy, and the fated

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61 For more on Kaplan's nuanced, informed, and articulate argument against the preservation of chosenness, see his Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life (New York: MacMillian Company, 1934). See especially 253-263 for Chapter XIX entitled “Cultural Nationalism as a Call of the Spirit.” While there is no doubt that Rubenstein is a Zionist in the modern sense of the term and Kaplan himself was not, Kaplan's work remains a force with which those who discuss the problem of chosenness in the modern world must reckon.
Rubenstein indirectly calls past and contemporary Jewish belief and practice “insane” when he states that Jewish religious life would be “sane” if it accepted “the fated destiny which Earth alone has meted out to all her children.” In other words, continued belief in chosenness, mission, and a living God of history is insane, and those beliefs have led directly to past persecutions of world Jewry. Perhaps this is simply another way in which Rubenstein asserts that nothing relating to Judaism, Jewishness or Jewish life can or should be the same after Auschwitz. But if Rubenstein is serious about protecting Jews from violence—and I very much believe he is—his argument would be better served by providing a more accurate sense of what Jewish mission means and could mean to Jews. Rubenstein could have approached the issue by introducing or reviewing the many interpretations of Jewish “chosenness” which do not rely on manifestations of God's “special love and concern” at all. And he ignores the fact that in the modern period, most Jews do not assume that Jewish suffering caused by persecution from majority groups is punishment for failing to fulfill the commandments, although hundreds of years ago, this was not the case. In contrast to Rubenstein's analysis, for Jews themselves the concept of chosenness is not monolithic or homogenous but shifts and changes in emphasis, nuance and complexity over time, even as non-Jewish understandings of Jewish election tend to remain static.

62 Rubenstein, After Auschwitz, 58.
As S. Leyla Gürkan writes:

In one way, the Jewish idea of being chosen refers to a general problem of all monotheistic religions in respect of their claims to exclusive truth; in this, Judaism is not alone. However, unlike the Christian notion of chosenness and the Islamic claim to truth, both of which are individualist and faith-centered, the Jewish doctrine of chosenness is based on the physical and collective existence of one people, the Jews. Indeed, what is unique about the Jewish idea of chosenness is related to the fact that it provides Judaism with the elements of religion and nationality at once. This is why the Jewish religion is bound up with the existence and the experience of the Jewish people as a physical, collective entity. So Judaism does not only shape but is shaped by its followers, more so than any other religion is.63

Gürkan points out that, contrary to Rubenstein's claims that ideas of Jewish mission and chosenness are not self-referential, Judaism's sense of these concepts tend to be “independent of the outside world.”64 It is the lack of interest in non-Jewish opinions of Jewish theology that has often been interpreted as disdain for Gentiles and identified by Christians and Jews alike as offensive. Of course intellectual and political changes in the

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64 Ibid., p. 3.
wider world impact Jewish culture, theology and practice profoundly, and concepts of Jewish mission are no exception. Early rabbinic understandings of chosenness focus on holiness and separateness, yet as Jon Levinson argues one way to understand biblical and rabbinic understandings of chosenness is that:

Chosenness...need not [in this period] entail implacable enmity on anyone's part; nor are the unchosen the enemies of God or the Jewish people. The Other has dignity while remaining the Other. He is not required, in the biblical view, to be brought low, to convert, least of all, die.65

During the medieval period Jewish understandings of chosenness changed to reflect the altered condition of the Jews themselves. After the second exile, Jews living in Europe, for example, came to understand themselves in much the same way that the Christians did with regard to chosenness: the Jews were being punished for their sins by being forced to live in exile. Yet the Jews also understood themselves as having been singled out for redemption, a redemption which their suffering indicated was close at hand. During this period, intellectual approaches to chosenness varied with respect to the issue of agency. Judah Halevi felt that Jews were inherently different from others; so

according to Halevi, God imbued Adam with a “divine essence” which was passed on through Seth's line to the entirety of the Jewish people. This interpretation does indeed define chosenness as a genetically encoded privilege, the understanding of chosenness to which Rubenstein refers. According to this view, a person who is born a non-Jew cannot acquire the essence of the Torah, which God revealed at Sinai, no matter how much he or she might try to live in accordance with its commandments.66

Maimonides had a different view, however. Contrary to earlier understandings that God's choices were random, Maimonides felt that Abraham was chosen by God to be the father of His people based on the virtue of his actions.67 According to the Mishneh Torah, anyone “who sets oneself apart to stand before, to serve, to worship, and to know God...is consecrated to the Holy of Holies, and his portion and inheritance shall be in God forever.”68 Maimonides' understanding leaves open the possibility that non-Jews may be “chosen” and Jews un-chosen, depending on their actions—or at least that chosenness is not about unalterable superiority. Then, too, chosenness is often understood not only as a quality but as a duty; the duty of the Jews, because they were “chosen” or “have chosen” (depending on whether one embraces a Halevi’s approach or Maimonides’ approach to election) is to fulfill the mission charged to them to be “a light among the nations.” With the notion of choice comes responsibility.

67 It must be said here that the kinds of stories upon which the argument regarding Abraham's virtue are not usually biblical. For example the story about Abraham smashing the idols in his father's shop cannot be found in the Bible, and yet it shapes both the Jewish and Muslim understandings of Abraham a the virtuous and brave founder of monotheism. This fact supports the claim that understandings of chosenness both change over time and are by no means monolithic or static.
While Gürkan's study tends to work in broad, historical strokes, her sense of the way in which Jewish understandings of chosenness have changed from the rabbinic era to after the Holocaust is apt. Generally speaking, in the rabbinic and classical periods, chosenness was most often understood in terms of holiness or separateness (election and covenant). In the modern period, chosenness was more often understood as related to notions of mission (a unique Jewish vocation). After the Holocaust, ideas of chosenness were directly connected to the concrete drive to survive (and live a uniquely Jewish existence which may or may not be religious or Zionistic in any sense). Traces of earlier understandings of chosenness can be found in contemporary Jewish thought and practice, of course. But the notion that the Jews should be a separate, holy people, for example, whose chosenness indicates superiority, would more likely be embraced by the ultra-orthodox and the Hasidim, which make up only a small—albeit highly visible--part of the world Jewish population.

This theme of holiness is replaced by the theme of mission only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the advent of the Enlightenment and subsequent Jewish emancipation in Europe, and the understanding of “mission” is shaped in large part by Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment, supported and perpetuated by thinkers from Moses Mendelssohn, S. I. Abramovich and Isaac Baer Levinson to name only a few) and the changing political, social and economic conditions in which Jews found themselves as a result. This movement redefined Judaism as a universal religion based on a mission to help the world, rather than an exclusive one based on separateness and inherited

69 Gürkan, Chosen People, 4.
nationhood. As Gürkan points out:

[By the nineteenth century]...Jews...were defined as a religious community striving for a universal goal. They were not only a chosen people but a choosing people working toward universal redemption. Chosenness was thus considered to refer to something beyond mere status. It was a responsibility as well, a universal/spiritual role which would establish redemption on earth on the basis of justice and equality. In this way, the rabbinic notion of fundamental difference between Jews and non-Jews, each having totally different attributes and opposite roles to play in this world (i.e., the people of God and the enemies of God) was fiercely challenged by the enlightened Jews.71

Modern notions of Jewish mission embraced the belief that the Jews were endowed with a special mission to aid in the redemption of the world, and here redemption was defined in a number of ways. Some Jews felt that the redemption was spiritual, so that Jews were meant to aid the world in the embrace of monotheistic values and the ethical framework associated with those values, regardless of their religious affiliation. Some Jews felt that the redemption would manifest itself politically through social reforms in labor, social

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
services, the treatment of prisoners and other social justice oriented concerns. Jewish mission understood in this way is meant to spur Jews to work toward justice on earth for all people; the duty is inescapable and can be fulfilled in a number of ways. Having been “chosen” is secondary to the importance of the mission itself.

For some, the Holocaust changes the understanding of chosenness yet again. New conceptions of chosenness are, as Gürkan points out, concomitant with belief in the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an historical event and with diversifying opinions regarding the nature of the covenant. American Reformed Jewish definitions of chosenness “...unlike traditional ones, generated confirming, yet non-apologetic, faith-related, but mainly experience-based, interpretations of chosenness with the intent of making proud of themselves, proud of their difference and their otherness.” Gürkan speculates that this mostly indicates a desire on the part of the Reform establishment, to “make Jewish distinctiveness inescapable, even desirable, for Jews, rather than making it acceptable and reasonable for non-Jews.” What pervades Gürkan's study is the sense that since the Holocaust Judaism has 'resorted' to a shallow, exclusivist understanding of chosenness in response to Jewish suffering that ironically borrows heavily from Christian typologies of suffering. She also suggests that post-Holocaust theologians might borrow from the sages' responses to the loss of the first and second Temples in order to come to a “deeper” understanding of chosenness after the Holocaust.

Gürkan is not alone in her disappointment with regard to post-Holocaust Judaism.

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72 Refer back to our earlier discussion in Chapter 3 of modern and contemporary treatments of *tikkun olam.*
73 Gürkan, *Chosen People,* 143.
Certainly there have been more than a few Jewish theologians and rabbis who have intimated any number of problems regarding chosenness and mission. Some suggest that chosenness be rejected altogether, or that it recover its sense of universal mission, or that it embrace an earlier sense of chosenness that is at least more faith based. But when you consider that many survivors of the Shoah are still alive, and that many—Jew and non-Jew alike—feel that the Holocaust remains a unique event in human history, the reluctance to make Jewish mission anything greater than Jewish survival is understandable. When 6 million people who define themselves in the same way you do are slaughtered in unforeseen ways while most of the world looks on—or even assists in the murders—it is hard to think beyond the survival of those who are left. And why should this be a problem for non-Jews—or even fellow Jews? If the remainder of world Jewry were not in some way concerned with its survival, it would be shocking.

What is, for our purposes, ironic, is that Rubenstein ends up replacing what Gürkan would call a biblical understanding of chosenness with similar “post-Holocaust” forms of chosenness popular among non-Orthodox American Jews—but he doesn't call it that. This indicates that even as Rubenstein works to reject the doctrine of chosenness, he remains deeply ambivalent about doing so. We recall that Levinas and Wiesel are also ambivalent about the nature of chosenness. Rubenstein relinquishes previous notions of Jewish mission and chosenness but replaces them with an emphasis on Jewish survival by means of a physical nation that will create and live out a uniquely Jewish existence. This is likely what he means when he urges Jews to focus on “self-validation.” To the extent that for him, Jewish mission (even though he doesn't call it that) should constitute a
national turning inward on the part of world Jewry, Rubenstein is of his time. The call to support Israel becomes increasingly urgent in Rubenstein's later work, in part because Rubenstein lost faith in the Enlightenment, traditional Judaism, modern Christianity, and ethics as they have been traditionally understood. His call for Jewish support of Israel as a necessary protection for the remainder of world Jewry was in many ways another example of a transformed understanding of chosenness and mission. This emphasis on the Jewish people rather than on theology is also reminiscent of Kaplan.

Rubenstein's failure to connect his ideas to those of other thinkers like Kaplan or even the early Hasidic rebbes whose theological questions were similar to his own, or to connect his own beliefs about the centrality of the Israeli state to pre-existing ideas about Jewish mission suggests that he was, at least during the years After Auschwitz was written and most intensely discussed, out of touch with current understandings of Jewish thought and history. At the very least, his theological suggestions did not resonate with his fellow Jews. The problems with After Auschwitz's answers to very important questions—at least in relation to its authenticity for Jewish self-perceptions, practice, and thought—are not isolated to Rubenstein's treatment of the existence of God, or to his ideas about chosenness, Jewish mission and covenant. Rubenstein's treatment of Jewish theology after the Shoah is also limited by his rigid view of Jewish history. Steven Katz writes:

...emerging out of, as well as essential to, the “Death of God” view putatively grounded in the Holocaust experience is...the way one views Jewish history, its continuities and discontinuities, its “causal
“connectedness” and interdependencies. [Rubenstein] sees Jewish history too narrowly, i.e., focused solely in and through the Holocaust. He takes the decisive view of history to be the death camps. But this is a distorted image of Jewish experience, for there is a pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust Jewish reality that must be considered in dealing with the questions raised by the Nazi epoch. One cannot make the events of 1933-1945 intelligible in isolation. To think, moreover, that one can excise this block of time from the flow of Jewish history and then, by concentrating on it, extract the “meaning” of all Jewish existence is more than uncertain, no matter how momentous or demonic this time may have been.74

At issue are Rubenstein's conclusions as well as his method of analysis. Despite his knowledge of Jewish history and thought, the Holocaust is of such intense focus that it becomes the defining event for Judaism, Jewish identity and Jewish thought. To be clear, claiming that the Holocaust is a unique event in human history in general and in Jewish history in particular, as many other thinkers have argued, is not equivalent to making it the central, defining climax of Jewish existence in all its facets, as Rubenstein seems to have done.75 Add to this Rubenstein's claims that love of and connection to land is

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75 With regard to Israel, Rubenstein accepts that the creation of the modern state is a consequence of the events of World War II, and the Holocaust specifically, but he is steadfast in his assertion that the connection between Israel and the Shoah is not theological; Israel, according to Rubenstein, should in no way be understood as “the reward after the punishment” of Auschwitz. While this point of view is perhaps admirable, one can surely reject theodicy while maintaining a sense of authentic Judaism and
inherently pagan and therefore not a traditional part of Judaism and Jewish identity, and what emerges is a theology that lacks depth, flexibility and authenticity for anyone whose ideas are not identical—or at least very similar—to Rubenstein's.

Finally, despite Rubenstein's declaration that God is dead, he claims it is religion that connects Jews specifically to one another. He writes that Jewish atheism (defined as Jewish life which does not include religion, rather than a Jewish life without belief in God) "fail[s] to see that it is precisely the ultimate hopelessness and gratuity of our human situation which calls forth our strongest need for religious community. If all we have is one another, then assuredly we need one another more than ever."76

Religion, then, is not dead, even if God is; it is the glue that holds together communities, provides the most comprehensive systems of meaningful symbols and rituals, and connects communities who are otherwise disconnected from one another. Unlike Wiesel, whose ethics rely on the stories of survivors to help activate ethical action on the part of bystanders (sometimes as slowly as one survivor and one bystander at a time), Rubenstein's system ethics emphasizes collective action. Unlike Wiesel, Rubenstein never mentions the survivors of trauma at all, in fact. He doesn't appear to have any faith in the effectiveness of moral education per se, either, and his theoretical approach is solidly Freudian: Man is a mess of impulses and drives which society must harness and sublimate in order to create civilization. His own brand of post-Holocaust theology and a postmodern understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis blend to create an

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76 Rubenstein, *After Auschwtiz*, 119.
understanding of the nature of man that is far bleaker than either Wiesel's or Levinas', and rather than attempting to encourage further development of humanity's better angels as Wiesel and Levinas do, Rubenstein promotes accepting that our dreams for a morally evolved humanity are just that: dreams. When we accept that we are a violent, bigoted species that never learns from its mistakes, we can focus on adopting measures to minimize the damage we cause to one another and to the rest of the planet.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of Rubenstein's system is its tendency toward relativism. Unlike Levinas and Wiesel, who attempt to provide firm ground for ethics in suffering as a temporal experience, Rubenstein ultimately ends up rejecting even the possibility of ethical impulse because of the ubiquity of human suffering in the world. In a very real sense, Rubenstein develops more of a Weltanschauung than an ethics. According to Rubenstein, the world is brutal and full of suffering and man's essential nature is cruel rather than innately or even potentially moral. One could argue, therefore, the only systems which can impart human “rights” are states whose laws are enforced by military bodies. The stateless are not therefore guaranteed protection from persecution and therefore murdering them is not a “crime” per se. Didier Pollefeyt writes:

When the moral quality of an act is justified only from within and by the ethical framework of the (ruling) group, and when the validity of this ethical structure depends only on formal criteria, then there can be no moral story against evil deeds...except for the story of another ethical
system with the same formal characteristics, defended with the same ethical passion. Ethics becomes a question of the strongest, the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most influential, the most privileged, the most numerous, etc...For Rubenstein, the only response of the Jews to the [H]olocaust would be the establishment of their own community...the story of the [H]olocaust risks becoming an ethical legitimation of new forms of injustice, [and] an ethic can easily become an ideology.\textsuperscript{77}

And yet Rubenstein challenges us to, as Jon M. Young suggests, “face the horrible political deeds of this century without sentimentality” by moving away from ethical theory and theology altogether. Young goes on to state that although individuals “profess religious belief, modern civilization has [indeed] become godless.” The starting point for “ethical theory and theology must be a recognition of the cultural conditions of modern existence.”\textsuperscript{78} Rubenstein begins his project at the very same place Levinas and Wiesel begins theirs; all three thinkers are searching for 1.) an understanding of modern society in light of the Holocaust; 2.) the presence of ethicality in humanity; 3.) what universal experiences unify human existence and profound a ground for ethics; 4.) and finally, what kind of moral education will best utilize humanity's ethical impulses. Rubenstein


remains unconvinced that humanity is innately moral, and is likewise unconvinced that there is any single educational method or tool that will “train” humanity to respond ethically to suffering. But Rubenstein's best offering to the project of grounding an ethics in suffering can be summed up in this passage from *The Age of Triage*, written in 1983:

> We can no longer rest content with a humanity divided into working and the workless, the saved and the damned, the Occident and the Orient. Our fates are too deeply intertwined...Conversion has all too often been devoid of the inclusive social component our times demand. In truth, we must be born again as men and women blessed with the capacity to care for each other here and now.\(^79\)

Chapter 5
Toward an Ethics Grounded in Suffering

According to Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein, an ethics that prioritizes the alleviation and prevention of suffering does not exist in general philosophy and culture. In response to the problem of ethics after Auschwitz, they make ethics “first philosophy” by rejecting traditional metaphysics and grounding ethics in the experience of suffering. Suffering becomes not only the first priority of ethics, but an experience that simultaneously necessitates and activates ethical response. According to this view, human beings are not blank slates whose values are informed exclusively by culture and moral instruction alone. Nor is human consciousness awakened or even primarily constituted by reason, as believed by Kant, Cohen and others who subscribe to and promote deontological ethics. Rather, consciousness is characterized by affectivity and sensibility as interconnected faculties meant to work in concert with one another to create ethical response. If what makes ethics possible can be located in the consciousness of humankind rather than in metaphysics or culture, then traditional ethical systems which have shaped our understanding of ethics are indeed significantly problematized. A re-orientation of philosophy toward the investigation of human affectivity and its role in ethical response is in order.

Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein all derive their ethics from Jewish sources for
many reasons, at least two of which have meaningful implications if we want to derive a universal ethics that allows for and encourages cultural, political and theological particularity. Because they perceive ethics as Judaism's first priority, all three thinkers insist that Judaism has much to offer Western thought and culture. For Levinas and Wiesel, this is most evident in the prophetic texts of the Bible and rabbinic literature. For Rubenstein, Judaism is at it most ethical in the priestly texts from which the atonement liturgy is derived. All of these texts treat the alleviation and prevention of human suffering as a universal obligation of the highest order; in addition, Judaism sees prophetic suffering as an experience that connects human beings with one another and with God. Suffering is the most powerful common denominator in all of creation.

Second, for Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein, Judaism's valorization of particular identity has significant moral value. This understanding of particularity as a moral model is a critical part of Jewish thought from the eighteenth century to the present. For example, if my community subscribes to beliefs and practices which are not subscribed to by the majority and I nonetheless contribute to and value the well-being of both my own community and the larger, general community as well, then I am well positioned to serve as a moral example. The observant Jew who can remain faithful to her particular community while participating ethically in general society is in itself proof that ethics do not necessarily require shared ideology or practice. I can intervene on behalf of another because I identify with his suffering and feel compelled to alleviate it. Or I can intervene on his behalf because I reject persecuting violence for my own sake; if persecution is inflicted on my neighbor now it may be inflicted on me next.
On a broader level, any individual who upholds the norms of general culture represents the experience of every individual who, in spite of his particular values, interests and proclivities can intervene on behalf of other, equally particular members of greater society who suffer unjustly without violating any ethical codes or values particular to him. If ethics can be grounded in shared experience, and if humans can be understood as being in relation to one another even on an affective, pre-reflexive level, then new understandings of universality are possible because what connects us to one another in a global sense does not require shared values, culture, language or belief. Instead we are profoundly and inextricably connected by our ability to activate emotional—and potentially ethical--responses in one another. What makes pluralistic societies possible is that we don't need to share detailed ideologies and directives with our neighbors in order to value their right to exist without persecution. These two aspects of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein's projects are among the very best of what they offer to the Western conversation regarding ethics, and both are derived from Judaism.

For Levinas, affectivity precedes our ability to reflect cognitively on our experiences. Therefore we respond emotionally—and with emotional intelligence--to the presence of the other person before we even know what responding is. According to Levinas, this response is so deeply engrained that it takes place even against our wills and is what makes ethical behavior possible. This strongly suggests that ethical response is far more intuitive and far more primal than philosophy and psychology has often claimed.1

1 Although psychologists like Freud and Piaget believed that infants are amoral and therefore require socialization before they can develop the compassion, guilt or shame required to develop “higher
Rationality, prized by idealism and deontology, creates (and then, according to Levinas and other critics of deontology, is not able to step outside of) systems that ultimately become totalizing frameworks which distort our emotional response to our fellow humans. This means that reason alone cannot be trusted to either create or dictate ethical action. According to Levinas, making ethics “first philosophy” means not only making ethical relation the first priority of philosophy; it also entails making our emotional responses to one another as well as our profound desire to connect with one another focal points of philosophical inquiry as well. For Levinas, our very first response to the other is a kind of suffering; we “suffer” when we encounter the demands of the other—demands which are dictated by her mere existence. Because she exists, I am not the center of the world, and I cannot neatly categorize the world and all other beings as mere extensions of myself or objects which do not challenge my views. This awareness constitutes a suffering because it both makes me “strange” to myself (i.e., I become aware that I am both object and subject) and “nails me to the present.” It makes me aware of an ultimate truth which I cannot escape, even if I think I can. In response to this suffering, I either accept ethical obligation to the other, or I attempt to ideologically or physically obliterate the other because she disrupts me. In short, I either accept my ethical


Kant does accept that “sentimentality” can help us to feel compassion and compassion is at times useful when we need to make ethical choices. But Kant is wary of human “passions” and therefore insists that what is truly ethical can always be discovered by reason alone. For him, reason makes use human and it enables us to make ethical choices, and human emotions are meant to be tamed, not heeded.
impulse or I reject it. Ethical impetus is not outside of me or imposed upon me but comes from within me and animates my actions whether I like it or not.

For Wiesel, ethics is grounded in suffering as well, but Wiesel does not focus on the development of human consciousness. Rather, the suffering of others activates our compassion for the innocent such that we may be compelled to act on their behalf. This ethics relies heavily on victims who are willing to advocate on behalf of other victims and share their stories of suffering with potential bystanders. Like Levinas, Wiesel sees humans as essentially moral creatures who can be lead astray by logic and power. How else, Wiesel argues, can one explain the presence of an Eichmann or a Mengele? Wiesel's vision, although moral, is not utopian. For him, the world will never be without persecution and suffering, and therefore he does not aim to proactively prevent suffering as much as he attempts to shape human response to suffering into something profoundly more ethical than was the majority response to the suffering of mid-twentieth century European Jewry. Wiesel suggests that there will probably be another Auschwitz or Rwanda or Cambodia, and that the best we can do is intervene as quickly as possible at the first rumblings of undeserved persecutions. But concern for others is born out of and nurtured by dialogue, which is the center of Wiesel’s ethics. And we do more than talk when we engage in dialogue; we also listen to others talk, process the content of their words, and formulate responses to those who are speaking.

This activity of engaging in dialogue forces us to acknowledge the sentience of the other with whom we engage. Wiesel and Levinas both see the act of engaging with
the other as a powerful means of stepping outside of our own experiences and concerns and therefore possess great potential to create ethical response. I cannot really respond to the suffering of others—especially those outside my own community—unless I deem others worthy of engaging in dialogue with me. It follows that victims are not pitiful objects but subjects whose insights into the human nature, persecution and suffering should be used to shape ethics. Because stories of victimization are found in every culture from every time and place, they help to prove, beyond a doubt, that undeserved suffering is universal, and that some portion of that suffering is within our power to prevent.

General philosophy has had very little—if any—interest in the voices of minorities and victims, and is lacking because of it. We must begin to conceive of universality differently.

Rubenstein's understanding of the nature of man is radically different from that of Levinas and Wiesel, who continue to see humanity as potentially moral in spite of its brutality. According to Rubenstein, the fact that moral codes are successfully internalized by a relatively small minority of human beings does not powerfully suggest that humanity is fundamentally moral. Instead, it suggests that the opposite is true. And yet the unabated suffering of the world, much of which is caused by human brutality, should, according to Rubenstein, prompt us to do our best mitigate it. He also insists that any attempts to assign meaning to suffering or even to life in general should be met with suspicion. Rubenstein's ethics are more pragmatic than those of Levinas or Wiesel insofar as he has no expectation that the ethical imperative to intervene on behalf of those who suffer will be heeded by most of us for altruistic reasons. According to Rubenstein,
preventing the rise of totalitarian regimes that perpetuate violence and demand cultural and ideological homogeneity is practical: If such regimes are not allowed to come to power anywhere, then they cannot come into power in my neighborhood, either. For Rubenstein, humanity's potential for moral turpitude will ultimately be our downfall on a practical level; moral behavior helps us protect us from harm and fosters civilizations that flourish economically and culturally. This aspect of Rubenstein's ethics provides compelling motives for intervening when others suffer. It is bad for humanity when fanaticism and totalitarianism prevails. When I intervene on behalf of my neighbor, it matters very little whether I do so because I actually empathize with my neighbor or because I fear his persecution will become my persecution if he is rescued and protected. All that matters is that I choose to intervene rather than watch my neighbors suffer unfairly.

Of the three thinkers examined in this study, none reject metaphysics entirely. Instead, they offer alternatives to traditional metaphysics. Providing an agreed-upon definition of metaphysics is extremely difficult if for no other reason than because what is meant by the term changes significantly over time and from thinker to thinker. An in-depth exploration of this history is outside the purview of this dissertation, but a working definition of metaphysics for our purposes is necessary. Generally speaking, metaphysics refers to an aspect of reality that cannot be reduced to typical forms of representation and yet informs, defines or somehow unifies observable reality and human perceptions and experiences of it. Metaphysics is often constituted of things a thinker considers *a priori*. Rubenstein, for example, views not just the Holocaust but human nature and all existence
though the lens of philosophical nihilism. For Rubenstein, it is a metaphysical truth that life is inherently meaningless and he must *a priori* reject any evidence to the contrary.\(^3\) Rubenstein claims that God the Father is dead, and yet he cannot relinquish the notion of an meta-omnipresence that escapes human comprehension; perhaps this is what he is settling for when he acknowledges the inherent difficulties for the Jew who claims that God is really “dead.” For Rubenstein, “God,” insofar as He can be said to exist, is more like a weather pattern that is indifferent to creation and yet awes us with a kind of amoral majesty.

Wiesel cannot resist the notion of identity as metaphysically informed; Jewish people generally and Holocaust survivors specifically are in special categories which enable them to serve as moral messengers to the rest of humanity. As “chosen people,” Jews are vehicles for the salvation of humanity, and because of their suffering, Holocaust survivors are specially positioned to fulfill this duty. For Wiesel, Jews and Jewish history serve as testimony of the fact that humanity can remain moral in the face of unimaginable persecution. Wiesel embraces the idea of multiple metaphysically particular ways of being, however. He might say also that an explication of what constitutes each category of “being” should be left to those who occupy that category. These separate, particular categories of being do not disconnect people from one another, since the experiences we share as a species ultimately unify us and make universal ethics possible. If we see

\(^3\) Rubenstein might argue with this point, and yet I think it is accurate. Rubenstein's entire project depends on his understanding of human existence as inherently meaningless. None of Rubenstein's precepts really violate this philosophical perspective, since it is the assumption upon which all his other assertions rest.
particularity as universal, humanity's experiences of suffering, loss, love, hope and other fundamental emotions are the things upon which ethics can reliably be built. Also, for Wiesel, God is mysterious and suffers with humanity, so much so that He cannot always intervene on its behalf, and yet maintains with it what can only be called a metaphysical connection. Humanity suffers and God suffers with it.\(^4\) Again, suffering is the common denominator of all creation.

Levinas has directly argued what Wiesel's work points toward the reality that “being” is not monolithic but multiple. When he claimed that Judaism was a different category of being altogether, this is precisely what he meant. Being—the way we see the world, the way we feel in the world, and our place in society—is not singular. Ways of being are both metaphysical and at the same time shaped by experience. Again, particularity of being is universal; the experience to which a Jew in Nazi Europe was inescapably tied was significantly different from the experience of the Nazi officer living in the same time and place. That two people would have such radically different experiences of being and yet live in the same time and place supports the notion of multiple categories of being. In Levinasian terms, if we force a univocal understanding of “Being” rather than accepting multiples ways of being—or when we feel we must make all other kinds of being submit to a single kind of being as superior—we commit an

\(^4\) This is also Abraham Joshua Heschel’s understanding of the nature of God. Although an in depth examination of this idea is beyond the scope of this study, this view has roots in traditional Jewish theology. For example, Ezekiel’s vision of God leaving Jerusalem in His chariot so that He can live in exile with His people is sometimes used as an example of the ways in which Judaism can support such a view of God. According to Judaism, humans are made in the image of God, which can be understood to mean that God and humans share many characteristics. From a practical point of view, if God suffers along with us, it is harder to blame Him for failing to intervene. From a spiritual point of view, it is perhaps meaningful that at least with are suffering with God.
ideological violence that can be used to justify the physical obliteration of the other.\footnote{A 1991 documentary made for French television entitled \textit{Pensur Aujourd'hui: Emmanuel Levinas} contains excellent discussion between Levinas and his interviewer, Catherine Chalier. In the second section of the documentary, “The Right to Be,” Levinas discusses his understanding of Being as predatory. This is juxtaposed against “being,” or the experience of the particular or other in the face of Being. Levinas also suggests that when humanity “encroaches on Being” or tries to take more power over creation than is its due, then it tends toward evil. What tempers this “encroachment on Being” are the commandments revealed at Sinai. This documentary was directed by Nat Lilienstein.}

Like Wiesel's God, Levinas' God is also metaphysical; the alterity of the Holy One Most High prefigures and informs the alterity of the human other to whom I am bound in ethical obligation.

Finally, recall also that in \textit{Totality and Infinity} Levinas repeatedly refers to the face-to-face relationship as metaphysical. Levinas means that this relation cannot be reduced phenomenologically in the same way one might reduce other objects of philosophical analysis. The face-to-face relation resists representation and yet is a faculty of human consciousness. This connection to which we are beholden in spite of ourselves creates both the suffering and the desire for connection that makes ethics possible. This relation is not visible in the same way that a table and chair are visible, but unifies and dictates to our consciousness and our experiences nonetheless. Levinas himself subjects affectivity to philosophical analysis as a means of getting at the face-to-face relation, and when he calls for a re-orientation of philosophy, he is first and foremost asking that philosophy take greater interest in human emotion and its power to both unite and divide us. Levinas also accounts for possible violent response to the face-to-face relation, thereby accounting for the development of perpetrators and victimizers; this places victimizers within the human family and makes them our responsibility whether we like
it or not.

Despite the innovative nature of their projects, however, none of the thinkers examined in this dissertation creates an ethics that could operate successfully on its own. Of the three, Levinas' theory is the most convincing because he argues that human ethics are an extension of human consciousness which evolves in advance of our ability to reason. As an innate quality of the human animal, the ethical impulse is arguably among the most important and most neglected human faculties, and Levinas' work can be used to support further studies of the morality of babies and children and the possibility of innate ethical impulses in humans in general. If an innate source for human ethics can be illuminated in ways that are useful for the humanities and sciences alike, then the future of moral education designed to more successfully prevent mass murders, genocide, hate crimes, rape and abuse and prevent hunger, joblessness and disease could be bright. What Levinas' project provides in the way of theoretical substance and brevity it lacks in normative statements and directives. Levinas hoped that others would use his theoretical framework and its inherent prioritization of the problem of suffering to develop a fuller ethics. This is both liberating and daunting for those drawn to his theory of ethics.

Wiesel's project is less concerned with providing proof of the possibility of ethics and focuses instead on how suffering as a common denominator of human experience makes it possible for victims to use their experiences to prevent further victimization. Stories of loss and suffering create empathetic responses in listeners and emphasize what connects us rather than what drives us apart. Yet Wiesel has much more to offer Western ethics than stories of suffering. Wiesel's work has already been successfully applied to
the development of genocide education curricula in primary, secondary and higher education. Coupled with Levinas' theoretical understanding of the source of ethical response, Wiesel's approach to moral education could be applied more broadly. Yet Wiesel's ethics focus almost exclusively on rescuing and healing victims and activating bystander response to undeserved suffering; it largely ignores the questions of whether—and how—victimizers and perpetrators can be rehabilitated and how the creation of victimizers can be prevented as part of an overall ethical imperative. It is here, however, where Rubenstein's ethics shines.

Like Levinas, Rubenstein makes a rigorous attempt to understand how victimizers are created. Rubenstein agrees that perpetrators commit violence as a response to their own suffering. Rubenstein goes further when he asserts that victimizers are themselves victims of society. He makes it clear that their re-entry into society is unavoidable, and his insistent inclusion of potential predators and victimizers in the human family is what drives him to explore the possibility of reviving Judaic cultic atonement ritual. If we can allow those who might someday violent crimes to atone communally with the rest of us, and if the community is forced to acknowledge that guilt is universal, then perhaps it is possible to prevent the creation of so many innocent victims. Rubenstein's solutions to the problem of perpetrators leaves much to be desired for a number of reasons. First of all, as Rubenstein himself points out, it is unlikely that

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6 See Facing History and Ourselves' web site: http://www.facing.org (accessed July 21, 2013). This organization uses Night and other parts of Wiesel's corpus as a central part of its educational program. FHAO believes that “education is the key to combating bigotry and nurturing democracy.” They provide extensive resources and training for professional communities, educators and interested individual designed to promote civic engagement.
Judaism will return to cultic practice. Second, as we discussed in Chapter 4, many of the European perpetrators of the Nazi period were Christian, at least culturally; Christianity is born out of the sacrifice of an innocent Jew, and this has never slaked the European thirst for Jewish blood. Yet his observations of the victimizers as sufferers and his insistent claims that the victimizers are profoundly human and therefore also our responsibility is invaluable to the development of any ethics. We can acknowledge the value of Rubenstein's insight and apply ourselves to taking this problem seriously without accepting his proposed solutions. Additional development of this aspect of an ethics grounded in suffering must include realistic and practical approaches to dealing with potential predators and victimizers.

Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein, particularly when their projects are examined together, offer compelling approaches to making ethics and suffering the central concerns of philosophy, but their projects also share some significant flaws. Judaism as Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein understand it takes on what they feel philosophy leaves out: suffering and its role in the creation of ethics and the demand the ethics remain humanity's first and most important concern. In addition, Judaism offers a tradition of maintaining particular identity in the face of the totalizing nature of secular Western culture. It offers some proof that we can remain particular while engaging ethically with the larger collective. All three thinkers would also agree that it is better for all of us if we are not all the same, since the presence of minorities insures ethical relations. All three argued convincingly on behalf of Judaism's potential value to Western philosophy, but none of them consistently dealt with the concept of Jewish election in a way that could
appeal to Jews of different denominations and non-Jews of all kinds. Even if we consider that the term “election” could be used to describe only one among many kinds of being, the election of the Jews as all three understand it is inextricably connected to Jewish rather than universal ethical imperatives. Rubenstein tries to reject election completely, but in the end adopts a kind of Zionism that is a post-Holocaust iteration of chosenness. Wiesel, albeit inconsistently, makes Holocaust survivors specifically the moral messengers for humanity, and arguably leaves less ethical authority or autonomy to other individuals. Finally, Levinas succeeds in making chosenness temporal, but can’t seem to decide if election is synonymous with being trapped in Jewishness in an anti-Semitic world, or if the election of the Jews is simply a metaphor for the election of humanity. Finally, if a universal ethics grounded in suffering were to retain the understandings of election described by Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein, it quite simply could not be called a universal ethics, unless they have developed a means to do so which is certainly possible.

In any case, none of the three thinkers examined here deal with the issue of chosenness in ways that will appeal to Jews and non-Jew alike. But Levinas' attempts to transform the idea of election into a universal state shared by humanity would be meaningful if consistently applied. Further development of a universal ethics created out of Jewish sources would need to address this point while remaining committed to demands that in order accurately depict and engage with Western thought and culture,

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7 See Chapter 4 of this dissertation for a discussion of the ways in which understandings of Jewish election continue to change through time.
Western philosophy must reflect minority experience and apply itself to the problems faced by members of persecuted groups. Ultimately, “love thy neighbor as thyself” has long been an imperative in Western ethics. What must changed is not the content of the command, but the definition of “neighbor.” My neighbors are not only the members of my religious community, my state or my country, but all of humanity. This re-definition of “neighbor” is critical for any universal ethics, and is offered by Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein in spite of the problems involved in deriving a universal ethics from their understandings of Judaism. If we understand an ethics grounded in suffering this way, then it has the potential to transcend those aspects of its foundation which are not truly universal.

The ethics examined in this dissertation also fail to address moral concerns that have nothing to do with suffering. How can Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein help me if I catch my office mate stealing office supplies, discover that my daughter's grade school teacher has a mental illness, or if I find out that the superintendent of my apartment building is an illegal alien? How should such questions be approached, according to Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein with regard to problems that have little or nothing to do with suffering? It is in some respects liberating—and perhaps more realistic—to embrace an ethics that contains few directives, and yet these day-to-day questions are not unimportant. Our responses to these kinds of problems are precisely what tend to inform our responses to catastrophe, in fact. If ethics are grounded in suffering, it makes sense that we should always ask ourselves if the choices we make (or don't make) will cause undeserved suffering. There may be times when answering even that question will be
difficult. For example, if suffering will be the result of any of the possible choices I make, then I must decide whose suffering I most want to avoid causing. It is also the case that if an ethics prioritizes the mitigation and prevention of suffering, then the general well being of the other is a priority as well. Perhaps an ethics grounded in suffering need not contain entirely new directives from the normative ethics of the past; one of the greatest differences between traditional ethics and the ethics of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein lies in what all three thinkers emphasize above all other factors: the well-being and safety of the other.

One of the most significant shortcomings of the ethics developed by Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein is that none of them mention our responsibility to alleviate non-human suffering, although certainly all three would agree that humanity must make the alleviation of animal suffering a priority. What about the suffering of the thousands of animals whose entire habitat is disappearing, or the suffering of beef cattle as they watch one another slaughtered one by one, or the suffering of a mother sheep whose lambs are repeatedly sold for meat before they have even stopped suckling? What about the low conviction rate for animal abusers, or the fact that torturing and murdering a pet is not a felony in all 50 states? What about bullfighting, cockfighting and dogfighting? What about pesticide use and its devastating effects on the lives of bees and other innocent creatures who sustain the ecosystems of the entire planet? The list of violations committed by humans against their fellow creatures and the planet we share with them goes on and on. An ethics which fails to address these mounting concerns that millions of people consider highly relevant can never be of universal value. There has been
significant scholarship on whether or not animals can be said to suffer, what kind of responsibility humans have toward animals who suffer, and to what lengths humans should go to preserve the planet from further pollution and damage due to overpopulation and over-harvesting of natural resources. And yet the ethics of Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein can accommodate imperatives to alleviate non-human suffering as well, despite the fact that all three thinkers are almost exclusively preoccupied with human suffering.

Recall that as much as Levinas engages in wordplay regarding a “contentless” revelation, the revelation of the other to the I does indeed possess content: the face of the other is what contains the call “thou shalt not kill.” Moreover, Levinas claims that it is the eyes specifically which contain that message.\(^8\) For Levinas, the eyes make consciousness visible to me, and contain the demand that I allow the other to live unmolested. It is not just the human face, then, which places me in ethical relation against my will, but the eyes of the other. Levinas' insistence that the eyes of the other is the ultimate source of ethical demand suggests that the sentience of the other, rather than the visage itself which engages me and affects me. This means the other could be an ape, a dog, or a human child.

This has exciting implications for the creation of an ethics which draws on

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\(^8\) See Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 23 for just one example: “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, nonetheless offer absolute resistance to which the temptation to murder is inscribed.” Levinas refers to the human being here, but what he states about the power of eyes to convey “absolute resistance” could also be said of non-human eyes. This should be investigated more deeply.
traditional sources and yet broadens the definition of “neighbor” even further to include non-human others. It would be of significant philosophical and scientific value to embark upon a affective phenomenology of animal suffering; though we could not speculate on the cognitive experience of non-human suffering, a phenomenology of suffering as the catalyst for the human ethical obligation to prevent and intervene on non-human suffering would be fruitful. Extending human ethical obligation to all of creation might not be appealing to those who don't feel compassion for non-human sufferers or lack a sense of connection to the natural world. But it is nonetheless reasonable to prioritize the ethical treatment of animals, since research shows that humans who abuse animals are much more likely to abuse people, too. By the same token, human beings will suffer from more hunger and disease if the planet is not better protected from pollutants, invasive and sloppy extraction of resources and other human abuses of the environment. It must be said that extending ethical obligation to non-humans and the natural world in general will make many ethical questions more complicated. I may object to “chicken factories” which consign beakless chickens to a life spent on a conveyor belt. But these chicken factories also supply inexpensive protein and feed

9 Studies show that most serial killers engage in animal torture as children and then progress to the torture and murder of human beings. This strongly suggests that those who cannot empathize with our fellow creatures cannot empathize with their “own kind” either. See Joseph G. Saunder, “Enacting and Enforcing Felony Animal Cruelty Laws to Prevent Violence Against Humans.” 6 Animal L. 1 (2001); BR Johnson and JV Becker, “Natural Born Killers?: the development of the sexually sadistic serial killer,” Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, 25:3:335-348 (1997); Randall Lockwood, “Animal Cruelty and Violence Against Humans: Making the Connection,” 8 Animal L. 81 (1999); and Jeremy Wright and Christopher Hensley, “From Animal Cruelty to Serial Murder: Applying the Graduation Hypothesis,” International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology. Vol 47, no. 1, pp. 71-88. Every serial killer does not have a history of animal abuse. The connection is not always there. For example, Hitler was a known animal lover and vegetarian. But researchers have established that the likelihood that an animal abuser will abuse humans as well is considerable.
millions of hungry people who might not be able to afford free-range chicken meat. When the definition of “neighbor” is extended significantly, there is more at stake, rather than less. And yet if we choose to believe that humanity's dominance of the planet suggests we are “elected” as stewards of creation, then these kinds of complicated ethical choices must be faced.

Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein demand a re-orientation of philosophy toward ethics, prioritize the alleviation of suffering and broaden the definition of “neighbor” to include all of humanity. Their ethics are not of lesser value because they do not contain the kind of normative statements that are typical of traditional ethical systems. In fact, the most useful aspects of each project augment one another and together form a solid theoretical framework that can be used to create a more complete ethics grounded in suffering that contains more normative statements and directives. And Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein remind us that religion continues to be of value to human thought and culture even if we do not believe in God; religion has consistently concerned itself with issues like the problem of suffering, relatedness, and responsibility for the other. It is often argued that without God, religion has no authority. And yet part of what makes religion attractive to thinkers like Levinas, Wiesel and Rubenstein is that religious thought traditionally concerns itself with matters such as the value human emotion, the importance of ritual, and perhaps most importantly, the problem of suffering, all of which modern philosophy tends to avoid. Contemporary Jewish thought is ideally positioned to re-orient philosophy toward more practical, engaged demands for human responsibility for creation. If philosophy were to commit to taking up these problems with real
seriousness, then a long overdue interest in minority experience would surely follow. Finally, Judaism's focus on the regenerative value of dialogue between parties who are at odds with one another—a tool meaningfully applied to the alleviation and prevention of suffering in the projects analyzed in this dissertation—can be of real value to a philosophy interested in accurately reflecting the universality of particularity. If philosophy cannot reposition itself toward valuing particular experience and dialogue over monolithic universalism and monologue, then it cannot really apply itself to the task of prioritizing the alleviation of suffering, either.
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Curriculum Vitae

Ingrid L. Anderson
16 Allen Street
Cambridge, MA 02140
ila@bu.edu
617-501-3893

Education

PhD Boston University, Religious Studies, September, 2013
Dissertation: “Making Ethics “First Philosophy”: Ethics and Suffering in the
Work of Emmanuel Levinas, Elie Wiesel and Richard Rubenstein.”

MA Boston University, Judaic Studies, May 2005
“Stealing the Messiah: The Third Reich’s Co-option of Messianic Ideology.” MA

BA University of Kentucky, English, August 1997

BA University of Kentucky, Women's Studies, August 1997

Awards and Fellowships

Ezratti Family Fellowship for post-Holocaust Ethics 2013
Boston University Graduate Writing Fellowship 2013
University of London at Royal Holloway Summer Institute Fellowship 2012
Ezratti Family Fellowship for Post-Holocaust Ethics 2011-2012
Mark and Ruth Luckens International Prize in Jewish Thought 2008
Boston University Graduate Writing Fellowship 2007-2008

Publications

“‘Faithful to the Law”: Why Richard Rubenstein is Not a Death of God Theologian,” in


Reviews


Conference Papers


““A Head Full of Nonsense:” The Image of the Lamdan in Post-Haskalah Judaism” Collaborative project with Rabbi Eliana Jacobowitz. Paper accepted for Summer Workshop for Young Researchers in Culture and Jewish Identity Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, Israel 2009. (declined)


Teaching Experience

Emmanuel College, Boston: Spring, 2013
Introduction to Judaism, from the Bible to the Modern Period

Boston University, Boston: Spring, 2013
Undergraduate Writing Seminar: From Moses to Kevin Youkilis, or, Images of Jewish Masculinity in History

Emmanuel College, Boston: Spring, 2010
Introduction to Judaism, from the Bible to the Modern Period

Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Boston: Fall, 2009
The People of the Book: An Introductory Course in Academic Writing

Boston University, Boston: Summer and Winter, 2009
The Holy City: Jerusalem in Time, Space and Imagination

Boston University, Boston: Fall 2007-Spring 2009
Undergraduate Writing Seminar: From Moses to Kevin Youkilis, or, Images of Jewish Masculinity in History

Teaching Fellow Experience

Boston University, Boston:

World Religions East, 2007
Supervising Faculty, David Eckel

The Holy City of Jerusalem, 2006
Supervising Faculty, Michael Zank

Holocaust in Historical Perspective, 2006
Supervising Faculty, Steven T. Katz

The Bible, 2005
Supervising Faculty, Peter Hawkins

Judaism, 2005
Supervising Faculty, Michael Zank

Zionism and the State of Israel, 2004
Supervising Faculty, Hillel Newman

**Selected Invited Lectures**


“The Beginning of Nation-Statehood: Moses Receives (and Gives) the Law.” For *The Bible*, Professor Peter Hawkins, Boston University, Boston, February 2008.

“Norman Lamm's *The Shemah.*” For *Introduction to Modern Judaism*, Professor Michael Zank, Boston University, Boston, October 2005.


**Professional Memberships**

American Academy of Religion
Association for Jewish Studies
Society of Jewish Ethics.