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# Jewish Philosophies After Heidegger: Imagining a Dialogue between Jonas and Levinas

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**Jewish Philosophies After Heidegger:  
Imagining a Dialogue Between Jonas and Levinas\***

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The divergent paths taken by Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas and Emmanuel Levinas have their common source in a disappointment with Edmund Husserl's promise to bring philosophy back to life by way of the phenomenological method. Each of Husserl's students turns phenomenology in an existential direction and claims to account for our deepest responsibilities as human beings.

Levinas and Jonas, however, write from an even graver disappointment with how their teacher, Heidegger, exploits phenomenology. Though each acclaims Being and Time as a masterpiece, each condemns their mentor for portraying a self-centered existence that pivots around the individual's anxiety in the face of freedom-unto-death.<sup>1</sup> And each diagnoses Heidegger's fundamental ontology as symptomatic of a larger cultural crisis in which the human will is regarded as the creative ground of all moral value. Each contends that what gets lost in Heidegger - and, at the very least, in modern philosophy in general - is the way our existence is oriented by our

obligation to a Good-in-itself that commands us from beyond our humanity. And each traces this transcendent Good to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In this respect, each finds in Judaism the resources to respond to the spirit of nihilism embodied by Heidegger's thought.

Levinas and Jonas, however, find it incumbent on themselves as philosophers not to ground ethics in dogmatic faith. And neither believes he has to, for each argues that the Good is accessible to human experience through creation. Consequently, one does not need to be a Jew or consult Torah - or even believe in God's existence or interpret the world as creation - in order to be held responsible before the tribunal of the Good. Though Torah is the medium of Judaic faith in its particularity, the ethical message of Judaism is universally available in the meaning that our existence reveals on its own terms. God, one might say, has created the world in such a way that the moral law and our capacity to receive it are part of the immanent structure of creation.

The glaring difference between Levinas and Jonas lies in where they place the Good in creation, and how they explain the relationship between the Good and God. I propose to imagine the steps in a dialogue between Levinas and Jonas, who, so far as I know, never engaged each other in person or writing after their student years in Weimar Germany. Because both are formidable thinkers, I must introduce each in his own right before the dialogue can begin.

### I. Levinas: Jerusalem and Athens

Levinas accuses the entire history of Western ontology "from Parmenides on" of being driven by the urge to bring Being under the command of the thinking self, so that the "Other" (or "Infinite") can be corralled within the horizon of the ego's own cares and possibilities.<sup>2</sup> This sweeping indictment permits Levinas to draw a stark contrast between two roads in Western thought: 1) an avenue originating in Athens - the egoism of ontology, with its penchant for a "totalizing" grasp of Being - and 2) a path, emanating from Jerusalem, that is less travelled by philosophers and that Levinas calls "metaphysics."<sup>3</sup> Following Rosenzweig and Heidegger, Levinas sees modern philosophy not as decisively breaking from ancient Greek thought, but as completing a rationalism that was already at work in Athens. But against Heidegger, who traces that rationalism to Plato's "metaphysics of presence" and tries in his later work to recover the meaning of Being by turning to pre-Socratic ontology, Levinas joins Rosenzweig in bidding us to walk the path towards Jerusalem before heading for Athens.

The heart's desire of the Jerusalemite, the metaphysician, is not to think Being but to be ethically responsible for the Other, whose very face is received as the locus of God's commandment, "Thou shalt not murder." The face is a vessel of the Torah's prophetic call to give to "the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the poor." The quality of our lives is measured, in Levinas's Judaic tradition, not by our knowledge or authenticity, but by the attention we pay to these

"Others": the needy whose cries are inconvenient and whose lives may seem useless to those intent on comprehending Being.

But what has Levinas's move from Being to "the Other" to do with philosophy? Doesn't pitting Jerusalem against Athens, metaphysics against ontology, also mean pitting faith against philosophy, revelation against reason? Levinas answers "No!," contending that Judaism's message does not require submission to the texts or laws of the Jewish tradition in particular, but is immediately available to every human being in what the human face-to-face encounter reveals on its own terms. And this encounter can be articulated philosophically.

Worldly things derive their meaning from the roles they play within a context organized around the cognitive powers and practical needs of the ego. Knowing, using and enjoying things in one's environment involve "assimilating" what is alien to "the Same." The Other, however, has absolute meaning "all by himself," prior to how he fits into the ego's grasp of Being. When the face is encountered for what it is, Levinas says, the inexhaustibility of what it signifies - the Other - is welcomed as a Good-in-itself for whom I am responsible. This transcendent Good is acknowledged in its "Infinity," as coming from "beyond Being," neither in a Platonic intellectual intuition nor in a Heideggerian mood of anxiety, but in the feeling of shame that attests to the awakening of one's conscience before the Other. Levinas writes:

Conscience... is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls into question the naive right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living

being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent... The Other is not initially a fact, is not an obstacle, does not threaten me with death; he is desired in my shame.<sup>4</sup>

Levinas's key idea is that the Other is not just an alter ego, for if he were, then our relationship would be symmetrical: I would be another You, and You another I. Levinas goes beyond Martin Buber's account of the I/Thou relationship by insisting that I am more responsible for you than you are for yourself, and that my responsibility for you is not contingent upon your mutuality.<sup>5</sup> You approach me from a height. You face me immediately, before I face myself. I only face myself - to the extent that I ever do - when I step back in reflection, but by that time I have already been claimed by the commandment to serve your good. Here's how Levinas puts it:

The Other is higher than I am because the first word of the face is "Thou shalt not murder." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. I, whoever I may be, as the "first person," I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call. The mastery of the Other and his poverty, with my submission and my wealth... are presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not, then we would not even say, before an open door, "After you, Sir!" It is an original "After you, Sir!" that I have tried to describe.<sup>6</sup>

Ethics can only get a foothold in our lives, Levinas insists, if we can overcome our natural temptation to "look out for old number one." He notes:

There is a Jewish proverb which states that 'the other's material needs are my spiritual needs': it is this disproportion, or asymmetry, that characterizes the ethical refusal of the first truth of ontology - the struggle to be. Ethics is, therefore, against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first.<sup>7</sup>

Each organism orders its world around its own survival and prosperity and is, at bottom, states Levinas, "hateful" of others.<sup>8</sup> Life on its own terms is a war of all against all. Even that sublime accomplishment of the cogito - ontology - is, by Levinas's rendering, just a sophisticated means by which we humans express our conatus essendi - our animal will-to-live - by mastering what is around us. Levinas goes so far as to associate Heidegger's fundamental ontology with Darwin's account of the life-world.

Heidegger says at the beginning of Being and Time that Dasein is a being who is concerned for this being itself. That's Darwin's idea: the living being struggles for life. The aim of being is being itself.<sup>9</sup>

Within nature, there are subjective goods, but no objective Good-in-itself, says Levinas, and so no basis for ethical responsibility.

Consequently, the very possibility of ethics demands reference to a supernatural Good: a meaning that reveals itself from "beyond Being" because it requires one to be able to sacrifice one's interests - and even one's life - for the sake of the Other. Regardless of whether one identifies the Other's face as the trace of God, one is responding to a supernatural summons when one suppresses nature in order to welcome one's neighbor. Our bodies sets the stage for our being able to transcend our nature and condemn "the survival of the fittest" in the name of "Shalom!" And paradoxically, we reveal our spirituality most fundamentally by tending to the material needs of others: the needs of life itself.

Levinas agrees that the ethical message he discerns within the I/You encounter is perhaps best exemplified by Jesus's selfless lovingkindness - and the Biblical paradigm of Levinasian neighborliness is, I believe, the Good Samaritan. But Levinas interprets the Gospels as conveying the same basic lesson that was already present in the Prophets' injunction to give to "the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the poor." Still, Levinas's emphasis on agape - one's exclusive, self-sacrificing exposure to the particular Other one happens to face - seems to conflict with the Prophets' ideal of justice: a moral principle that requires that all Others, and even oneself, as "the Other of Others," be respected equally.

Levinas concedes that love needs justice, Jerusalem needs Athens, because the "third parties" who stand outside the immediacy of the I/You encounter are also one's neighbors. Justice demands that



incomparables be compared: that the unique Other to whom one is absolutely devoted be placed within the wider human community and be acknowledged as "only one among others." Justice requires that the conscientious self step back from the immediacy of the one-for-another and adopt a posture of neutrality: treating everyone as having equal rights. Levinas acknowledges that justice is recommended by the Torah itself, but argues that ethical priority lies in mercy (rahamim): simple acts of generosity. Long before the recently celebrated debate between Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan over the relative importance of justice and care, the Judaic tradition has known that a concern with justice's "abstract order of rules" too easily degenerates into an "ideological rationalism" that is forgetful of the unique Other who needs a helping hand.<sup>10</sup>

It should come as no surprise to us now that Levinas reads the encounter with God - one's submission before the majesty of the Other who commands from "on high" - into the phenomenology of the interhuman relationship itself. In presenting itself as coming from beyond the world organized around one's own, and even society's, needs, the face of the Other person is the "trace" of the divine. Metaphysics, in Levinas's sense, is ethics because the Good-in-itself is revealed in the experience of one-for-another. And ethics, in turn, is already religion: because proximity to God can arise only through devotion to the other person. The transcendent is an immanent moment of the ethical relation itself. The personal presence of God resides in the I/You encounter, and love of God resides in love of neighbor.

But isn't faith something above and beyond morality? Levinas relates an anecdote told by Hannah Arendt shortly before her death.

"When she was a child in her native Konigsberg, one day she said to the rabbi who was teaching her religion: "You know, I have lost my faith." And the rabbi responded: "Who's asking for it?"" Levinas remarks:

[T]he response was typical. What matters is not 'faith,' but 'doing.'... [A]re believing and doing different things? What does believing mean? What is faith made of? Words, ideas? Convictions? What do we believe with? With the whole body! With all my bones. (Psalm 35:10) What the rabbi meant was: "Doing good is the act of belief itself." That is my conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

Levinas concedes that the Christian idea of God's kenosis - the humility of God's willingness "to live and die for all men" by appearing on earth as the suffering servant of the vulnerable - is "close to the Jewish sensibility."<sup>12</sup> But he rejects the theological concepts of transubstantiation and the Eucharist that come to surround the personality of Jesus. Indeed, "theo-logy" - with its "Greek" root in the desire to comprehend God's nature, the nature of perfect substance - is a kind of idolatry: the exercise of "the spiritually refined" who, in the telling words of Isaiah 58, want to see the face of God and enjoy His proximity before they have freed their slaves and fed their hungry. Theology's focus on the epistemic issue of whether faith is credible distracts us from Judaism's ethical message: that belief lies in *mitzvot*, the performance of good works.

Levinas's account of how God presents Himself, as forever absent, through the face of the other person - captures three crucial features of the Judaic idea of God. First, God is infinitely Other. It would be

idolatry to believe that one can grasp Him in a finite image. Divine incarnation is foreign to Judaic spirituality. Yahweh - He whose face no human can look upon and survive - has abdicated us out of trust in our ability to hear Him from afar. Second, in His infinite separation from us, God nonetheless remains present, for His law is revealed through the face of the Other. To compensate for His separation from us, God has put Torah into his childrens' hands, and, writes Levinas, "one is justified in loving Torah even more than God." It is the glory of Judaism, according to Levinas, to welcome a God who does not want to possess us but who wants us to be responsible so that our work has real importance. "To veil His face in order to demand everything from man": this, remarks Levinas, is "an austere humanism bound to a difficult adoration."<sup>13</sup> Finally, Levinas's is a personal God who singles each of us out for responsibility. We stand alone not, as Heidegger would have it, before our own death, but in the irreplaceable burden we bear for those whose lives embody a Good-in-itself that absolutely transcends our own life and death.

Levinas brings all humans into the orbit of Judaic experience because the I/You encounter, constitutive of being a human agent, bears pre-philosophical and even pre-textual testimony to the Judaic understanding of the relationship between humanity and God. "Thou shalt not murder" is, as Levinas puts it, "a Saying that is prior to any Said"<sup>14</sup>: an imperative addressed to the singular individual, through the face of the Other, that precedes all products of tradition or reflection, including ontological accounts of the meaning of Being. Though commandment takes possession of the ego before one has time to reflect on it, our reason can articulate the meaning of this experience

by a phenomenological description of the revelation implicit in the face-to-face encounter. In this regard, then, faith is not alien to philosophy, revelation not immune to reason.

Against Heidegger in particular, who represents the apotheosis of the egoism of ontology, Levinas uses phenomenology to establish that no anxious assertion of freedom can excuse a shameful failure of ethical responsibility, no appeal to authenticity can override the commandment not to murder, and that any philosophy, like Heidegger's, that cannot set this fundamental limit is complicit in the Nazis' crime against the Absolute.<sup>15</sup>

## **II. Jonas: Athens and Jerusalem**

The route to a Judaic moment in Hans Jonas's philosophy is far more circuitous. Jonas's work does not spring from an alleged opposition between Athens and Jerusalem. He unabashedly pursues ontology's project of trying to comprehend the meaning of Being. What worries Jonas about modern philosophy in general and Heidegger's thought in particular is not the spirit of ontology as such, but the ontological assumption of dualism: of a stark divide between human beings and the rest of nature. The greatest flaw in Heidegger's fundamental ontology, according to Jonas, is not that he forgets "the Other," but that he diminishes Being by denying that living nature is a Good-in-itself: a meaningful whole to which we belong and which commands our responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

Heidegger epitomizes the nihilistic temper of modernity. No longer believing that humanity belongs to a sacred order of creation or

"an objective order of essences in the totality of nature," moderns have lost not only the grounds for cosmic piety, but also a stable image of human nature, even the conviction that we have a nature. Jonas writes:

That nature does not care one way or the other is the true abyss. That only man cares, in his finitude facing nothing but death, alone with his contingency and the objective meaninglessness of his projecting meanings, is a truly unprecedented situation... There is no point in caring for what has no sanction behind it in any creative intention.<sup>17</sup>

Existentialism is no idiosyncrasy within modern thought, according to Jonas, but the most complete expression of "the ethical vacuum" caused by two key assumptions of the modern credo: 1) that the idea of obligation is a human invention, not a discovery based on the objective reality of the Good-in-itself; and 2) that the rest of Being is indifferent to our experience of obligation.<sup>18</sup> Jonas challenges these modern assumptions and aims to disclose, in a manner consistent with modern science, "a principle of ethics which is ultimately grounded neither in the authority of the self nor in the needs of the community, but in an objective assignment by the nature of things."<sup>19</sup> Jonas's recovery of the meaning of Being unfolds in three stages: existential, ontological, and theological. Our journey through the first two stages will be brief as I have been asked to focus on the Judaic dimension of Jonas's thought.<sup>20</sup> My main object is to track how Jonas relates the

Good-in-itself - the ultimate object of our ethical responsibility - to his Judaic God.

In The Phenomenon of Life, Jonas offers "an existential interpretation of biological facts," arguing that "concern for one's being" is not reserved for Dasein alone, but is present in "an ascending scale" of perception and action among plants, animals and human beings. Value is inherent in nature because organisms must be able to experience value and disvalue in order to survive and thrive. Jonas worries, however, that a "nihilist" may acknowledge the presence of subjective value in Being yet doubt "whether the whole toilsome and terrible drama is worth the trouble."<sup>21</sup>

In The Imperative of Responsibility, Jonas seeks to demonstrate the objective reality of value - a Good-in-itself - because only from it can a binding obligation to guard Being be derived. On the basis of "intuitive certainty," Jonas derives "the ontological axiom" that the goodness of life is not relative to already existing purposes, for "the very capacity to have purposes at all is a good-in-itself."<sup>22</sup> Through life, Being says "Yes" to itself. Only humans, however, are able to discern the ontological truth: that the presence of life in Being is "absolutely and infinitely" better than its absence. The ethical consequence of this axiom is that we have a duty to protect the life-world. But not all living things have equal ethical status. The primary object of our responsibility within the Good-in-itself of living nature, Jonas contends, is "the idea of Man" and so the future of humanity. This is no anthropocentric conceit but an objective assignment by Being, for the testimony of life justifies our seeing ourselves, in our capacities for knowledge, freedom and responsibility,

as "a 'coming to itself' of original substance," the actualization of a "cosmogonic Eros."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, we arrive at the theological - and, specifically, Judaic - stage of Jonas's thought. Having located the Good-in-itself within Being, what need is there for belief in God? Jonas concedes that neither his existential interpretation of the biological facts nor his ontological grounding of an imperative of responsibility demands that we see living nature as God's creation. But they do not rule it out either, so long as our appreciation of the meaning of Being is compatible with faith. Jonas contends that although we can make ethical sense of our place in nature without appealing to a transcendent Creator, we can also make sense of nature - and perhaps deepen its meaning - by thinking of it as God's creation.

Jonas proceeds from the premise that those who live from the Judaic tradition believe that nature is the work of a supreme Creator, and then asks whether this concept of God can accommodate four aspects of modern belief that our reason cannot deny: 1) the denial of personal immortality, given the evidence that mind depends on body and so death brings an end to both; 2) the brute reality of evil, ineradicably symbolized by Auschwitz; 3) modern science's exclusion of divine intervention from the explanation of nature; and 4) modern cosmology's evidence that the universe began with "the big bang" and that life is a late, rare, and precarious product of nature's labors. Jonas concludes that Judaic faith in the goodness of a God who created the universe and revealed Himself to uniquely elected individuals remains a genuine option today even for those who refuse to turn their backs on what reason commends to them.

Jonas begins his theological journey by suggesting that we can accept a central article of modern reason - the denial of personal immortality - while finding some meaning in the idea of immortality itself.<sup>24</sup> He draws on two Judaic symbols - "the Book of Life" and "the transcendent image of God" - to develop the idea that our decisions carry eternal significance. Hebrew prayer speaks of our names being inscribed in "the Book of life" according to our individual deserts. The deeds we add to this record, on Jonas's interpretation, bear not on any future destiny of ours as individuals but on the welfare of God who harbors a unified memory of the world-process. Our experience of the call of conscience in the moment of decision attests to our holding the fate of "the becoming deity" in our hands, for the completion of His image depends on our fulfilling the promise of goodness that His gift of life offers us.

Jonas goes so far as to argue for the existence of a such a God, who experiences the particular events of history as they occur and weaves them into an ever-growing memory so that the truth about the past is eternally preserved, although He lacks both a foreknowledge of what will occur and the power to physically alter the course of affairs. Jonas contends that our consciousness as finite, historical beings depends upon our awareness of a distinction between true and false statements about the past. And this distinction in turn must refer to a universal and perfect mind for whom the past remains eternally present, for our hold on the long-lost past at best represents what seems true to us based on current evidence.

Our reconstruction of natural history rests on the unprovable assumption that nature's laws remain the same over time: that



contingency plays no role in their evolution. And our opinions about human history stand vulnerable to distorted evidence, the most extreme instance of which is the totalitarian effort to rewrite the historical archive. Jonas recounts a conversation with Hannah Arendt in which they imagined that Stalin had succeeded in revising the Soviet historical record to the point where there was no way for future generations to know about the Gulags. Our awareness that statements which meet our evidential standards of "historical" truth may be incorrigibly false attests to our recognition that the concept of truth about the past refers to a perspective that infinitely transcends our own. And, following Descartes's causal argument, Jonas conjectures that our idea of such a mind must have been caused by that mind itself.<sup>25</sup>

Jonas agrees with Kant that theological arguments never comprise proofs, but reason must still venture such speculations in order to address two spiritual longings. First, we may hope that the unavoidable question, "How did it all begin?," find an answer in a personal ground: a caring presence who created the world with the intention of letting creatures arise in its midst who are able to respond to the goodness of Being. Second, we may hope that nothing good be lost and forgotten: that there be an eternal memory even of "the gassed and burnt children of Auschwitz, the defaced, dehumanized victims of the camps, and all the other numberless victims of holocausts of our time."<sup>26</sup> No immanent ontology of nature can satisfy these spiritual longings. Yet they are just what the Jewish God answers, symbolized as He is by "the Book of Life" and "the transcendent image."

Jonas then proposes a more "complete metaphysics" into which such symbols would fit. He invents "a tentative myth" that more fully

articulates God's nature and shows the compatibility between reason and faith. He imagines that God withdraws from His own creation in order that the world might be "for itself," fraught with risk. God - utterly exhausted by his creative effort and with nothing left to give - pronounces His experiment to be good only with the long awaited, but not inevitable, emergence of life: of creatures who affirm their own existence. Prior to the advent of knowledge, however, God's cause cannot go wrong because life retains its innocence. Eventually, with the evolution of humanity, life arrives at the highest intensification of its own value, for our capacities for knowledge and freedom represent "transcendence awakened to itself."

But there is a price to be paid, for with knowledge and freedom come the power to will and do evil: an unprecedented power in this technological age, given our ability to destroy our species. Still, moral responsibility is the mark of our being made "for" God's image, not "in" it. Among earthly creatures only we can acknowledge the transcendent importance of our deeds: that we are the "mortal trustees of an immortal cause." To God's self-limitation we owe thanks, for this makes room for us to help Him by taking responsibility for our own vulnerable affairs. We are called "to mend the world" for the sake of a caring, suffering and becoming God who is powerless to realize the promise of His creation on His own.<sup>27</sup>

Jonas's myth lets him accommodate a second truth that reason cannot deny: evil is real. A Jew cannot avoid asking: how could the Lord of history - who responds to worldly events with "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" - have allowed the Holocaust to happen? It would be a curse on God to believe that divine goodness renders the

evil of mass murder a mere illusion of our finite perspective. Jonas's myth incorporates the speculation that God was silent not because He chose not to intervene but because He could not have intervened. God remains impotent in the physical realm, but addresses us through the manifest goodness of creation itself with "the mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal."

Jonas concedes that his myth of a God who spent Himself in the labor of creation "strays far from the oldest Jewish teaching." But he believes that the traditional theological notion of God's omnipotence must be sacrificed to protect His goodness, and he finds precedent for his idea of a self-limiting God in the teaching of the Lurianic Kabbalah regarding tzimtzum, or divine self-contraction. He receives further confirmation in the diary of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewess who volunteered for the Westerbork concentration camp in order "to help in the hospital and share in the fate of her people." The basis for her martyrdom lay in her conviction that God "cannot help us," but it is our turn to give back: to "help You and defend Your dwelling-place in us to the last." <sup>28</sup>

But can such a God meet the third dictate of reason: the scientific exclusion of divine intervention from the explanation of nature? Here again Jonas's tzimtzum myth again comes to the rescue. Divine agency, of which revealed religion must speak, need not be represented in the form of visible, spectacular miracles that violate nature's laws. Instead, it can involve the direct inspiration of uniquely elected individuals. For if we can accept the compatibility between causality and freedom in the case of human action - and Jonas thinks we must - then we can permit a similar compatibility in the case

of divine action. As laws of nature do not preclude freedom in our acting upon the external world, so the principles of psychology do not block entry to a transcendent initiative in our inner lives. In this respect, Jews have an advantage over Christians, Jonas contends, for while the counternatural miracles of Jesus's birth, resurrection and ascension touch upon the core of Christian faith, "nothing much hangs on [such] miracles in the Old Testament."<sup>29</sup>

The fourth demand of reason - the evidence of modern cosmology - again finds support in Jonas's myth. For it is plausible to read the cosmological evidence as pointing to a physically improbable, anti-entropic development from chaos to order: from simpler, commonplace concatenations of matter to more complex, unusual forms of life. Life itself appears to be late and rare in the universe, but far rarer is that most inward and self-transcending product of life: the human mind. Jonas speculates that the upward mobility of the evolutionary record - though "no guaranteed success-story" - lends credibility to the idea that the cause of the universe was not random.<sup>30</sup> Still, the fate of the divine adventure lies with us, for only we can bear witness to the three pillars of the Judaic faith: 1) that God saw His creation was a Good-in-itself; 2) that God created humanity for His own image; and 3) that God made known to humanity what is good because His word is inscribed in our hearts.<sup>31</sup>

Though Jonas's "imperative of responsibility" - never to let the existence or essence of humanity be threatened by the hazards of action - follows from Judaism's appreciation of the goodness of life and the special dignity of humanity, he contends that this imperative is available to reasonable people everywhere, even atheists who do not

interpret nature as God's creation. Our duty to be "executors of an estate that only we can see but did not create"<sup>32</sup> is founded, Jonas insists, on a judgment concerning the value of life "that can be separated from any thesis concerning [the world's] authorship."<sup>33</sup> The presupposition of a Creator would offer us no reason for judging the world to be good if the world did not justify our perception of its value in its own right. The person of faith should believe not that creation is good because God created it, but that God created it because He recognized life as a Good-in-itself and morally responsible life as the highest evolution of the Good. But this means that theistic - and in particular Judaic - faith, though compatible with an understanding of nature that commands our responsibility, is not necessary for such an understanding. Furthermore, although faith in revelation need not conflict with science, it is safer to keep ethics in the public realm independent of revealed truth because of the arrogance and dogmatism invited by the claim that one possesses "the one true religion" and also because religious ethics will fail to win broad support in an era of declining faith.

Hans Jonas grounds ethics ontologically in "the depths of Being." Whereas Heidegger tries to persuade us of a silent call of conscience commanding us to be authentic in the face of the nothingness of Being, Jonas alerts us to an ethical imperative emanating from the plenitude of Being. Herein lies the meaning of Jonas's pointedly anti-Heideggerian motto: "Responsibility is the moral complement to the ontological constitution of our temporality."<sup>34</sup> The plenitude of Being opens up "a genuine present" because it gives us a future worth caring

for: a future that is already present in the integrity of nature, both outside ourselves and within.

### III. Dialogue

Although both Levinas and Jonas draw from their roots in Judaism and phenomenology to fill an ethical vacuum, epitomized by Heidegger's fundamental ontology, that haunts the Western philosophical tradition, it is hard to find common ground for dialogue between them, for their ideas are couched in different languages and fundamental categories. Though both aim to ground an imperative of responsibility in a Good-in-itself ultimately anchored in God, their disagreements would seem to be so basic as to allow for no hope of rapprochement. These disagreements revolve around three fundamental questions:

- A) Can Jews today have a theology without lapsing into theodicy?
- B) Is the Good-in-Itself "Otherwise than Being" or within Being?
- C) Is ethics against nature or the completion of nature?

#### A. Can Jews Have a Theology without Theodicy?

**Levinas** would surely object that Jonas's whole approach to God places Athens ahead of Jerusalem, onto-theology over commandment, the issue of faith before the requirements of mitzvot. What Jonas takes to be a premise of Judaic faith - that God created the universe - drives him to ask the traditional question of rational theology: what attributes must we take the Creator of the universe to have, consistent

with what we know from our experience of creation? Given that God's goodness is the perfection most central to Judaic faith, Jonas concludes that we can only attribute goodness to God by limiting His power and foreknowledge. Having shown what the Creator's nature must be if He is worthy of our faith, Jonas even offers several arguments for God's existence.

From Levinas's perspective, Jonas subordinates the living God of Torah and Talmud to the God of philosophers steeped in Greek ontology. Of this difference Levinas states:

The God of the Bible cannot be defined or proved by means of logical predications and attributions. Even the superlatives of wisdom, power and causality advanced by medieval ontology are inadequate to the absolute otherness of God. It is not by superlatives that we can think of God but by trying to identify the particular interhuman events that open towards transcendence and reveal the traces where God has passed. The God of ethical philosophy is not "God the almighty being of creation," but the persecuted God of the prophets who is always in relation to man...<sup>35</sup>

Why does Levinas insist that we can't have both the God of ethical philosophy and the God of rational theology: both "the Other" and the "almighty being of creation"? I think it is because he identifies rational theology with theodicy, and concludes that the death of this God, pronounced by Nietzsche, has "taken on the meaning of a quasi-empirical fact" given the horrors of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

The rational theologian, ensnared in the logic of trying to comprehend the height of the Supreme Being in terms of what it means to be perfectly, is seduced by "the temptation of theodicy" - the fantasy that:

[T]he evil that fills the earth would be explained by a "grand design"; it would be destined to the atonement of a sin, or announce, to the ontologically limited consciousness, compensation or recompense at the end of time. These super-sensible perspectives are invoked in order to divine, in a suffering that is essentially gratuitous and absurd, and apparently arbitrary, a meaning and order.<sup>37</sup>

Although all religion prior to the twentieth century begins with the promise of salvation, according to Levinas, Auschwitz requires us either to abandon God or else obey the moral law independently of the Happy Ending, preach piety without reward, imagine that conscience brings us closer to God "in a more difficult, but also a more spiritual, way than does confidence in any kind of theodicy."<sup>38</sup>

In keeping with halakhic Judaism, Levinas says a Jew today must make sense of suffering ethically, not by way of rational theology.<sup>39</sup> Useless suffering is evil. Insofar as one suffers "for nothing," one suffers not only from something but from suffering itself. Yet evil can gain ethical-religious meaning from compassion: when one makes one's own suffering into suffering for the suffering of others. The only compensation for useless suffering is the occasion it provides for responsibility: for taking on, as one's own, the affliction of another.



But this elevation of the Other neither makes his suffering "for something" by giving it a purpose, nor brings satisfaction to the righteous one, for responsibility requires that one feel ever more accused and take on more and more affliction.<sup>40</sup>

Levinas enjoins us to rethink the meaning of Jerusalem as "ethics without salvation": being-for-the-Other even at the expense of my own desire to be. "To be worthy of the messianic era," Levinas writes, "one must admit that ethics has a meaning even without the promises of the Messiah."<sup>41</sup> Such an ethics - obedient to "an un-known God who does not assume a body and is open to atheism's denials"<sup>42</sup> - is tantamount to "a theology without theodicy."<sup>43</sup> The Good-in-itself does not console us but intensifies the burden of responsibility, and the good life is a stranger to all rewards except the elevation of the soul's dignity. In the spirit of Emil Fackenheim, Levinas states that "faith is not a question of the existence or non-existence of God," but of choosing to accept the authority of morality even "after the failure of morality."<sup>44</sup>

To Levinas's claim that "the God of ethical philosophy is not 'God the almighty being of creation,' but the persecuted God of the prophets who is always in relation to man...", **Hans Jonas** would no doubt reply that the Creator is always in relation to man - as the caring, but now powerless "Ground of Being" who suffers when we fail to shoulder our responsibilities - but that Jews cannot bypass rational theology because the idea of the Creator is the central premise of Torah, and reason's interest in thinking to its very limits cannot be denied. Jonas would agree with Levinas that the central task of Jewish philosophy after Auschwitz is to speak of a God worthy of our faith because He is not responsible for suffering or the evils of history.

But Jonas undertakes this task in an unflinchingly theological way, denying that rational theology must lapse into theodicy.

Jonas's appeal to tzimtzum - the Kabbalic idea of the self-contracting God - lets him symbolize a caring, suffering and becoming Creator for whom cosmic and human history is no guaranteed story of progress. Jonas's Supreme Being does not eliminate the reality of evil, lessen the burden of our responsibility, or diminish the sense in which we ought to assume our obligations towards creation ultimately for the sake of the Other, God, whose transcendent image it is ours to complete. There are, to be sure, elements of consolation in Jonas's theology: in particular, the thought that everything good is remembered for all eternity. But whatever salvation this offers does not come by way of personal immortality or belief in inevitable progress.

Though Jonas agrees with Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas that the God of theology-as-theodicy is dead, he concurs with Levinas that the later Heidegger's alternative of a non-objectifying listening to the call of Being amounts to a pagan deification of the world: a natural theology in which the divine does not transcend but belongs to Being.<sup>45</sup> But Jonas disagrees with Levinas about what it takes to think God's transcendence, contending that the theologian is beholden to objectifying thought and language, even though this objectification inevitably fails to do justice to the divine.<sup>46</sup> Against Levinas's turn "beyond Being" to the Other, Jonas takes rational theology, regarding both God's existence and essence, to be a legitimate Jewish enterprise. The real task is "how to keep the necessary inadequacy of theological language transparent for what is to be indicated by it."<sup>47</sup>

Jonas rejects the theological strategy of his teacher, Rudolf Bultmann: de-mythologization. Bultmann would have us translate mythical terms into the terms of existential philosophy so that objective concepts - like "God" - would return to their origin in the self-experience of human beings. For his part, Jonas contends that the understanding of God should not be reduced to the self-understanding of man. The paradoxical sphere of divinity, he states, is better protected by myth, whose manifest opacity remains transparent for the ineffable and mysterious God, than by concepts grounded in the self-experience of man.<sup>48</sup> Rational theology must take its cue from myths that:

[may] happen to adumbrate a truth which of necessity is unknowable and even, in direct concepts, ineffable, yet which, by intimations to our deepest experience, lays claim upon our powers of giving indirect accounts of it in revocable, anthropomorphic images.<sup>49</sup>

The myth of tzimtzum invites theology-without-theodicy, according to Jonas, for God can be imagined "objectively" without our concluding that everything in creation expresses His will and power. Though suffering in general is the price of creation's independence from the Creator, no particular moment of suffering - and in particular, no human act of evil - must be for some higher purpose. Evil is real because people often suffer for nothing. Still, faith in God's existence, though it cannot be proven, is compatible with what reason recommends to us, and is even a plausible hypothesis given the unlikelihood, according to Jonas, of mind having evolved from what is

mindless. If God does exist, we must argue for the finitude of His power: the priority of the Good over His will. One diminishes the divine mystery by presuming that the Creator is omniscient or omnipotent.

So maybe a rapprochement between Levinas and Jonas is possible after all. They agree that suffering and evil are real, and the God of theodicy dead. After Auschwitz we must conclude that there is no good reason, purpose or compensation for much of the affliction that befalls the creatures of God's world. Theodicy makes a mockery of God. So we have the glimmer of a synthesis: perhaps the goodness of Jonas's now-impotent Creator reveals itself in Levinas's "face of the other person" whose dignity commands my responsibility. Levinas's halakhic response to the problem of evil seems to open the possibility of a reconciliation with Jonas's employment of the Kabbalistic myth of tzimtzum.

#### **B. Is the Good Within Being or "Otherwise than Being"?**

A tantalizing prospect of synthesis, but far too hasty. For Jonas would object that Levinas, in refusing to conceive of God theologically as the author of nature, distances himself from another article of Judaic faith: the inherent goodness of life. By imagining God only as the ultimate Other of the interhuman ethical relation, Levinas severs God from nature: the Other from Being.

Recall that, on Jonas's myth, the emergence of life justifies God's judgment that His creation is a Good-in-itself, for life says "Yes!" to Being. With the advent of human knowledge and freedom, this

goodness is entrusted to man "to be completed, saved or spoiled by what he will do to himself and the world." Our primary ethical responsibility, however, is towards the Idea or essence of humanity in which each of us participates, for our form of life represents the highest actualization of Being's purposiveness, and so it is a matter of ontological import that we safeguard the future of our kind. By Jonas's lights, Levinas misconstrues the object of our responsibility by locating it "beyond Being," thus leaving out the ethical resources of the life-world from which we evolved and on which we depend, and favoring the particular Other person over the universal of humanity in which we share and which grounds our responsibility for future generations.

**Levinas** would retort that Jonas is mistaken to locate the Good within Being. First, Jonas's God has become ethically irrelevant because his Good-in-itself has ontological standing independent of God. Second, nature is incapable of supporting ethics, according to Levinas, for nature, stripped of any reference to the Other who commands the self from "beyond Being," is the site of egoism: the drive of each living thing to organize the world around its own needs. Levinas's divide between Being and the Other is rooted in a major premise: that Being - the totality of nature - includes value only from the egoistic perspective of organisms willing their own survival and prosperity. Ethics can open up, Levinas insists, only if "there is a rupture with Being's own law: the law of evil"<sup>50</sup> - if, that is, I am available to an "otherwise than Being" who calls me to transcend my natural self. He states:

With the appearance of the human - and this is my entire philosophy - there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the Other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal. Most of the time my life is dearer to me; most of the time one looks after oneself. But we cannot not admire saintliness.<sup>51</sup>

The human is a radically new phenomenon for it breaks with pure Being's struggle for life which is ultimately "a question of might."<sup>52</sup>

**Jonas** rejects Levinas's dualistic - even "Gnostic" - premise that nature contains no Good-in-itself. But perhaps we have a second opportunity for rapprochement, for Levinas concedes, upon being asked whether animals should be considered as Others, that "the ethical extends to all living beings," and he poignantly acknowledges the possibility of "a transcendence in the animal." He recounts the story of Bobby, a dog who found his way into Levinas's prisoner-of-war unit and faithfully befriended the captives who had become a subhuman "gang of apes" for both the guards and local citizens who passed them by. Levinas remarks that for Bobby "there was no doubt we were men," and he crowns the dog "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany," even if Bobby lacked "the brain needed to universalize maxims and inclinations."<sup>53</sup> So perhaps, even for Levinas, ethics is more implicated in nature, the Good more internal to Being, than his opposition between Being and the Other would have us think.

### **C. Is Ethics Against Nature or the Completion of Nature?**

Again, however, peace is not so quickly at hand, for Levinas insists that we think ethics against nature, while Jonas grounds the imperative of responsibility in his ontological naturalism. Jonas would identify two pitfalls in Levinas's rejection of naturalism. First, if all of nature is God's creation and human life is a recent and rare outcome of nature's own evolution, it is odd to see our coming-into-being as so discontinuous with the rest of the life-world. Levinas and Jonas agree that only humans are ethical creatures subject to an imperative emanating from the Good, but Jonas sees the capacity for responsibility as a development of life's inherent goodness, not an external imposition of the Good upon life. Even if Levinas anecdotally acknowledges capacities for responsiveness in non-human animals which suggest that there is gradation and teleology within living nature, his dualism of Being and the Other, Jonas would argue, deprives him of the categories to do justice to his own insight.

Second, Levinas holds that the ethical encounter is asymmetrical because an equal, mutual relationship between self and other is still too tainted with selfish concern. "The ethical rapport with the face..." is unnatural, he states, for I must "subordinate my existence to the other."<sup>54</sup> Jonas, by contrast, locates the drama of our ethical life within nature. On the one hand, we are inclined by nature to give priority to the interests of family and friends. This is not wholly selfish, for such special relationships of caring - especially between parent and child - are often marked by generosity and genuine self-sacrifice. Against Levinas's Hobbesian view of human nature, Jonas offers a more Humean appreciation of our moral sentiments. On the other hand, Jonas recognizes that if we simply follow our natural passions,

sympathetic though they be, we will not be up to the task imposed by his imperative of responsibility, for it requires a level of respect for humanity and future generations that does not come naturally. This is the Kantian moment in Jonas's idea of our ultimate obligation: the requirement of suppressing our natural, present-centered inclinations for the sake of our duty towards a distant future that will not serve our own happiness.

Still, there remains a classical, Platonic/Aristotelean moment in Jonas's ontological Grundlegung, for the Good in light of which we ought to be moved by respect for "the Idea of man" is a natural one, and we can come to feel that our commitment to it represents the actualization of "cosmogonic Eros" and the fulfillment of our largest self-concern, not the sacrifice of it for the Other's sake. Jonas's sense of justice is animated by the Platonic notion that all human individuals share in the Form of humanity and that this Form is a manifestation of the Good. In this regard, then, the cultivation of virtues corresponding to Jonas's ethics for the future should be seen as contributing to the eudaimonia of the person who embodies them.

From **Levinas's** perspective, of course, this enlargement of self-concern only betrays the extent to which Jonas has been seduced by Athens - and Socrates's erotic dream of realizing his own good by assimilating himself to the Idea of justice through the exercise of reason - rather than following the unreasonable path of Jerusalem which commands us to be holy: to be moved by selfless love of the Other. Levinas would be correct to call Jonas a "Greek" when it comes to ethics, for Jonasian responsibility requires not the suppression of our nature for the Other's sake but the completion of our nature in a pious



appreciation of the organic whole to which we belong. But Jonas would reject Levinas's judgement that one cannot be a Greek in ethics and a Jew at the level of faith.

#### IV. Rapprochement?

On the three fundamental questions we have explored - A) Can Jews today have a theology without lapsing into a discredited theodicy?, B) Is the Good-in-Itself "Otherwise than Being" or within Being?, and C) Is ethics against nature or the completion of nature? - Levinas and Jonas appear to be at loggerheads. Levinas believes that Jews must abandon conceiving of God onto-theologically and should instead approach Him ethically - as "Otherwise than Being" - through the face of the Other person, whose "height" commands me not to murder and even to sacrifice, for his good alone, my natural desire to exist. Jonas believes that there is and must be a place for theological speculation in Judaism, but that we can intuit the Good-in-itself as the first principle of Being and understand ethics as the completion of nature, once we reject reductive materialism and appreciate nature ontologically.

The deepest root of the ethical difference between our two Jewish thinkers lies in where they locate the disease - the ethical vacuum - for which the appeal to the Good provides the necessary therapy. For **Levinas**, the disease inheres in human nature itself which, left to its own devices, tends towards the worst. Levinas is haunted by a world he has known all too well: in which the egoism underlying the social contract has reared its head and made a mockery of the conventional prohibition against murder. Unless murder is forbidden by an authority higher than nature, he worries, no standard allows us to condemn barbarity once the vulnerable cease to be protected by the social contract. Levinas believes we must go further than those who provide an

"enlightened" defense of individual rights based on the moral equality of all persons. For the absolute moral worth of an individual can only reveal itself when the face of the Other commands one from "beyond nature" and "from a height," and this command precedes the neutral, impartial requirements of legal-political justice. "Thou shalt not murder" is more heteronomous than any laws resulting from the neutral posture of human autonomy or agreement.

Levinas would have us think that only love for the unique Other enables us to break out of the prison of self-concern. For I go towards God not by securing my place in Eternity but by giving it all up for the Infinity of time. And this I can do by realizing the "possibility, through sacrifice, of giving meaning to the Other and to the world which, though without me, still counts for me, and for which I am answerable."<sup>55</sup> Only in fearing the death of the Other more than my own am I truly open to "a future that will never be my present."<sup>56</sup>

For Levinas, the acid test of responsibility only occurs when, for the good of the Other, I may have to pay an unreasonably high price. The Holocaust would never have happened if individuals had passed this test: if they had not only been able to acknowledge the face of the Other beyond the stereotypes imposed by Nazi ideology, but also been willing to jeopardize their own comfort and even survival for these Others in spite of the fact that shutting them out conformed with Nazi justice. But it was only natural to ask: Why should I take it upon myself to break the law and thereby risk my family's safety in order to save a public enemy whom it is acceptable, even required, to regard with contempt?

**Jonas** joins Levinas in believing that the liberal tradition of individual rights (not to mention the anti-cosmopolitanism of Heidegger) fails to meet the ethical challenge of our time. For Jonas, too, the task of being our brother's keeper - tantamount to hearing the outcry of the invisible, impotent deity - demands far more of us than Biblical wisdom's liberal descendant - "Pursue your own happiness so long as you do not violate the rights of others" - would have us think. But for Jonas that challenge is to defend not the perennial figure of the saint, but an image of the natural Good robust enough to ground our responsibility towards future generations who, as not-yet-existent, have no individual rights. No less acquainted than Levinas with the depths to which human nature has sunk in his century, Jonas worries that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." If Hannah Arendt awakens us to the idea that most of the evil in the age of totalitarianism has stemmed not from wickedness but thoughtlessness - the willingness of bureaucrats like Adolf Eichmann to do their jobs without asking questions - Jonas is most concerned that our technological prowess tempts us with "the bait of utopia": the fantasy that our ever-expanding power to "master and possess nature" can only improve our lives.

Jonas worries that our hubris risks sacrificing the good for the sake of the perfect. Unless nature itself - and our own nature - can be shown to be a Good-in-itself, there is no standard that allows us to set limits to what we might do in the name of bettering our condition, both within ourselves and without, through the use of psychopharmaceutical, genetic, and nuclear technologies, among others. Jonas holds, therefore, that the dualistic belief, shared by Levinas,

that nature harbors no Good-in-itself is nihilistic. For if nature presents us with no ethical norms, then no effort to change our own nature in the name of perfection, convenience or novelty could be condemned as a transgression of essential limits or a violation of a standard beyond any convention of our own making.

Yet let us not forget - and do we here have one last chance at rapprochement? - that Jonas, like Levinas, is looking for a sense of responsibility that will orient us towards a future that we will not be there to experience. Though Jonas's imperative commands not love of the unique Other but a kind of intergenerational justice, there is an asymmetry in this justice, for it requires sacrificing not our lives but our short-term interests for the sake of long-term benefits that we - and even our children's children - will not enjoy. Future generations will profit from what we bequeath to them, but we will not profit from what they make of our bequest. This is the element of saintliness that makes Jonas's imperative of responsibility so demanding. He, like Levinas, sees that the task of ethics is to explain why I should care about "a future without me." But while Levinas is obsessed by the perennial issue of what it takes to rescue strangers in dire circumstances, Jonas focuses on the novel question of what it will take to protect conditions under which human individuals can flourish at all. Perhaps these are two aspects of a single challenge after all.

But whose philosophy is more authentically Judaic: Jonas's onto-theological naturalism or Levinas's ethical supernaturalism? I leave that as an open question. From a philosophical point-of-view, however, the issue is irrelevant, for both thinkers claim that the Good commands everyone: Jew and non-Jew alike. While Levinas holds that one only

loves God by loving Other persons, Jonas claims, in effect, that one only loves God by caring for humanity as the highest expression of nature's intrinsic majesty. They agree, however, that Yahweh is so self-effacing that one can hear the commandment of the Good without giving it the name of "Yahweh." And this implies another piece of common ground: that the self-effacing or self-limiting God leaves us responsible to answer His prayer that we improve the world. God's creative power now lies not in His ability to intervene in the physical world and guarantee that good prevails over evil, but in His ever-present capacity - through the Good - to inspire us to take His commandment to heart.

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This paper is dedicated to my teacher, Mitchell H. Miller, Jr. of Vassar College. It has benefitted from audiences' responses to various papers I have given on Jonas and Levinas - at Connecticut College, Washington and Lee University, Emory University, the University of Vermont and the New School for Social Research. I am especially grateful for memorable conversations with Carol Freedman, Frank Kirkpatrick, Rabbi James Ponet, Steven B. Smith, Claire Katz, Alan Udoff, James Mensch, Richard A. Cohen, and Roger Brooks.

<sup>1</sup> Levinas goes so far as to call Heidegger's thought "a great event of our century." See Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 41. Jonas heralds Being and Time as "the most profound and important manifesto of existentialism." See Jonas, "Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism" in The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology (New York: Delta, 1966), p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> The two main works in which Levinas elaborates this argument are Totality and Infinity (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) and Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) both translated by Alphonso Lingis.

<sup>3</sup> For a clear account of the Athens/Jerusalem (or as Derrida calls it "Greek/Jew") distinction, see "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" in Face to Face with Levinas, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986)

<sup>4</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> For Levinas's critique of Buber, see Levinas's essay, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge" in The Levinas Reader, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

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<sup>9</sup> Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas" in The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> For the relation between love and justice, see Levinas, "The Bible and the Greeks," in In the Time of the Nations, ed. Michael Smith, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Levinas, "Judaism and Christianity" in In the Time of the Nations, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, "Judaism and Christianity," p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> Levinas, Difficile Liberte: Essais sur le Judaisme, 2nd edition (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), p. 193. This passage is translated by Adriaan Peperzak in "Judaism According to Levinas," Ch. 3 of Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p 27.

<sup>14</sup> For the use of the terms "Said" and "Saying" as transformations of "Totality" and "Infinity," see Levinas's Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence.

<sup>15</sup> For a good overview of Levinas on Heidegger see Peperzak, "On Levinas's Criticism of Heidegger," Ch. 14 in Beyond.

<sup>16</sup> For Jonas's charge that Being and Time expresses cosmic impiety, see his seminal essay, "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism" in The Phenomenon of Life.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 233.

<sup>18</sup> For the transition from Jonas's philosophy of nature to his ethics, see "Epilogue: Nature and Ethics" in The Phenomenon of Life.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 283.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the existential and ontological stages of Jonas's recovery of the meaning of Being, see my Introduction to Hans Jonas's later essays, Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good After



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Auschwitz, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston: Northwestern, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> For his hypothesis of the existence of a cosmogonic Eros, see "Matter, Mind and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation," Ch. 8 in Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good After Auschwitz, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston: Northwestern, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> See Jonas, "Immortality and the Modern Temper," Ch. 5 in Mortality and Morality.

<sup>25</sup> For this argument, see Jonas's "Vergangenheit und Wahrheit: Ein später Nachtrag zu den sogenannten Gottesbeweisen," Ch. 8 in Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Jonas, "Immortality and the Modern Temper" in Mortality and Morality, p. 129.

<sup>27</sup> This myth appears verbatim in two of Jonas's theological essays, "Immortality and the Modern Temper" and "The Concept of God After Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," Chs. 5 and 6 in Mortality and Morality.

<sup>28</sup> See Jonas's "The Concept of God After Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice" for a discussion of tzimtzum and the importance of Etty Hillesum. For more on Etty Hillesum, see "Matter, Mind and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation," Ch. 8 in Mortality and Morality.

<sup>29</sup> Jonas, "Is Faith Still Possible?: Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on the Philosophical Aspects of his Work," Ch. 7 in Mortality and Morality, p. 154.

<sup>30</sup> See Jonas, "Matter, Mind and Creation" in Mortality and Morality.

<sup>31</sup> See Jonas, "Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective" in Ch. 8 in Philosophical Essays: from Ancient Creed to Technological Man (Chicago: Chicago, 1974).

<sup>32</sup> Jonas, "Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism" in The Phenomenon of Life, p. 283

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<sup>33</sup> Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> Levinas, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" in Face-to-Face with Levinas, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Levinas, "Useless Suffering" in Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other (New York: Columbia, 1998), p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>39</sup> Levinas's ethical response to "the problem of evil" is typical of the halakhic strand of Judaism, but Levinas deviates from the standard version of the halakhic response provided by Joseph Soloveitchik, the preeminent voice of Orthodoxy in contemporary Jewish philosophy. Soloveitchik claims that humanity's task is not to speculatively second-guess God and fruitlessly ponder the metaphysical mysteries of the cosmic economy, but to transform "fate" - the sense that we are caught up in a blind, mechanical dynamism - into "destiny" - a faith that we are creatures of a personal, loving Creator - by our acting to make the world a better place. The theological issue is not "Why evil?" but rather "What obligation does suffering impose on us?" The halakhic answer is to learn from one's own experience of suffering so that one may "mend the world" by empathizing with and helping others who suffer. According to Soloveitchik, it is irrational, from a Jewish perspective, to insist on a rational resolution to the apparent inconsistency between the existence of evil and God's perfection, for human rationality mandates a behavioral, not metaphysical, response to the experience of suffering. Because we are infinitely removed from a God's-eye perspective on the world, our place is not to explain suffering but to make the best of it.

Soloveitchik begs the question, however, for he preserves the metaphysical problem as a problem, even if it is irrational for us to think we can resolve it. He appears to concede that the living God is an omnipotent, unfathomable will who ultimately controls the show from behind the scenes but according to a design we only dimly see. But if God is conceived as "the almighty being of creation," then we cannot avoid holding Him accountable for suffering and evil, even if it is true that He has His reasons that our reason cannot understand. Soloveitchik's answer to the problem of evil amounts to saying, "Don't ask why we suffer; just obey the law." But this answer leaves open the prospect of theodicy: the thought that we suffer for a reason, though it is not our business to know why.

Levinas goes farther, rejecting Soloveitchik's metaphysical problem altogether by refusing to conceive of God in terms of predicates like knowledge, goodness and power, for God's transcendence is signified not by the theologian's Supreme Being who infinitely exceeds our capacity for knowledge, but only by an "otherwise than

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Being" whose Infinity presents itself as commandment through the vulnerable, yet lofty face of the unique Other person. Our finitude consists not in the inadequacy of our wisdom, power and goodness to measure up to a perfect Lord who would control the economy of Being for the best, but in our subjection to "an infinite and indeclinable authority that does not prevent disobedience, that leaves time - which is to say, freedom." (Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," in Entre Nous, p. 175.) For a good discussion of Soloveitchik's views, see Moshe Sokol, "Is There a 'Halakhic' Response to the Problem of Evil?," Harvard Theological Review (92:3, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> For Levinas on the theological "problem of evil," see both "Useless Suffering" and also "Transcendence and Evil," Levinas's Postface to Philippe Nemo's Job and the Excess of Evil, tr. Michael Kigel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1998). For a thoughtful discussion of this issue, see Richard A. Cohen, "What Good is the Holocaust: On Suffering and Evil," in Philosophy Today (Summer, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup> Levinas, "From the One to the Other: Transcendence and Time" in Entre Nous, p. 152.

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation" in Entre Nous, p. 177.

<sup>44</sup> Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality" in The Provocation of Levinas, p. 176.

<sup>45</sup> The distinctively Judaic character of Levinas's critique of rational theology can be brought out by seeing how he both draws on and subverts the later Heidegger's deconstruction of onto-theology. In Identity and Difference, Heidegger contends that "deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it." (ID 56) Theology becomes onto-theology when it capitulates to the demand of calculative-representational thinking for reasons. The principle of sufficient reason, as a demand for completeness, invites an appeal to God as the ultimate ratio. But the mystery of Being gets reduced to idolatry, Heidegger alleges, when divinity becomes a being that revolves around man's need for reasons. The God of philosophy is religiously useless, according to Heidegger, because "before the causa sui man can neither pray nor sacrifice, neither fall to his knees in awe nor play music and dance." (ID 56)

Though Levinas concurs with Heidegger that rational theology assimilates the living God to the theoretical demands of ontology - and ultimately the consolations of theodicy - Levinas would accuse Heidegger of paganism: of deifying Being and altogether effacing God's

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transcendence. The root of the problem of rational theology, according to Levinas, is not "forgetfulness of the ontological difference between Being and beings," but oblivion to transcendence and the "metaphysical" difference between Being and the Other. In the words of Adriaan Peperzak:

[Levinas attacks Heidegger's effort to] restore a world dominated by the mysterious powers of the sacred. Heidegger's "fourfold" is too small to contain God, and when Heidegger, in his "Letter on Humanism," declares that Being itself must take the initiative to open for us the dimension of the holy or sacred (das Heilige) as a space in which the essence of the divine can unfold, he places "the God and the gods" within a horizon that prevents authentic transcendence. Within the dimension thus indicated only pantheism and polytheism are possible, a divinization of Being and beings, followed by all the violences that belong to idolatry. (Peperzak, Beyond, 35)

By following Nietzsche in unmasking the latent "humanism" - or self-centeredness - of theodicy, Heidegger believes he has deconstructed the Absolute altogether. But Nietzsche and Heidegger's critique of the God of theodicy frees Levinas to conceive of the transcendent God in ethical, not cosmological terms. Whereas Heidegger rethinks the sacred as a dimension of Being which transcends the enframing function of calculative-representational thinking, Levinas refigures God's height as that trace in the face of the Other that disrupts an ontological account of temporality altogether and puts our ethical responsibility to be our brother's keeper before our ontological responsibility to hear the call of Being. Put otherwise, Levinas places being-for-the-Other - to the point of dying for the Other's sake - ahead of our attachment to Being.

Heidegger's critique of "the metaphysics of presence" inaugurated by Plato - according to which the the temporary, changing and contingent realm of beings is grounded in an eternal, unchanging, and necessary supreme being - remains firmly on the Athenian road of Being, as Heidegger seeks to revive authentic thinking at "the end of metaphysics" by recalling us to the ontological difference known by pre-Socratics like Anaximander, Parmenides and Heraclitus. Whereas Heidegger's agreement with Nietzsche that the God of theodicy is dead draws him away from the transcendent God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob altogether, Levinas enjoins us to rethink the meaning of Jerusalem as "ethics without salvation": being-for-the-Other even at the expense of my own desire to be.

<sup>46</sup> As for Heidegger's paganism, Jonas contends that his supposedly post-metaphysical move away from a supreme being and towards Being is "metaphysical" after all, because Heidegger's Being is personified as an agent who reveals itself to properly attuned thinkers who are thereby able to become "ventriloquists of Being." In Heidegger's "primal thinking," Jonas writes, thought is the event of the self-clearing of Being, not man's own erring bid for truth. And man is called to be "the shepherd of Being, not of beings." Jonas replies:

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in the Bible. But the terrible anonymity of Heidegger's Being, illicitly decked out with personal characteristics, blocks out the personal call. Not by the being of another person am I grasped, but just by Being! And my responsive thought is Being's own event... (PL, p. 258)

One might think, on the basis of this quotation alone, that Jonas would be attracted to Levinas's "God of ethical philosophy" who can only be approached through the face of another person. But for reasons I hope to have explained in this paper, Jonas believes that Jewish philosophy must risk theological speculation about cosmo-genesis, and not be satisfied with an account of etho-genesis alone. For Jonas's famous accusation of Heidegger, see "Heidegger and Theology," Ch. 10 in The Phenomenon of Life.

<sup>47</sup> Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," in The Phenomenon of Life, p. 260.

<sup>48</sup> For this critical appropriation of Bultmann's views, see "Heidegger and Theology" and also "Is Faith Possible?."

<sup>49</sup> Jonas, "Immortality and the Modern Temper" in Mortality and Morality, p. 127.

<sup>50</sup> Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," in The Provocation of Levinas, p. 175.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 172.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," in Difficult Freedom, tr. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990), p. 153. Thanks to Judith Friedlander of the New School for alerting me to this passage.

<sup>54</sup> "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in Face to Face with Levinas, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> Levinas, "The Other, Utopia and Justice," in Entre Nous, p. 228

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 233.