OTHERWISE, THEN BEING:

KENOSIS IN THE THOUGHT OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

by

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This work is an examination of Emmanuel Levinas' use of the Christian idea of kenosis. It addresses the questions of Levinas' Judaism, the effects of the Shoah on his faith, and to what extent his use of kenosis opens the door to a mutually transformative dialogue between his own thinking about God and that of Christianity.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

INTRODUCTION

OF GOD AND THE GOOD IN THE WAKE OF THE SHOAH

If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?

—Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (175)

As a "post-Auschwitz" Christian, this question eats unendingly at me.

Less than a month ago, as of this writing, I returned from a trip to Krakow. I was there to present a paper at an academic conference, but after a less than stellar reading I devoted most of my time to savoring the beauty of Krakow. I was overwhelmed by the sheer historicity of the place, the literal *heaviness* of its past—*heavy, but heavy with meaning*, as Buber might say.[1] I visited as many of the churches as I was able to reach on foot, including the incomparably beautiful St. Andrew's Church. Seated amongst my fellow Christians within the church's dazzling interior, I could feel the blood pounding in my ears—though it took me some few minutes to realize that this was because I was scarcely breathing, so enraptured was I by the beauty all about me: For virtually every square inch of St. Andrews' baroque interior is covered in splendor.

And yet a sobering thought soon began to dog my short-lived rapture: *But what went* wrong*? How, in the face of such undeniable piety, did some of the worst atrocities of the Shoah transpire* here*, of all places? Why did this undeniable devotion to Christ Jesus do almost nothing to retard the Nazis' efforts?*

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[1] *I and Thou*, 158.

Truth to tell, this thought was far from new to me. For some years now, my faith has been an ongoing struggle to maintain the angle of repose between the reductionism of history and the idealism of mere theology.

Far from being a palliative or a crutch, faith for me constitutes a precarious, life-or-death business. "I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge," Bergman's Antonius Block relates to his friendly enemy, Death. "I want God to stretch out His hand towards me, reveal Himself and speak to me." When Death draws the obvious connection between God's silence and likely absence, Block replies with evident agony, "Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness."[2] From the first, I recognized in the story of Antonius Block my own often years-long dark nights of the soul. My encounter with the Shoah, however, took these struggles beyond the merely personal to encompass those of the *Other*—in this case, the Jew—thereafter intensifying my crises exponentially. As my spiritual parent, are not the Jew's trials my own? Are we not parts of the same Covenant? Surely we are not mere islands, spiritually unrelated!

And is there not a deeper consideration, an *ethical* consideration?

Lorenzo Albacete's description of Biblical faith as entailing a "co-suffering" with and among one's fellow human beings is essential to my own understanding: "To co-suffer is to be willing to serve on the jury in the trial of God and to risk our own faith by identifying with those who suffer in their questioning of God…We must establish that solidarity, risk our own faith and identity, make a human connection with the sufferer, and cry out to God together" (*God at the*

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[2] Bergman, *The Seventh Seal* (*Modern Film Scripts*, 28).

Ritz, 101). As a post-Auschwitz Christian, then, I must endlessly navigate between the solipsistic comfort of "Amazing Grace" and the asphyxiating hopelessness of Paul Celan's "Once": "One and Infinite, / annihilated, / they I'ed. / Light *was*. Salvation."[3]

Nor does it end even there. There remains a still deeper, potentially *disastrous* consideration…

At the risk of the charge of hubris, I would argue that the crisis posed by the Shoah is more damning by far for the Christian than the Jew, inasmuch as the former is a *participant* in the crimes of the Shoah, whereas the latter is but its *victim*. To put it as simply as I may: *How can I remain* Christian *in the wake of the Shoah?* For I cannot help but put myself in the shoes of the Jew and imagine the incredulity, even *outrage* she or he must surely feel when confronted by post-Auschwitz Christianity. Would it not be more consistent—dare we say *ethical*?—if I were to abandon Christianity altogether? What sort of fool, or coward—or *criminal*, even—must I be to remain true to the path that led to the Shoah?

For can it be denied that Christianity prepared the way for the "pagan" violence unleashed by Hitler and the Nazis? Is it not true that for almost one and a half *millennia* the Church poisoned Western culture with its Judaeophobic teachings? To what else would Primo Levi be referring when he describes "that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to millennial anger" (*Survival*, 27) if not Christianity's teachings of fear and loathing for the Jew? Replacement theology, whereby the Church replaces Israel as God's people, already resounds with a "genocidal ring," as Franklin Littell avers in *The Crucifixion of the Jews*. From this wellspring flow such world-rending lies as the Deicide charge and the attendant satanizing of

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[3] Trans. Felstiner. In Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. Emphasis mine.

Synagogia; the Blood Libel and Host desecration allegation; the depictions of Jews as "poisoners," as "rootless," as "materialists" and "nihilists." Even the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a Czarist forgery, is ultimately *Christian* in origin.

It is difficult in the extreme, then, to imagine the Shoah apart from the aforementioned Christian teachings, to posit any kind of *discontinuity* between the two. Indeed, insofar as I am concerned, the Shoah becomes well-nigh *inevitable* in light of Christian Judaeophobia.

As Franklin Littell observes:

> To the superficial mind, Antisemitism [*sic*] is simply another form of race prejudice, and only those are guilty who willfully indulge in it…For a professing Christian, the red thread that ties a Justin Martyr or a Chrysostom to Auschwitz and Treblinka raises issues far more serious than can be dealt with by conscious avoidance of vulgar anti-Jewish slurs in speech or discrimination in practice. If we are, as we profess, linked in "the communion of saints" across the generations with those who have died in the faith, we are also linked in solidarity of guilt [for the]…mass rebellion of the baptized against the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to wholesale apostasy. (*Crucifixion of the Jews*, 1).

Far from taking issue with Littell's potentially offensive connection, Paul Celan also binds the Shoah to the Crucifixion of Jesus. In his "Tenebrae," inspired by the gradual extinguishing of lights during the services in the three days prior to Easter, he creates a dialogue between the victims of the Shoah and the crucified Jesus, drawing disturbing parallels between the victims' bodies, "clawed and clawing as though / the body of each

of us were / your body, Lord,"[4] and Jesus' own horrifically bloodied form. It does not matter that the Jews' bodies were "clawed" by their fellows as they fought to escape the Zyklon B gas while Jesus' body was shredded by the legionnaire's cat o'nine tails; the agony and, more crucial, the *degradation* is the same. Both the victims and Jesus experienced an annihilation of the self, the Jews' "…eyes and…mouths…so open and empty, Lord"—an allusion to the musselmans, whom Levi describes as the "drowned…[and] anonymous…non-men…the divine spark dead within them"[5]—perversely paralleling Jesus' crucified form, emptied of its Divine glory and reduced to the despised and degraded form of a criminal. "We have drunk, Lord. / The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord. / Pray, Lord. / We are near." The poem's conclusion, John Felstiner stresses, is not an acceptance of Christian belief in Jesus on Celan's and/or the victims' part; rather, the victims' injunction that Jesus pray to them represents an inversion of the Deicide charge: It is not the Jews but the *Christians*, the *people* of Christ, who have killed God. Is it not, after all, taught that the Ten Commandments must be read "horizontally" as well as "vertically," thereby establishing a causal relation between the first and sixth commandments? If he who kills his fellow man in some sense kills, or at any rate diminishes and degrades, God, what does that imply about the Christians who, obliquely or otherwise, killed the Jews, and not only in the Shoah but throughout much of Western history? And this is to say nothing of the fact

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[4] Trans. Michael Hamburger, *Poems of Paul Celan* (1989).

[5] Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

that Israel is "indwelt" by God, becoming God's body much as the Church is Christ's body. *Who, then, is the* true *God-killer?* Celan asks.

—Which thereby returns us to our starting point: "If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?"

This line is taken from Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, occurring more or less in the middle of a conversation between the hit man Anton Chigurh and the mercenary hired to capture him, Carson Wells, immediately prior to the latter's execution by the former. In asking his soon-to-be victim this question, Chigurh seems genuinely, albeit bizarrely, concerned that Wells understand the futility of his philosophy, which might euphemistically be described as "enlightened self-interest"—or for that matter *any* philosophy or ethos to which he might, alternatively, have appealed. Very like Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter, who, playing on his name's similarity to the word *lectern*, appoints himself Agent Starling's teacher and guide, Chigurh seems to embody in an equally perverted way the archetypal Sage.

Chigurh's question, at the very least, belies an acute historical and metaphysical awareness. Thus it perfectly encapsulates the *raison d'être* of this book. Not only is it apropos of the egregious failure of Christianity vis-à-vis the Jews; it echoes a recurring motif in contemporary Western culture's ethical wranglings—specifically, a pervasive sense of despair regarding ethics and meaning, a sense that when all is said and done *There is no* why *here*.[6] G. K. Chesterton describes this state of affairs in much the same vein, as an "intellectual helplessness" borne of the "poisonous humility" of modern man: "For the old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about

[6] Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 29.

his aims, which will make him stop work altogether….The meek do inherit the earth; but the modern sceptics [sic] are too meek even to claim their inheritance."[7] The notion that this crisis is more than theological, extending far beyond Christianity to include the entirety of Western culture, is therefore not so outrageous as some might wish to think.

For is it not the case that virtually all of the –isms and –asms that govern even so-called "post-Christian" culture—Liberalism, Rationalism, Humanism, Pragmatism, Marxism, Kantianism, Freudianism, Existentialism, Postmodernism, Political Correctness, and so on *ad nauseam*—are themselves products or outgrowths of an underlying, albeit withered and secularized, Christian worldview? The virtual and complete failure of these great metanarratives, I contend, is attributable to the simple fact that without grounding in what Levinas would call an *Otherwise than being*, something *beyond* the purely naturalistic or ontological, any ethical system is doomed to failure. Yet most if not all of these systems are in the last analysis predicated on precisely that: *reductionism*.—Denial, that is, that there is indeed something more than the biological or ontological. Hence our current confusion: "Men have tried to turn 'revolutionise' [sic] from a transitive to an intransitive verb," to cite Chesterton once again.

> But the new rebel is a sceptic [sic], and will not entirely trust anything…And the fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind; and the modern revolutionist doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it…The man of this school goes first to a

[7] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 55-56.

> political meeting, where he complains that savages are treated as if they were beasts; then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting, where he proves that they practically are beasts…In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt has become practically useless for all purposes of revolt.[8]

If we are truly honest with ourselves, do we not discern in our current moral, political, and cultural climate the fulfillment of Chesterton's century-old prophecy? Can we have ethics—or anthropology, or cosmology, for that matter (the three are intimately bound, as we shall see[9])—without an *Otherwise than being*? Is it not the case that even political correctness, with its connotations of tolerance and inclusivity, results instead in an endlessly proliferating tribalism, which, splintering into ever more -isms, merely enter into self-serving alliances—thereby playing into the balkanizing strategies of leftist and rightist demagogues alike?

(For me, then, the quests for a viable post-Auschwitz theology and a viable post-Auschwitz ethic are inextricably bound. Although the latter is the primary focus of this book, the former

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[8] *Orthodoxy*, 55-56.

[9] For now, a brief citation from Colin E. Gunton's *The One, the Three, and the Many* must suffice:

> A major debt to Plato…is to be found in his focusing of certain central questions. The first is that of the relation of cosmology, thought about the nature of the universe, to social theory. Plato in effect shows us—although I put his point in modern terms—that pure philosophical or metaphysical speculation, a demythologizing of the gods in the name of pure rationality, is the beginning of disengagement…Ethos [is thereby] lost to environment, and so person and world[are] torn apart. It is similar to what in our day is called scientism, which limits all claims for knowledge to the narrowly scientific, and thus abstracts knowledge of things from the human context in which that knowledge is shaped. Giving attention to the environment in abstraction from its inhabitants leads to a world empty of personal meaning. (15-16)

will always be lurking in the near background. For what I am describing is not a simple return to Christianity in its "orthodox" formulation, which is to say, classical theism; what I am calling for entails a rejection of classical theism and an embrace of a "re-Judaized" Christianity.)

More than a few contemporary thinkers—Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Edmond Jabès, and Richard Rubinstein, among others—would tend to agree that the Shoah represents a cataclysmic failure of the West's previous ethical systems, whether Christian, Humanist, Kantian, or so on. Such individuals perforce maintain that we need a *new* ethic. But what does a "viable post-Shoah ethic" entail? Perhaps our foremost concern should be to ensure that any such ethic avoid the totalizing, reductionistic tendencies of prior systems, *particularly* insofar as the Jews and Judaism are concerned. Such an ethic must therefore avoid any trace of antisemitism, assimilationism, or triumphalism—currents clearly discernible in Voltaire, Kant, and Hegel, the sires not only of the Enlightenment but of modern liberal thought.

It is my contention that the thought of the Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) holds the key to a truly viable post-Shoah ethic. Among the most essential of his contributions, as we shall see, is his distinction between "totality" and "infinity." Any truly viable ethic, we aver, must utterly repudiate the objectifying, reductionist tendencies of totality by instantiating the kenoticism of infinity. It is his use of this last idea—*kenosis*, from the Greek *κένωσις* [kénōsis], "emptying," employed in Philippians 2:7 to describe Jesus' emptying himself of power—that lies at the heart of Levinas' ethical genius. We will find that Levinas relies on several key crucial Christological ideas or motifs ("incarnation" and "bearing," to name but two) which form a sort of "constellation" centered around the concept of kenosis. The only hope for post-Shoah ethics, I maintain, is this idea of kenosis, as exemplified not only in the thought of

Levinas but through his "dialogue," as it were, with the "theology" of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). I will also discuss Dostoevsky's premier commentator/interpreter, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), who highlights the kenoticism inherent both to Dostoevsky's protagonists (Prince Myshkin of *The Idiot*, Father Tikhon in *Demons*, and Zosima the Elder and Alyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*) as well as to Dostoevsky's goals and methodologies as a novelist. While many have noted Levinas' reading of Dostoevsky, few have discussed the metaphysical implications of his "discourse" with Dostoevsky at length; fewer still have noted Bakhtin's similarities with Levinas or made any attempt to set the three into any sort of dialogue.

Any truly viable post-Shoah ethic must be both theistic *and* kenotic—which is to say, it must be grounded in the theistic idea of kenosis. Attempts to dispense with these elements will inevitably result in a reductionistic and totalizing "ethos."

In the first chapter of this work, I will address the question of Levinas' faith. While the general consensus is that Levinas is a postmodernist and therefore indifferent to religion, I will argue, per David Patterson and Richard A. Cohen, among others, that Levinas is an Orthodox Jew. His reticence to speak of God I attribute both to the nature of his task—a critique of ontotheology, that is to say—and to the prophetism that so profoundly characterizes Judaism. Drawing on the work of Shoah survivors like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel (in particular the latter's *The Trial of God*—or, more accurately, an adaptation of it), I will demonstrate that Levinas' labors are inextricably bound to the task of the Biblical prophet, who stands between God and man, speaking on behalf of God to man and vice-versa.

I will draw somewhat on Hent de Vries at this juncture, for I believe his remarks about a certain despair or pessimism owing to Levinas' own experiences in the Shoah—including not

only his own imprisonment in a prisoner of war camp but the loss of his parents, siblings, and grandparents—is relevant. This is where my background in Shoah literature and poetry comes to bear, inasmuch as I will examine various memoirists and poets, including Primo Levi, Sarah Nomberg-Przytyk, Charlotte Delbo, and Paul Celan, all of whom struggle with the possibility of hope after the Shoah.

In the second chapter, I will engage in a limited discussion of a handful of key Levinasian terms; specifically, totality and infinity, maternity, and bearing. I will bring to light the underlying idea or motif that informs much of Levinas' terminology: kenosis. This Christian term, taken from Paul's Epistle to the Philippians and denoting the self-emptying or pouring-out undertaken by God the Son in the Incarnation, encapsulates the essence of Levinas' entire ethical project. His maxim "ethics as first philosophy," as we will see, cannot be understood apart from the idea of kenosis—an idea, it cannot be overemphasized, with profoundly *Jewish* roots. For the God of the Tanakh, far from standing aloof from His creation, undertakes a self-limitation on behalf of the cosmos, thereby according the world in general and mankind in particular the space to be and to grow and to come, either aiding or hindering God in what amounts to a *creatio continua*. Kenosis, we will see, is not a mere idea or a gift passively received but a command—perhaps the ultimate command—to embrace a mode of being Levinas describes as *being-for-the-Other*.

In the third chapter, I will back-pedal, as it were, and address the question of Dostoevsky's influence on Levinas. In various interviews and indeed throughout his corpus, Levinas often acknowledges his great debt to Russian writers like Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Vasily Grossman (1905-1964), and most of

all Dostoevsky, whose profound, often agonized wrestlings with questions of good and evil, life and death inspired Levinas to study philosophy in the first place. *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) exerted perhaps the greatest influence on Levinas—or so one would adjudge from his numerous citations of the Zosima the Elder's brother's claim "'…that each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all.'" Many of Dostoevsky's greatest and best-known protagonists, such as Myshkin in *The Idiot*, Father Tikhon in *Demons* and Zosima and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, are "holy fools"—which is to say, individuals who embrace the idea of Christ's kenosis and emulate it to such a degree that they are deemed fools, oddballs, and even madmen by their fellows. They are so radically oriented towards the Other that they sacrifice very nearly everything for the sake of their fellow man. The idea of the holy fool and Christ's kenosis is central to Russian Orthodox theology, and I will trace this history and its impact on writers like Tolstoy and in particular Dostoevsky. In the process, I will touch upon Russian Orthodox theologians like Sergei Bulgakov and Pavel Florensky in order to explain the central place of kenosis in Russian Orthodoxy even today.

This discussion of Dostoevsky will be followed up in Chapter 4 with an exploration of the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose literary theory carries within it a kind of kenotic theology, as the title of Ruth Coates' *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* implies. I will explore Bakhtin's understanding of Dostoevsky as a kenotic writer *par excellence*, one who eschews creating golems into whose mouths he places various ideas, then sets into a sort of conflict with a preordained outcome, but instead does his utmost to give them a life of their own—allowing them to be and grow and come in their own time, as it were. Along the way, I will address key Bakhtinian themes like incarnation, the grotesque, and the carnivalesque, which

have crucial resonances in Levinas' own thinking. This, in turn, will drive home the extent to which Levinas is indebted to a specifically Christian understanding of kenosis. The point, it must be stressed, is not that Christianity is kenotic and Judaism not, as the latter also attests to a God who "stoops low" and limits Himself for the sake of His creation; rather, the point is that in addition to his own spiritual heritage Levinas also draws on these uniquely Christian emphases and concerns, thereby enriching his own Jewish understanding of kenosis. If nothing else, the discussion should drive home the idea that Levinasian thought cannot be truly understood apart from an understanding of God that is thoroughly Biblical, emphasizing as it does the supremely relational questions of *Who?* and *Why?* of Biblical thought as opposed to the utilitarian questions of *How?* and *What?* that characterizes Hellenistic thought.

The fifth chapter will address another writer who exerted a profound influence on Levinas, the Russian-Jewish author Vasily Grossman. His novel *Life and Fate*, which depicts the Battle of Stalingrad from multiple perspectives and emphasizes the similarities of Nazism and Stalinism, is vital to understanding Levinas' critique of reifying metaphysical and political systems. More than that, however, it will be seen that Levinas and Grossman are, with Dostoevsky, united in their attraction to holy folly. This is particularly evident in the character of Ikonnikov, who represents, one might say, the spiritual heart of the novel. In the secondary literature surrounding Levinas, there is little detailed discussion of the philosophical and religious influence of Dostoevsky or Grossman, even less on their shared motifs of holy folly and kenosis. A key goal of this work is to provoke such a dialogue.

In Chapter 6, I will allow Levinas to critique Christian (onto) theological claims about Jesus. It will be shown that the Christian theological project—the so-called "Biblical-Classical

synthesis," i.e., with its emphasis on perfection and, in turn, immutability, timelessness, impassibility, and omnicontrol—fatally undermines the kenotic core of the Bible and thereby ushers in a totalitarian faith (as in Levinas' concept of *totality*, which posits a system wherein everything and everyone is reducible to a cog). By way of Levinas, I will issue a call to abandon the project of ontotheology and return to a more Jewish way of seeing and understanding God and the Scriptures.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I will draw upon the specifically Christian understanding of kenosis to illuminate Levinasian thought. The larger goal is to establish a deeper dialogue between Levinas and Christianity. Levinas opens the door to such a dialogue by borrowing not only the Christian understanding of kenosis but such closely-related ideas as incarnation, bearing, and, per Bakhtin, the grotesque. Is not Jesus, qua God incarnate, the ultimate grotesquerie, making a mockery of boundaries in his concern for mankind? Christ Jesus, the ultimate "radical reorientation towards the other," I will argue, tends to bear out rather than undermine the centrality of kenosis in Levinasian thought.

In the concluding chapter of this work, I intend to explore some of the ramifications of my dissertation's key claims. Specifically, *(a.)* Christianity "sanctified," i.e., brought to an acknowledgment of its failings, especially vis-à-vis the Jews, as well as "re-Judaized," brought back into contact with its Jewish roots; *(b.)* Jewish-Christian dialogue re-energized; and *(c.)* the attainment of a truly viable post-Shoah ethic, one that avoids the perils of totalization or reductionism as well as those of antisemitism, assimilationism or triumphalism and goes beyond the ultimately utilitarian character of much modern ethical thought by undertaking a radical

orientation towards the Other as opposed to merely tolerating her or him in the most expedient manner.

Chief among the various problems I will explore in this work One (not necessarily all at once, in one specific section or portion) is an issue raised by Merold Westphal in his essay "Thinking About God and God-Talk with Levinas"—namely, that Levinas' God is so *separate* from His creation as to be unknowable and even potentially impersonal; more akin to Spinoza's or Hegel's conception of the Divine than the Biblical and supremely *personal* God. The idea, too, of Providence, to say nothing of prophecy, is likewise problematized. This is no small issue for Levinas, who in his faith embraced Orthodox Judaism, which *affirms* an active, relational God. And there is another aspect to this issue in Levinas' stress on God's radical separateness: Namely, an apparent undermining of the importance of incarnation. If ethics necessitates incarnation—that I might take the bread from my own mouth to give to the Other—then how can a radically separate God be ethical, or be the embodiment or incarnation, if you will, of ethics?

In a related vein, another question I intend to address is the matter of a viable post-Shoah ethic. For my own part, I believe that such an ethic must be theistic in nature. And by this I mean not some abstract theism but a thoroughly *Biblical* theism—which, in turn, necessitates a thoroughgoing Jewish-Christian dialogue.[10] By so doing, I hope to demonstrate to Levinas (so to say) that to truly honor the Other, the particular, the heteronomous, he must at least allow for the possibility that God is not so radically separate as he maintains (in *God, Death, and Time*, i.e.).

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[10] Here it must be acknowledged that I exclude Islam from this dialogue; for despite its connections to Judaism and to Christianity, it knows nothing of kenosis or any sort of self-limitation of its God. Though Christian *theology* is ontologically-oriented, its sacred texts are not; the same cannot be said, however, of Islam. Cf. Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, pp. 116-18, 122-24, 164-66, 172-73: "For Judaism, the oral law counts as older and holier than the written law, and Jesus left no written word to his followers. Islam, however, is a religion of the book from its first moment on; the book is sent down from heaven. Can there be a more thorough renunciation of the concept that God himself "descends," himself gives himself, surrenders himself to man? [Allah] sits enthroned in his heaven of heavens and presents to man—a book" (166).

That He might, that is to say, be closer and more intimately and dynamically involved with humanity than the mere "trace of a trace."

In the final analysis, this work is unashamedly interdisciplinary. It is an attempt to bring Levinas into a dialogue with figures he admires and/or who display resonances with his thinking and thereby highlight or tease out aspects of his thought typically ignored or passed over in the "official" discourse on Levinas. The goal is to open up new avenues of dialogue, whether between Levinasians and non-Levinasians, philosophers and non-philosophers, Jews and Christians, believers and unbelievers, scientists and devotees of the Humanities, and so on and so forth. If there is an overarching purpose to this work, it is not only to demonstrate the kenotic elements in Levinas' thought but to put this kenoticism into *practice*.

CHAPTER 1

THE FAITH OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS: ORTHODOX, HETERODOX, OR ATHEIST?

Our first question is perhaps a deceptively simple one: Is Levinas a Biblical Jew, or is he in actuality an apophatic or negative theologian, a deist, a postmodernist, or indeed an atheist? His reticence to speak affirmatively of God has led some to classify him as a negative theologian, a label Levinas takes some pains to deny. Others see in Levinas' "Jewish writings," which they regard as distinct from his "metaphysical writings," something akin to Heidegger's ambiguous and ill-understood "turn": As Levinas aged, he felt a need to turn back towards his religious roots. Writings such as *Nine Talmudic Readings* and "Judaism and Kenosis," in this view, represent a sort of religious afterthought to his earlier, more secular thinking, an effort to deck out his metaphysics in a religious garb. In a related vein, writers like Merold Westphal describe Levinas' God as "contentless" and therefore beyond a relation like that portrayed in the Torah. Levinas' disinclination to speak of the possibility of an afterlife or God as a rewarder of goodness only adds to this sense of a divinity so otherwise as to be beyond relation. The abstract nature of Levinas' God-talk, it is argued, implies a God impersonal, more akin to that of deism or perhaps even pantheism. Levinas' talk of man as essentially "atheistic," likewise, has led many to regard him in a Nietzschean light, inferring that man no longer has need of God in order to live ethically.

It is my contention that such writers tend to downplay or somehow overlook Levinas' historical context—specifically, his experience as a Jew who lived through the Shoah. True enough; Levinas seldom speaks directly of it, and for a number of reasons, not least of which his fear of adding to the victims' sufferings by subjecting them to theologizing—specifically, by

fitting their sufferings into some kind of theodicy, somehow explaining (and thereby *justifying*) their suffering in terms of a Divine plan. If the Shoah itself subjected its victims to the most brutal of literal and metaphorical objectification, to attempt to explain, and thereby thematize, these sufferings is to repeat this process, to redouble the victims' pain. However unwittingly, it is to collaborate with the Nazis, to join them in their dehumanization of their victims. One recalls Levinas' warnings in "The Temptation of Temptation," wherein he writes that "To join evil to good, to venture into the ambiguous corners of being without sinking into evil and to remain beyond good and evil in order to accomplish this, is to know." To know is to apprehend, to appropriate; to reduce to the status of an *It*, if only by reducing to a node in one's mental map of the world. "The priority of knowledge," Levinas continues, "is the temptation of temptation…It will no longer leave the other in its otherness but will always include it in the whole, approaching it, as they say today, in historical perspective, at the horizon of the All. From this stems the inability to recognize the other person as other person, as outside all calculation, as neighbor, as first come" (in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 34-35). Ethics—which is to say, responsibility for the victim, with all that that implies—is thereby annulled. Hence the sense of theodicy as a form of re-victimization. Even the most well-meaning of endeavors, such as the creation of the (legal) concept of "crimes against humanity," risks thematization. As Levinas might say, it defaces each *individual* victim via abstraction and places him or her into a category of being. The victim, in short, becomes a *statistic*. The agonizing urgency of the nakedness and vulnerability of the individual face is thereby lost.

Despite these fears, it would be misleading to say that Levinas simply represses his experience of the Shoah or that it informs his philosophy only obliquely. In fact, it permeates his

work, and not only, as we shall see, in terms of his motifs and core concepts; his every word resonates with an urgency that is overpowering despite—or indeed because of—the fact that it is essentially "ultrasonic." And this brings us to a very closely related point: Levinas' labors, while aimed not at theodicy per se, are nevertheless characterized by an obsession: namely, the question of God's relation to the Shoah. Levinas is not attempting, à la Aquinas or Leibniz, to create a formula whereby we might comprehend, and therefore come to terms with, the horrors of the Shoah. He is not searching for some "meaning" behind the victims' sufferings. For all his seeming aversion to personalistic God-talk, each of his writings reverberates with the cry of *Aiyeka?!*—"Why? How *could* you?!" If theodicy is apropos of the Hellenistic obsession with knowledge, pragmatically focused on the *How?* and the *What?*, Levinas' labors are characterized by the all-too Jewish concern with the ethical and relational questions of *Why?* and *Who?* The Shoah (or indeed any evil) is not a question of epistemology or ontology, of God's power or purpose(s); instead it strikes to the heart of the question of the very *who* of God. Levinas' texts are concerned not with a rational, objectifying understanding of evil; Levinas is concerned with *what the Shoah means for the relation of God and world*.—For cosmology, for religion, for ethics. God's character—the *Who?* of God—is at the very heart of Levinas' labors. Writes Cohen in *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, though Levinas eschews apologetics, which is to say, a rational justification of Judaism, "[he] does bring together G-d's personal, immediate presence, and therefore this aspect of the religious sense of the divine, and the very requirement for impersonal, reflected, and universal consciousness, and therefore philosophical understanding"—which, Cohen hastens to add, implies bringing philosophy into God's service for the sake of justice (192-193).

To better illustrate this point, let us insert Levinas into a sort of dialogue with his fellow survivor, Primo Levi. Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved* will be our chief texts. We should begin by noting the original title of the former text: *If This is a Man*, which the American edition changed to *Survival in Auschwitz* in the misguided belief that Levi's title seemed too prosaic, and therefore less likely to attract a wide audience. *If This is a Man* reveals much in common with *Totality and Infinity*. For one, each is concerned with the question of what—nay, *who*—man is and why it matters what becomes of him. Some sense of the profundity of these questions for Levi is preserved in the subtitle of the American edition: "The Nazi Assault on Humanity." This, too, is a major theme in *Totality and Infinity*, which seeks to uncover, however indirectly, the *cause* of the Nazi assault on humanity—the deeper *metaphysical assumptions* of Western civilization itself, that is, that underlay and made possible the Shoah. If both men are interested in the pathology of the Shoah, one might say that Primo Levi's generally goes no further than a description of the symptoms, whereas Levinas delves into the metaphysics that inform and shape that sickness itself. In this regard, one thinks of Levinas is an etiologist.

Contrasting the German citizens sentenced to *Vernichtungslager* with the Jewish inmates of the camps, Levi observes that whereas for the former the Lager is a punishment, for the Jews "no end is foreseen and the Lager is nothing but a manner of living assigned to us, without limits of time, in the bosom of the Germanic social organism" (*Survival*, 82-83). The Nazis, victims of their own system, must perforce *physically* reduce the Jew to the less than human, render him into an impersonal thing, a mere unit. And not only physically but also psychologically—from rhetorical assaults as simple as designating the Jew as a "piece" (16) or a "Kazett"—"a singular,

neuter word" (121)[11]—to the seeming innocuousness of the look given Levi by the clueless Doktor Pannwitz, "as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds…" (105). For all the horrors Levi recounts in his memoir, whether the excruciating hunger and the reduction of bread to money (39), the omnipresence of enmity and rivalry (42), the "geometrical madness" of the camp orchestras which help to kill the Jews "first as men in order to kill [them] more slowly afterwards," (50-51), or the grey, ahistorical anonymity of the *Muselmanner* (90), it seems initially incredible, almost laughable, that he should cite this look from Doktor Pannwitz as perfectly instantiating "the great insanity of the third Germany" (106).

Levinas, however, shares this insight and makes it a key motif in his writings. "Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them. A thing is *given*, offers itself to me. In gaining access to it I maintain myself within the same," he writes in *Totality and Infinity*. To see, in the literal sense of *apprehend*—from *ad-*, "towards," and *prehendere*, "lay hold of," i.e., to grasp or lay hold of something physically or mentally—belies the passivity the word denotes in contemporary culture. It is rather a dynamic process, a *violence*, even, taking *hold* of someone or something as if it were but an object and nothing more. This is as true of politics as it is of allegedly nobler pursuits, including science and philosophy. Vision in this sense reinforces simultaneously the solipsism of the self and the objectification of the other. In this way, it opens the possibility of a knowledge beyond good and

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[11] Likewise, in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah: An Oral History of the Shoah*, survivors Motke Zaidl and Itzak Dugin relate that "The Germans even forbade us to the words 'corpse' or 'victim.' The dead were blocks of wood, shit, with absolutely no importance. Anyone who said 'corpse' or 'victim' was beaten. The Germans made us refer to the bodies as *Figuren*, that is, as puppets, as dolls, or as *Schmattes*, which means 'rags'" (13).

evil—and therefore that of a *system*, whether metaphysical or political, likewise beyond such considerations. A system, Levinas explains, wherein justice is subordinated to freedom, existence to Existence, the other to the Same.

The face, however, resist the totalizing effects of vision. "The face is present in its refusal to be contained," Levinas maintains. "In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (*Totality*, 194). But if, in the nakedness and destitution of the face, one hears the very voice of God—the commandment "Thou shalt not murder"—this voice can be overcome or drowned out through the defacement of the other.

Consider, for instance, Terrence des Pres' talk in *The Survivor* of the Nazis' "excremental assault" on their Jewish victims.[12] In "Our Nights," as but one example, Levi speaks of the "deformation" resulting from the excessive amounts of fluid the inmates are forced to consume, which, among other things, "imposes an enervating toil on our kidneys." Throughout the night, the inmates must rise and relieve themselves in a wooden bucket, which must itself be taken to the latrine and emptied on a fairly frequent basis. That task falls to the unfortunate inmate who fills the bucket to capacity, who is immediately seized by the night-guard: "It is our task to shuffle to the latrine with the bucket which knocks against our bare calves, disgustingly warm; it is full beyond all reasonable limit, and inevitably with the shaking some of the content overflows on our feet, so that however repugnant this duty may be, it is always preferable that we, and not our neighbors, be ordered to do it" (*Survival*, 61-62). The Nazis, he relates elsewhere, are

[12] Cf. Chapter Three (51-71). See also Sara Nomberg-Prytyk's *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land* (16).

simultaneously amused and disgusted by the filthy condition of the inmates. "These are not *Menschen*, human beings, but animals; it's clear as the light of day." Hence, too, the Nazis' complete disregard for the inmates' need for privacy in the "enormous collective latrine." The initial shame at the bestial conditions and lack of privacy is eventually replaced by indifference and unselfconsciousness. In this manner, "the transformation from human beings into animals was well on its way."[13] Where Levi's labors begin to resonate with Levinas' concerns is to be seen in his concluding remarks to this passage:

> I do not believe that this transformation was ever planned or formulated in so many words at any level of the Nazi hierarchy, in any document, at any "labor meeting." It was a logical consequence of the system: an inhuman regime spreads and extends its inhumanity in all directions, also and especially downward; unless it meets with resistance and exceptionally strong characters, it corrupts its victims and its opponents as well. The useless cruelty of violated modesty conditioned the existence of all Lagers. (*Drowned*, 111-12)

Let us consider Levi's analysis in light of a passage from early on in *Totality and Infinity*:

> But 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

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[13] Notes Baumgarten (Stellan Skarsgård) in Andy de Emmony's *God on Trial* (2008): "Do you think it's a mistake? Do you think a German engineer will not put in enough plumbing by mistake? No, that's not the way it was; nothing here is accidental. The filth is a part of the system, just like the fence, the floodlights, the other equipment. It serves a function: it's here to take away your dignity, your humanity…" (1:07:34-1:08:12).

> substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action. Not only modern war but every war employs arms that turn against those who wield them. (21)

In essence, Levinas explains, Fascism—and indeed every *–ism* and *–asm*, borne as they are of an inherently totalizing impulse—subjects the individual to an inevitable reductionism. And this applies not only to the victims of the totality; it applies equally to the architects and maintainers of the totality and to all those who dwell therein. Relationality is thereby undermined by thematization, which seeks the ultimate causes or sources, ontological or naturalistic, in the quest to know—the "temptation of temptation," as we have already seen. As Buber might say, the I-It mode annuls the I-Thou impulse; the It, the thematized, has been *defaced*, denuded of its personhood, and in this manner its apprehension, indeed, *domination* is made permissible. For of what logical sense is it to speak of the neuter, the impersonal, in relational or ethical terms? By this reduction, ethics is abrogated, reduced at the absolute best to mere pragmatism. Writes Levinas in a particularly urgent passage in *Totality and Infinity*:

> Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other. For possession affirms the other, but within a negation of its independence. "I think" comes down to "I can"—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State.

> Truth, which should reconcile persons, here exists anonymously. Universality presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity. (45-46)

Thus far we have spoken chiefly of the motifs that unite Levi and Levinas. We have done so to stress their shared experiences as survivors of the Shoah. The writings of each reveal, albeit more obviously in Levinas, a distinctly Jewish way of understanding the Shoah as an effort to kill its victims first as human beings in order to more effectively destroy their bodies afterwards. Both, in other words, betray a Jewish understanding of what it means to be human.

Let us narrow our focus by considering Levi's and Levinas' allusions to bread. Some might be inclined to see in this shared theme, and the urgency attendant to it, mere coincidence. Both, after all, were victims of the Second World War, Levi in a concentration camp, Levinas in a prisoner of war camp. Privation, then, was hardly unknown to either. Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel that Levinas singles out bread as he does for reasons beyond the merely convenient.

Consider Levinas' emphasis on the importance of the bodily, the incarnational—as distinct from the idealism inherent to Platonism and Hegelianism, that is, the tendency of such philosophies to relegate the bodily to a somehow inferior status, an obstacle or deficiency in need of overcoming. Levinas, by contrast, stresses that without the bodily there could be no ethics. Without the ability to savor, to taste and smell and feel, there could be no "one-for-the-other." The incarnational is, and in more ways than one, the spiritual. Only one with a body—and, perforce, bodily *needs*—can truly undertake the radical orientation towards the other that lies at the heart of Levinasian ethics. It is more than a question of volition; it is in fact a giving of one's very self, an outpouring of the self for the other. "It is a passivity more passive still than any passivity that is antithetical to an act, a nudity more naked than all 'academic' nudity, exposed to

the point of outpouring, effusion and prayer," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. "It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. But for this one has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it. Enjoyment is an ineluctable moment of sensibility" (72). If one were to undertake a rhetorical analysis of this passage, one could not but note Levinas' word choice and the way he links these words in a motific constellation: *passivity*, *nudity*, *outpouring*, *effusion*, *prayer*, *being-for-another*—and of course *bread*, which is here invested with the intense pathos suggested by the preceding terms. The phrase "exposed to the point of effusion, outpouring, and prayer," in precisely the same vein, recalls the pathos of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done'…And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:42, 44, NIV). Giving the bread from one's own mouth is for Levinas of a piece with this kenotic outpouring. It is undertaken *in spite* of the self as opposed to *expressing* the self. And kenosis, as we will see, is as much a Jewish idea as it is a Christian one, having ultimately to do with the character of the God who issues the Ten Utterances from Sinai: For the God of the Covenant never asks of His people what He is not willing to do. He asks His followers to limit themselves, i.e., to undertake a *being-for-the-Other*, after limiting Himself for the sake of the created order.

To further our rhetorical analysis of the aforementioned passage from *Totality and Infinity*, we must turn back to Primo Levi. Specifically, to his account of the morning distribution of the bread in *Survival in Auschwitz*. "The entire hut shakes to its foundations," he recounts, as the inmates "dress with feverish hurry" and run "into the freezing air half-dressed…Some, bestially,

urinate while they run to save time, because within five minutes begins the distribution of bread, of bread-Brot-Broid-chleb-pain-lechem-keyner, of the holy grey slab which seems gigantic in your neighbor's hand, and in your own so small as to make you cry" (38-39). Much later, eponymously describing a "good day" in Auschwitz, he writes almost as an aside, "But how could one imagine not being hungry? The Lager *is* hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger" (74)—an echo of Wiesel's own experiences: "I was nothing but a body. Perhaps even less: a famished stomach. The stomach alone was measuring time" (*Night*, 52). Levinas' not infrequent allusions to bread throughout works like *Totality and Infinity* cannot be fully grasped, nor their urgency fully felt, apart from the experience of Jews like Primo Levi. Only in this light can one appreciate the full significance of Levinas' word choices in the aforementioned passage, suggesting both a crucifixion of the victims and, simultaneously, the need for an answering crucifixion of the self for the sake of the victims.

Another crucial instance of word associations in Levinas is to be found in his linking of bread—specifically, the *giving* of bread—with the "coring out" or "denucleation" which the suffering of the other brings about in the self. Disrupting the Same, effecting a "non-coinciding of the ego with itself," the self is summoned to *pour itself out* (*kenoō*) for the sake of the other. In the passage, a constellation of ideas and images comparable to the one previously discussed is employed:

> Then there is produced in this vulnerability the reversal whereby the other inspires the same, pain, an overflowing of meaning by nonsense. Then sense bypasses nonsense—that sense which is the-same-for-the-other. The passivity or patience of vulnerability has to go that far! In it sensibility is sense; it is by the other and for the

> other, for another. Not in elevated feelings, in "belles letters," but as in a tearing away of bread from the mouth that tastes it, to give to the other. Such is the coring out (*denucleation*) of enjoyment, in which the nucleus of the ego is cored out. (64)

In this constellation, the words *passivity*, *patience*, *vulnerability* are conjoined to the words *tearing away*, *bread*, *mouth*, *give*. Taken together, the words resonate shrilly; there is almost a sense of horror, or perhaps conviction, about them. The effect is one of overpowering pathos conjoined to an almost irresistible command. The word *bread* itself carries within itself the very force of this constellation; the full significance of its use by Levinas is impossible to understand apart from the Shoah. This is borne out by an incident recounted by Levi in "The Story of Ten Days," which concludes *Survival in Auschwitz*. If the Lager is a place wherein the condemned are "desperately and ferociously alone" (88), this is due in no small part to the endless hunger the inmates are forced to endure. The sign that the Lager is at last dead, then, occurs when bread is freely distributed by the survivors to a small handful of their number who have repaired a broken stove and a damaged window. "Only a day before a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the Lager said: 'eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour' [*sic*], and left no room for gratitude. It really meant that the Lager was dead" (160).

One last example of the intense resonance between Levi and Levinas is in order. It is the final step in our first attempt to drive home the profundity of the depth and breadth of the Shoah's impact on Levinas' thinking.

The chapter "The Canto of Ulysses" is a contradiction in terms—a moment of intense beauty amidst an otherwise abyssal text. Levi recounts an expedition of sorts undertaken with his fellow inmate Jean, "shrewd and physically robust, and at the same time gentle and friendly" (110), to

retrieve the day's soup ration. It is roughly a mile's walk, so the men are able to converse in relative freedom. The two begin to discuss the canto of Ulysses from the *Divine Comedy*. Levi's struggles to translate the words of the canto into French effect a profound change in him.

> Here, listen [Jean], open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:
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> 'Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance,
>
> Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
>
> To follow after knowledge and excellence.'
>
> As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am. (113)

As his double labor of recollection and translation continues and as they near the kitchen, Levi becomes possessed by an urgency unknown in the camps: "I would give today's soup to know how to connect 'the like on any day' to the last lines" (114). Levi's nigh-obsession to relate as much of the Canto and its contents to Jean as possible reawakens his sense of the other. Whether that other be Dante, Jean, or perhaps even God Himself, it does not matter. The experience has reawakened to him the *Otherwise*, the beyond being. One cannot but be reminded of another key passage from *Totality and Infinity*: "It is being torn up from oneself for another in the giving to the other of the bread of one's own mouth," Levinas explains; and while it is true that in this instance it is soup rather than bread to which Levi alludes, the effect is the same. "This is not an anodyne formal relation, but all the gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus essendi* in the possibility of giving. The identity of the subject is here brought out, not by a rest on itself, but by a restlessness that drives me outside of the nucleus of my substantiality" (142). In a world—better, in the *anti*-world—wherein "everything is hostile

[and]…All are enemies or rivals" (42) and humans are daily rendered by hunger "more deformed and more squalid" (37), Levi's experience is uncanny. His experience relating "The Canto of Ulysses" precisely embodies the sort of coring out, the extirpation from the *conatus essendi*, that Levinas describes. His urgency is not entirely for his own sake, nor even primarily; he is driven outside of himself out of a sense of obligation to Jean and to Dante—and, mayhap, to God Himself. At least, this is intimated in his dismay at the "sacrilege" of recounting a portion of the canto in prose (113). A more overt allusion to God may be glimpsed in Levi's description of the effect of Dante's lines—"like the blast of the trumpet, like the voice of God"—which, according to David Patterson, is in fact an allusion to Rosh Hashanah, which in turn effects a connection to Mount Sinai and the giving of the Law. "The voice of God is what reveals to man what a man is," Patterson observes, which of course harkens back to the original title of the work, *If This is a Man*. What is a human being? A being capable of experiencing precisely such a coring out, a denucleation; a being for whom the possibility of undertaking a *kenosis* for the other person is only too real. Such would seem to be of a piece with Levi's own thoughts, especially in light of what he elsewhere says of Lorenzo, a civilian worker who, at some risk to himself, shared with Levi rations, gave Levi an old vest, and wrote a letter to Levi's family. Thanks to this "good and simple man…[who] did not think that one did good for reward" (119), Levi avers, "I managed not to forget that I myself was a man" (122). Likewise, Levinas maintains in *Otherwise than Being* that even the simple act of ceding one's place to another—*Apres vous, monsieur*—signifies such a pouring out of the self for another. "It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even the little there is,

even the simple "After you, sir." The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity" (117-18).

We have urged that it is only by acknowledging the extent to which the Shoah permeates Levinas' thinking can its true urgency—so shrill, so *prophetic*—be grasped; but it now occurs that something similar might be said of Levi's writing: Only when read in light of Levinas' corpus and his "credo," "Ethics as first philosophy," can the remarkable breadth and depth of Levi be appreciated. In an age when dejudaization is rampant, when Shoah Studies are subsumed by "Genocide Studies," we are in dire peril of (willfully?) forgetting the *Judaism* of Levi and Levinas.

Finally, we should stress another key commonality between Levi and Levinas, and that is their sense of ethics and, in a closely related vein, their antitheodicy, which engender both an undeniable intimacy as well as a marked divergence in their respective worldviews.

In a passage few would regard as horrific or nightmarish, Levi recounts what for this author is among the most disturbing in all the various and sundry memoirs and histories he has ever read. It occurs early on in the memoir, shortly after Levi's arrival at the camp. Dehydrated from the journey, he sees an icicle on the frame of a window and plucks it. He is immediately set upon by a guard, who "brutally" seizes it from his grasp. "'*Warum?*' I asked him in my poor German. '*Heir ist kein warum*' (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove" (29). That is all there is to the incident. Compared, say, to the gruesome hanging of the child in Elie Wiesel's *Night* (63-65) or the burning of the children in Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land* (81-82), it seems almost laughable. For two decades, however, it remained for me genuinely horrifying, containing as it seemed to the seed of some

nihilistic or diabolic truth about the essence of reality itself. *There is no why here.* Not merely in Auschwitz, to be sure, but everywhere. No *Why*, and therefore no *Who*. No Goodness, no Love, no Truth. Only *natura* and *esse*. For how could there possibly be a *Why* in a world where the Shoah was possible? What meaning or purpose could the Shoah serve? Considering the magnitude of the evil of the Shoah—leave aside the other injustices, cruelties, and atrocities endlessly meted out upon the Jews throughout their history—belief in a *Why* seems blasphemous. As if evil served a purpose and therefore were not *truly* evil. As if Goodness were monergistic, the ultimate operative force behind each and every flood, fire, famine and fart—a notion as bathetic as it is obscene.

Levi rejects not so much God per se as a certain theological conception of God—specifically, a theology necessitating the project of theodicy, which attempts to provide a logical reconciliation of the phenomenon of evil and the power and perfection of God as He is ontologically conceived. "Today I think that if for no other reason than that an Auschwitz existed, no one in our age should speak of Providence. But without doubt in that hour the memory of biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity passed like a wind through all our minds" (*Auschwitz*, 157-58). While many would accept this as a straightforward declaration of atheism, a rejection of the Biblical God per se, one wonders if it is quite so straightforward as that. Elsewhere in his memoir, in the chapter entitled "October 1944," Levi recounts the cruel absurdity of a selection. Ultimately Levi's hut is summoned to the *Tagesraum*, the Quarter-master's office, "a room seven yards by four" wherein "there is not even any room…to be afraid" once the victims have assembled. The ridiculous pretension of scientific rigor belies the capriciousness and sadism of the process: "The SS man, in the fraction of a second between two

successive crossings, with a glance at one's back and front, judge's everyone's fate…In three or four minutes a hut of two hundred men is 'done', as is the whole camp of twelve thousand men in the course of the afternoon" (127-28). Harkening back to the absence of any *why* in this place, Levi relates that whereas he survives the selection, the man who precedes him, René, "so young and robust," is marked for gassing. He suspects that this is due to an error arising from the hasty, slapdash nature of the process. There is, understandably, a quietly confessional tone about this portion of his account. The tone changes to one of outrage and disbelief, however, when he comes to relate the actions of another inmate, "old Kuhn," who survives the procedure and that night prays loudly, "swaying backwards and forwards violently…thanking God because he has not been chosen" (129).

> Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer. (129-30)

The vehemence of Levi's response, his palpable outrage, belies his self-proclaimed atheism. Why should he speculate—or care—as to how God should or should not respond? Why should Kuhn's behavior register in his consciousness at all given the daily horrors in which he is hopelessly immersed? Might one even go so far as to argue that if Kuhn's selfishness seems to suggest that his connection to God is not as robust as he might care to think, Levi's outrage at

such solipsism suggests a stronger connection than Levi might imagine? At the least, this account might be viewed not so much as a rejection of God per se as a rejection of theodicy. How can an atheist, it might be asked, comprehend that there can be no reconciliation between the Biblical God and the existence of such horror, i.e., no justification in terms of divine teleology or sovereignty? The fact that Levi is aware of the impossibility of connecting God to these events—or, better, the impossibility of finding ontotheological justification for these events—implies a profound awareness of God on Levi's part. Perhaps what Levi is advocating, consciously or no, is an *antitheodicy*. As Judith Woolf argues, Levi's memoir is predicated on the conviction that he is not a true witness insofar as he survived purely by dint of his "prevarications or good luck." *Witness*, after all, carries with it providential connotations—as if he were "'a person touched by Grace', spared from death because he 'had to write, and by writing bear witness'…"[14] Rejecting a monergistic conception of providence need not entail a rejection of God, however, though many seem unaware of that fact. Possibly even Levi himself was unaware of this fact on a conscious level. At a deeper level, however, he recognized that the real conflict is between the Shoah and a certain model of God, God ontologically conceived, as opposed to the Biblical God. It is *theodicy* Levi so vehemently objects to, the idea that there could be a purpose or a meaning inherent to the Shoah—a view shared, and profoundly, by Levinas.

"We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (40). Totality, it may be

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[14] Woolf, "From *If This is a Man* to *The Drowned and the Saved*." In Robert S. C. Gordon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, 35-49 (41).

recalled, pertains to thematization—is indeed the end product and goal of thematization. *Esse* and *natura* are the domain of totality, ontology and epistemology its *modi operandi*. The reductionistic questions of *How?* and *What?* reign unchallenged in the domain of totality. Infinity, by contrast, is the antithesis of totality—if "antithesis" adequately conveys the sense of *otherwise*. For infinity is being's *otherwise*. "The idea of totality and the idea of infinity differ precisely in that the first is purely theoretical, while the second is moral," Levinas maintains (83). Moral, but in what sense? Exactly insofar as it is *kenotic*, as in the emptying of the self for the sake of the other:

> Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being. Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a space for a separated being exists divinely. Over and beyond the totality it inaugurates a society. The relations that are established between the separated being and Infinity redeem what diminution there was in the contraction creative of Infinity. (*Totality and Infinity*, 104)

Which is to say: God becomes fully God by undertaking a "contraction" for the sake of the creation, which itself is truly *other* than God. For Levinas, the idea of *creation ex nihilo* is a statement not about God's ontological might but instead a testament to God's character—His willingness, that is, to undergo a "contraction" that leaves a too-real space for the creation to be and to grow and to come in its own time. If God ontotheologically conceived results in theodicy—which is to say, necessitates a *reason*, a *meaning*, for every last evil act, thereby rendering "evil" into good—God's contraction, or kenosis, means that God eschews control (i.e.,

totality and totalization), which in turn means that evil *cannot* have a reason or a purpose. Nothing, neither *telos* nor *logos*, can explain or justify evil. In this sense, evil is *meaningless*. As Richard A. Cohen explains in "What good is the Shoah? On suffering and evil," if there *is* a "meaning" to the Shoah, it obtains in the end of theodicy. "'The most revolutionary fact of our twentieth century,' Levinas writes, 'is that of the destruction of all balance between…theodicy…and the forms which suffering and evil take.'"[15]

One of the most daunting implications of this rejection of theodicy and, by extension, its ontotheological God, is Levinas' assertion that humanity must esteem the Torah more than its Giver—which, as Cohen explains, has two implications of its own: First, that love for God's commands, which can be condensed to "'responsibility for everything and for all,'"[16] must take precedence over love for God and one's relationship therewith. Second, that "humans must love the work of morality and justice more, apparently, than God does Himself. It would mean that even if God seems to have let humanity down, having hidden His face or been eclipsed, as our twentieth century seems to teach again and again, that now *all the more* must we, we humans, love the Torah, that is to say, 'do justice and love mercy.'"[17]

It as if Levinas is saying, with Levi's guard, "there is no why here," albeit with a different accent, as it were: "there is no why, ***here***"—here in the realm of totality. The *why* lies not in explaining the event but in the Otherwise that prompts us, illogically, to embrace a "'responsibility for everything and all.'" For as we have already said, there is no *Why* without a

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[15] In Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy*, 266-82 (268-69).

[16] Ibid, 277-78.

[17] Ibid, 280-81.

Who. This realm, the realm of totality—of *esse* and *natura*—attempts to reduce the *Who* to a *What*, a *How*. And it would succeed in this were it not for the "existence," if so it can be called, of the *Otherwise than being*. Whether he is even aware of it or not, Primo Levi *is* a witness—a witness to this *Otherwise*. Likewise, Levinas is a witness as well, albeit more overtly—and, at the same time, not.

This of course brings us to another aspect of Levinas, which pertains as much to Levinas the *thinker* as Levinas the *Jew*—though if truth be told the two are inseparable, our culture's penchant for atomization and compartmentalization notwithstanding—and that is Levinas' *prophetism*. It was Susan Handelman who first made me aware at a conscious level of this aspect of Levinas' writings, though even before that, on some half-conscious level, I discerned in Levinas an urgency, a shrillness, a sense of command I'd not encountered before, save perhaps in portions of the Bible. Susan Handelman in *Fragments of Redemption* argues that partly this prophetism is inherent to Levinas' arguments against thematization, which operates by advancing "thesis, evidence, proof, conclusion, complete comprehension with no remainder. So repetitive recurrence, a continuous holding open, replaces a style which argues and 'thematizes' through logical deduction and hierarchical ordering." Levinas seeks not to argue for the good, to intellectually coerce his readers, as it were, by means of overpowering ratiocination or evidence, thereby reducing "goodness" to mere canniness or pragmatism. Instead he employs a rhetorical style that seems to unsettle and afflict his readers through its incessant questioning of the superficially reasonable "'that's just the way it is'" asserted by the comfort of the comfortable

and "the Power of the powerful."[18] "In this sense, as a vocative mode," Handelman explains, Levinas' style "parallels the language (and aim) of the biblical prophets—as urgent appeal, imperative demand, anguished theoretical questioning" (180-81). Levinas is crying out against the idolatry of the Same—the solipsism of the autonomous ego which appropriates the other, if only by reducing her or him to a node on a mental map whereby the ego might safely traverse the literal and/or metaphorical cosmos. We have already seen that however innocuous such reductionism might at first appear, appertaining to the mental or the theoretical only, it nevertheless serves as the *sine qua non* for the violence of domination, which may range from assimilation to outright genocide. When he describes totality as a theoretical mode and infinity a moral mode, then, the implications resonate with the prophetism of a Micah or a Hosea: "The idea of the perfect is not an idea but desire; it is the welcoming of the Other, the commencement of moral consciousness, which calls in question my freedom. Thus this way of measuring oneself against the perfection of infinity is not a theoretical consideration; it is accomplished as shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise."[19] True language, for Levinas, involves a calling into question of the Same; i.e., *Logos* as *Sermo*: Not a means of apprehension but a calling, a summons by the other, followed by a calling into question of the self—the self, i.e., addressing itself in shame: *Is it righteous to be?* Which is to say: *What right have I to enjoy this place in the sun when I do so at the expense of another?*

Indeed, as Handelman observes, Levinas' style embodies this very calling into question of the self:

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[18] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

[19] *Totality and Infinity*, 83-84. Cf. Micah 6:8 and Hosea 6:6.

> Levinas's repetitive prose style is thus not "disclosure" but the constant "exposure" and reexposure of philosophical language to the intrusions of the other. The subject (both the philosophical "knowing subject" and the subject as the "contents" or object of his philosophy) recurs to itself not as a self-coincidence but as a constant exposure and reexposure to the other, a going back again and again, insistently, relentlessly. It has the structure of an "insomnia," a figure he often uses to characterize the putting into question of consciousness. Yet each time, it somewhat differently bears down on the "themes" of responsibility, exposure, vulnerability, substitution for the other.

Handelman describes Levinas writing style as a "'prophetic appeal…reflect[ing] that insistent call and appeal from the other which for him defines the essence of language" (*Fragments*, 180). This generally overlooked aspect of Levinas' motifs and manner of writing drives home how very *Jewish*—religiously as opposed to (merely) ethnically—Levinas truly is. To downplay or ignore his orthodoxy is to render his entire system of thought baseless, a castle in the air.

Before we may proceed further, it would be prudent to explore the Jewish notions of prophecy and prophetism. What is a prophet? What manner of man is a prophet?

Walter Brueggemann, to begin, offers enormous insight into the nature of prophetism as conceived and indeed *embodied* by Judaism. Throughout his numerous texts, from *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (1986) to *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (1997) to *Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha* (2001), among many others, Brueggemann describes the immense complexities surrounding the nature of prophetism—particularly from a *Christian* perspective, which, as we will see, tends to reduce

prophetism to mere foretelling. This relates to a larger, still more complex issue: namely, the difference between Jewish and Christian God-talk. Whereas Judaism embodies an ongoing, often fractious dialectic between what he describes as the Tanakh's "Core Testimony," or positive modes of speaking of and relating to God, and its Countertesimony," which entails the "negativity" or "hiddenness" of Israel's God (an idea we will discuss in greater depth a little farther on), Christianity does away with the idea of such a dialectic altogether. As he explains in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*:

> The dialogic structure of faith is treated gingerly in much of the life of the church. If we are dialogic at all, we think it must be polite and positive and filled only with gratitude. So little do our liturgies bring to expression our anger and hatred, our sense of betrayal and absurdity. But even more acutely, with our failure of nerve and our refusal to presume upon our partner in dialogue, we are seduced into nondialogic forms of faith, as though we were the only ones there; and so we settle for meditation and reflection or bootstrap operations of resolve to alter our situation. By contrast, ancient Israel could face honestly and openly its predicament because it never doubted that the predicament could be handled in dialogue. (149)

I would argue that Levinas cannot be understood apart from this tension between the "Core Testimony" and the "Countertestimony," in particular as it is embodied in the phenomenon of Biblical prophetism.

One of the first aspects of prophetism Brueggemann touches upon in *Theology of the Old Testament* is the disruptiveness of the prophet, of whom it may be said with equal veracity that

he both emerges in a time of crisis as well as provokes a crisis (624). Levinas, likewise, emerges from the crises of the Second World War and the Shoah and, in his response, generates a crisis through his exposure of the metaphysical (and theological) roots of the Shoah. Levinas looks not to such "causes" as racism, economic inequity, colonialization, militarization, and the other phenomena typically cited to explain the Shoah; in a move hotly contested to this day, he points to the totalizing tendencies inherent to the thought of Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, among others—that is to say, to the very bedrock of Western thought itself. He speaks in *Totality and Infinity* of the "ancient privilege of unity which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza to Hegel," arguing that separation and otherness is associated in Western thought with imperfection, fallenness; something to be overcome, seemingly at all costs. "Metaphysics would endeavor to suppress this separation, to unite; the metaphysical being should absorb the being of the metaphysician," he contends (102). Though we tend to think of the Biblical prophets as being at war with false gods like Baal, Chemosh, Ishtar et al, in point of fact, as Brueggemann goes on to point out, the prophet must contend as well with "dominant modes of power and dominant definitions of reality" (625)—a task, as we have seen, in which Levinas is likewise engaged in his outcry against totality. Prophetic speech, Brueggemann explains, is therefore characterized not only by its disruptiveness and destabilizing effect but by its invitation "to alternate perceptions of reality" (625). One passage particularly beloved by this author exemplifies Levinas' own efforts in this regard:

> But the irresistible weight of being can be shaken only by this incautious existence. Being receives a challenge from Torah, which jeopardizes its pretension of keeping itself above or beyond good and evil. In challenging the

> absurd "that's the way it is" claimed by the Power of the powerful, the man of the Torah transforms being into human history. Meaningful movement jolts the Real. If you do not accept the Torah, you will not leave this place of desolation and death, this desert which lays to waste all the splendors of the earth. You will not be able to begin history, to break the block of being stupidly sufficient unto itself, like Haman drinking with King Ahasuerus. You will not be able to exorcise fatality, the coherence of determined events. Only the Torah, a seemingly utopian knowledge, assures man of a place.[20]

What is noteworthy is that Levinas is describing the Torah itself as an "alternate perception of reality," i.e., as "a seemingly utopian knowledge"—which is itself a way of presenting to readers a new way of relating to the Torah. Few people, in particular Christians, would regard the Torah as "utopian," seeing it merely as a Book of Law, as purely "legalistic," thereby failing to recognize the sheer imaginative power it potentially exercises over its readers, its force as a counterculture in a world in thrall to *esse* and/or *natura*.

Another crucial aspect of prophetism is its mediatory aspect, attempting to reconcile God to man and man to God. As a result, he is often at odds with both parties. The prophet, accordingly, is the loneliest of beings, forever torn between man and God. "A prophet is forever awake, forever alert; he is never indifferent, least of all to injustice, be it human or divine," writes Elie Wiesel in his discussion of Elijah in *Five Biblical Portraits*. "God's messenger to man, he somehow becomes man's messenger to God" (39).

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[20] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings* 30-50 (39).

If, as we have claimed, Levinas' work is truly "prophetistic," this idea of mediation is especially crucial.

To his fellow men the prophet cries against their efforts to construct a new spiritual, metaphysical and/or social reality for itself "by removing Yahweh from its center," as Brueggemann puts it. "Yahweh, however, will not be removed from Israel's center! One of the ways in which Yahweh returns to and remains at Israel's center is by the utterance of these odd, abrasive, and mostly unwelcome voices" (*Theology*, 627). One has but to think of Isaiah: "'An ox knows its owner, / And a donkey its master's manger, / But Israel does not know, / *But* Israel does not know, / My people do not understand'" (1:3 [NASV])—or Jeremiah: "'Why should I pardon you? Your sons have forsaken Me / And sworn by those who are not gods. / When I had fed them to the full, / They committed adultery / And trooped to the harlot's house'" (5:7 [NASV]).

Throughout the Tanakh, Israel does indeed play the harlot, lusting after false gods like Baal and Ishtar. Hence another essential role of the prophet, who is an iconoclast par excellence, a destroyer of images. This literal aspect of iconoclasm is fairly straightforward and warrants little explanation. There is, however, another element to the prophets' relentless war against idolatry that is less obvious, and that is the manner in which certain Biblical ideas become themselves "idolatrous," i.e., "subject to caricature," as Abraham Joshua Heschel says in *The Prophets*. The two he singles out for discussion are the idea of Israel as the chosen of God and that of "'the day of the Lord'" (39). The former tended to lead Israel to regard itself as somehow insulated from Divine justice, when in fact the opposite was the case. Similarly, the "day of the Lord" often led to a sort of triumphalism, even a vulgar nationalism, as if Israel alone were the object of God's

love. Both ideas tended to undermine the idea of God's people—the people of Torah, the people of the Covenant—as *challengers* of "the absurd 'that's the way it is' claimed by the Power of the powerful" and *transformers* of *esse* and *natura* "into human history."[21] (As an aside, it should be noted that these behaviors are hardly unique to Judaism but are today displayed by the Church, particularly in terms of its "replacement theology" and its excessive accent on Jesus' return at the End of the Age, as if all it need do is passively await his return as opposed to serving as if there *were* no return.)

At the same time, however, the prophet is also man's apologist, so to say, to God. "And yet, though surrounded by people, Jeremiah is alone—alone with God, and at times alone against God," relates Wiesel in *Five Biblical Portraits* (109). "Jeremiah abides by God's law but disputes His justice" (121).

> He becomes a prophet only when he thinks he can prevent disaster; once he realizes he cannot, he protests forcefully. "Of course, God, You are just and righteous; but I shall quarrel with you, I have no choice: it is because You are just and Your name is truth that I must quarrel with you…" Few prophets have spoken up with such anguish and forcefulness against heavenly injustice—or heavenly justice, which is worse. (121-22)

Heschel stresses that the role of the prophet is not to be a mere mouthpiece or stand-in for God but is in fact a far more dynamic affair, entailing both partnering with God as well as opposing God. The fact that God is capable of being opposed, that Judaism records instances of such contention, as between prophets like Moses or Jeremiah and God, says something

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[21] Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

remarkable about God's relation to the world; something of a piece with Levinas' assertion in *Totality and Infinity* that "We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (40). But this is an idea to which we must return a little later. For now, let us return to Brueggemann's observation that the prophet not only emerges from but evokes a crisis by his presence. The relationship between God and man, as Heschel elaborates in *The Prophets*, has broken down. "The prophet is not only a censurer and accuser," he notes, "but also a defender and a consoler. Indeed, the attitude he takes to the tension that obtains between God and the people is characterized by a dichotomy. In the presence of God he takes the part of the people. In the presence of the people he takes the part of God" (28). It is my argument that Levinas' work cannot but be understood in this light.

Thus far, I have made mostly broad claims about Levinas' prophetism. At this juncture I would like to delve into this matter more deeply, and I will do so by examining Levinas' project and work in light of two very specific figures from the Bible: Hezekiah, King of Judah, and Jeremiah.

True enough: Hezekiah is not a prophet per se. Nevertheless, his iconoclasm—in particular as regards the brazen serpent, created by Moses in the days of the Exodus at God's express command (Numbers 21:6-9)—beautifully embodies a crucial aspect of prophetism.

Hezekiah's act is a shocking one. The people had made of the brazen serpent an idol, true; but did that warrant its destruction? Its origins lay in God's command to Moses. Why destroy it, then? Why not simply forbid its worship, or remove it from the public eye? It is an extreme act, surely; one implying, even to the sympathetic reader, an unnerving sense of "commitment at any price," even fanaticism, on Hezekiah's part. Doubtless the destruction of the brazen serpent

entailed some degree of misunderstanding and confusion. Very likely even some of the pious wondered at Hezekiah audacity, speculating that he might perhaps be guilty of acting according to his own will, not God's. Even in the present day, far removed from the event, there are surely readers who will respond with an approval tinged with approbation. At the least, many readers will wonder at the vehemence of Hezekiah's response. The brazen serpent served as a witness to the greatness and mercy of God, to say nothing of providing a tangible link to Israel's origins as a people set apart. Remembrance, testimony, commemoration—all are vital, if not foundational, aspects of Judaism. Consider Jacob's creation of the altar at El Bethel because of God's revelation to him (Genesis 35:7). Likewise, think of the Holy Days of Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, to name but two. Given the importance of commemoration, originating in the very command of God, one might be reluctant to destroy an object of such potentially powerful commemorative value. Hezekiah did not hesitate in the least, however—indeed, he called it *Neshutan* ("piece of bronze"), a derogatory term. That Hezekiah would take such an extreme action, then, causing the brazen serpent to be broken up and its pieces scattered, testifies to the prophetistic/iconoclastic impulse in Judaism. However indisputably sacred its origins, its corruption necessitated its destruction lest it cause more harm than good. For the prophet, the *relation* between God and Israel is paramount, and there can be no doubt that the relation with God was jeopardized by the brazen serpent's presence; ergo, drastic measures were required. The object was holy insofar as it was a palpable reminder of that relation, but when its purpose was perverted and the relationality thereby subverted, it became a detriment and was therefore destroyed.

One might describe Levinas' project in like terms. Insofar as Levinas is concerned, the Jews'—and indeed the world's, insofar as the Western world purported to be theistic and biblical, if only foundationally[22]—relationship with God is jeopardized by the idolatry of metaphysical thought—i.e., the corrosive influence of Parmenides and the other Hellenistic thinkers. Specifically, one might say that Levinas opposes the biblical-classical synthesis, which caricatures the God of Torah by conceiving Him not primarily relationally but ontologically. Levinas opposes the thematization of God, His reduction into an *It*, a collection of attributes to be apprehended, thereby subverting the *Why?* and the *Who?* of God beneath the utilitarian considerations of *How?* and *What?* However helpful a practice like theology might be in some respects—*thinking* about God isn't a sin, after all; and it is true that theology emerged out of a dialogue between Christians and pagans, most of whom were Hellenistic in their thought and speech, in the former's attempts to bring the latter to an understanding of the *true* God—it becomes detrimental when the God described by theology, itself a caricature despite our best efforts, replaces God Himself.—I.e., when the *Who* becomes a *What*. "The relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it. Its very *infinition* is produced precisely in this overflowing," he argues in *Totality and Infinity*. Hence his reticence to speak in strictly objective terms of God, though he is quick to point out that the relationality between God (qua Infinity or *Otherwise*) and man is not mere subjectivism in some postmodern or quasi-pantheistic sense: "The relation with infinity will have

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[22] I am thinking specifically of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, which identifies the Star with Israel and its rays with Christianity, thereby acknowledging a shared vocation. Insofar as the Western world was once "Christian," then, it is safe to say that Levinas is speaking to Christians as well as Jews—and, by extension, to the Western world as a whole. Even "pagans" are more influenced by Christian presuppositions and ideas than they might at first realize.

to be stated in terms other than those of objective experience; but if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word" (25).

This relation, what is more, cannot be divorced from the ethical, from Israel's mission. Let us momentarily return to Wiesel's observations regarding Jeremiah and his own labors:

> It is up to the prophet to stop the process [of Israel's prostitution] by forcing them to remember: the covenant, the Law, the promise of the beginning, the moral thrust of Israel's adventure. To forget the beginning means to justify the end—the end of Israel. Thus Jeremiah's magnificently rendered discourse is contrapuntal in structure and concept: set in the present, it reaches out simultaneously to the distant past and the unattainable future and makes one dependent on the other. (112-13)
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> Not only does this recall (however indirectly) Levinas' talk of "diachrony," wherein the anarchic past speaks to the present and to the "unattainable" Messianic age, binding them together not as a totality but under the aegis of infinity—it also calls to mind the connection Levinas draws in "Judaism and the Present" between the figure of the Biblical prophet and the mission of the Jewish people itself: "The most deeply committed [*engagé*] man, one who can never be silent, the prophet, is also the most separate being, and the person least capable of becoming an institution…The *midrash* likes to recount how Samuel refused every invitation he received in the course of his travels throughout Israel. He carried his

own tent and utensils with him. And the Bible pushes this idea of independence, even in the economic sense, to the point of imagining the prophet Eli being fed by crows."[23] Just as the prophets eschewed institutionalization, so, too, is Israel called to be "disengaged" from the world about it. "Disengagement" does not imply for Levinas a sense of privilege—an idea harkening back to Heschel's remarks about the prophets' need to remind Israel that its "chosen" status implies neither triumphalism nor immunity to judgment—but a commitment fundamentally at odds with totality and its ontological and epistemological foci. "Here, Judaism filters into the modern world," Levinas explains. "It does so by disengaging itself, and it disengages itself by affirming the intangibility of an essence, the fidelity to a law, a rigid moral standard. This is not a return to the status of a thing, for such fidelity breaks the facile enchantment of cause and effect and allows it to be judged."[24] Ergo, "[Judaism] has a function in the economy of being. It is indispensable to the work of reason itself."[25] For Levinas, reason entails a questioning, broadly speaking, of the "'that's just the way it is' of the Power of the powerful"[26] and, specifically, the self's right to be at the expense of others. Human autonomy—the self's right to say *I*—is, paradoxically, predicated upon this calling into question of the self. "The essence

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[23] In *Difficult Freedom,* 208-15 (213).

[24] Ibid, 212-13.

[25] Ibid, 212.

[26] Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings,* 30-50 (39).

of reason consists not in securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him in question and in inviting him to justice," as Levinas maintains in *Totality and Infinity* (88)—an idea that dovetails beautifully with his assertion here, in "Judaism and the Present," that "A person is indispensable to justice before being indispensable to himself."[27]

The kind of lifestyle demanded by this disengagement, this refusal of institutionalization within the totality, returns of course to Levinas' prior remarks regarding prophets like Samuel and Elijah. Levinas speaks of it in terms of "asceticism, like the training of a fighter. It is acquired and held, finally, in the particular type of intellectual life known as the study of Torah, that permanent revision and updating of the content of the Revelation where every situation within the human adventure can be judged."[28] Such a view precludes a reductionistic understanding of Scripture, as if it were a collection of mere truths to be assimilated as one might a formula or a credo. Rather, it implies an intensely *dialogical* understanding of Scripture. The Bible does not merely, or even primarily, foretell; rather, it questions, challenges, provokes to dialogue. It speaks not merely to/of God and Covenant and ethics; it also speaks, via "the eternal anteriority of wisdom," to/of history and science.[29] It inspires such practices as Talmud and Midrash, which eschew the broad, universalizing certainties of theology. Or, to come full circle, Judaism refuses the temptation of thematization—one might well say *idolatry*, inasmuch as an idol can be as easily intellectual/theological as material—in favor of a relationship that is, or can

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[27] In *Difficult Freedom*, 208-15 (212-13).

[28] "Judaism and the Present." In *Difficult Freedom,* 208-15 (212-13).

[29] Ibid, 213-14.

be, as fractious and difficult and unwelcome, even, as that between God and His prophets. And again it must be stressed that this applies not only to the prophets but is expected of Israel corporately. Israel is God's prophetic people, the countercultural people. "[Commitment] alone—commitment at any price, headlong commitment that burns its bridges behind it, even the commitment that ought to permit a withdrawal into the self—is no less inhuman than the disengagement dictated by the desire to be comfortable, which ossifies a society that has transformed the difficult task of Judaism into a mere confession, an accessory of burgeoise comfort."[30] That Levinas lived this commitment, lived prophetically, one might well say, is borne out by the fact that his writings, in Richard A. Cohen's words, "are *mussar*…teaching ethical lessons." Cohen goes on to note the double-sidedness of Levinas' task: "teaching Jewish ethics to the non-Jewish world and teaching non-Jewish philosophy to the Jewish world."[31]

Reading Levinas in light of Hezekiah's destruction of the brazen serpent, to sum up, emphasizes the iconoclasm inherent to Levinas' project. It stresses his concern lest Jews (and Christians, and perhaps Westerners in general) reduce the God of Israel to a mere idea, foregoing relation—and, it cannot be overstressed, the *ethical demand* it entails—for mere thematization, which might be described as the ultimate form of idolatry. In stressing his approach to Torah, his high regard for Talmud and Midrash, his talk of the need for endless engagement, we witness a clear rejection of the thematizing tendencies in Christian readings of Scripture. Not foretelling, not mere command or legalization" but "asceticism" and "the training of a fighter," an endlessly dialogical and even fractious approach to Scripture—and its God. In fine, the Hezekiah-Levinas

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[30] Ibid.

[31] *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Levinas and Rosenzweig*, 132.

pairing emphasizes not merely Levinas' Jewishness but his prophetism—which in turn militates against those readings that tend to disregard or devaluate Levinas' Judaism (i.e., by describing his God as "contentless," per Merold Westphal).

Another crucial aspect of what I am calling Levinas' prophetism is his attitude towards evil, in particular the Shoah. Superficially it may seem as if he speaks only to man, condemning the idolatrous Western ontotheology that paved the way for the Shoah; yet if we focus only on this aspect, we do Levinas an injustice and fail to appreciate the depth of his faith as a Jew.

We have already seen that Levinas refuses to deal with the Shoah in terms of theodicy. He rejects attempts at "explaining" it in terms of Divine sovereignty or teleology—which to his thinking is tantamount to nullifying evil and rendering it an oblique or unpleasant form of goodness; the bitter medicine, so to say, of some Divine remedy or goal—but by crying out to God, *Aiyeka?!* "How could you, Lord? Where were you? What were you thinking?" His writings, however philosophically dense, reverberate with the pathos of Moses' intercession after the sin of the golden calf (cf. Exodus 32-33). "'But now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou hast written!'" (32:32). Moses effectually provokes God to mercy by his display of self-emptying, mirroring back to God His own behaviors in creating man and in choosing Israel. Something uncannily like this is at work in Levinas' own writing. The fact that the prophets can cry out in this fashion relates directly to Levinas' avowal that God desires not a totality but makes space for the creation to be and to come on its own, undertaking a "contraction"—a *kenosis*—to vouchsafe the otherness of the created order. This is in stark contrast to classical theism, which emphasizes God's perfection—with its associations of timelessness, immutability, impassibility, and hence omnicontrol—to

such a degree that to all intents and purposes the created order becomes but a puppet to God, which of course is tantamount to a reduction to the Same.

For all Levinas' painstaking efforts to avoid theology and theodicy lest he thematize both God as well as the victims, he is not indifferent to the so-called "problem of evil" in its broadest sense. It is less a question of the *What* of God, that is, the knowledge or power of God, as it is the *Who* of God.—Which is to say, Levinas is troubled by the Shoah and its implications for God's *covenantal relationship* with the Jews, and, to a lesser extent, His relationship with the world: For by seeming to abandon the Jews to the Shoah, God also sends a clear message to the world that He is utilitarian, using all things as a means to the Divine ends. In short, that evils are not truly evils and victims not truly victims, inasmuch as the ultimate operative force behind the reality of both is the Divine will. God becomes just another force—not *in* the world, directly, but certainly *on* the world, which is tantamount to the same thing: God ontologically conceived.

In focusing so much energy on *man*'s responsibility, seeming almost to leave God out of the picture, it is as if Levinas is silently protesting God's inaction and indifference. When he calls on Jews to love the Torah more than God, it is as if He is hoping to shame God by urging Jews to cling to the Covenant all the more fervently. His silence with respect to God, then, is not some expression of apophatic tendencies in his thinking or character; rather, it is a pregnant silence, a silence that speaks volumes.

Some, like Merold Westphal, have suggested that Levinas is an atheist, but—assuming I am wrong about Levinas' prophetism—it would be more apt to call him a *misotheist*, or God-hater, like Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Although Levinas refers to Dostoevsky's magnum opus in almost his every book and essay, and although scholars sometimes connect

Levinas with Dmitri and, less frequently, Zosima, there is an obvious link between Levinas and Ivan.

> I absolutely renounce all high harmony. It is not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child who beat her chest with her little fist and prayed to 'dear God' in a stinking outhouse with her undredeemed tears!...I don't want harmony, for love of mankind I don't want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. Besides, they put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket. And it is my duty, if only as an honest man, to return it as far ahead of time as possible. Which is what I'm doing. It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket.[32]

Were Levinas not Jewish, I might be inclined to accept the possibly of labeling him a misotheist and have done with it. (Even that, however, would not end the matter so easily…) As I have stressed, however, not only is Levinas Jewish; his God is the *Most-Moved Mover* of the Biblical prophets, as Heschel has it, as opposed to the "unmoved mover" of Aristotle or the apathetic, impassible God of classical theism. This of course is of a piece with my prior remarks about Levinas' concerns about the idolatry of thematization, but here the accent is not on his remonstrance of the West for its thematization-cum-idolatry but on his provocation of God into a response for His inaction in the face of evils like the Shoah. Levinas' reticence to speak directly

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[32] Cited in John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*, 111. We will return to Levinas' underappreciated relationship with Dostoevsky in Chapter 3 of this work. For now, it is enough to note that the two are united in their struggle with the problem of evil and their uncannily similar way of addressing the problem, which may be summarized in a single word: *kenosis*.

of God is not equivalent to a reticence to speak *to* God. Far from it! By placing the burden of evil on man to such an extent—i.e., his claim that I am responsible even for the evils I myself endure at the hand of others—Levinas is crying out to God as vehemently as Jeremiah in the latter's Lamentations. Whereas Jeremiah is more direct and explicit, however, Levinas' protest is oblique. For all that, it is in some ways a more intense protest, a more involved protest—and therefore more intimate.

Let us delve more deeply into the idea of prophetic arguing with God. It is an intensely Jewish idea and has little or no analogue in any other religion, as Anton Laytner demonstrates in *Arguing with God: A Jewish Perspective*.

For our purposes, this idea of arguing with God is perhaps best evidenced by Andy De Emmony's *God on Trial* (2008), an adaptation of Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God* (1979)—which, though set during a pogrom in 1649, is itself based on an actual trial that took place in Auschwitz. Wiesel was present at the trial, which went on for several days. God was found guilty, as Robert McAfee Brown relates in his introduction to Wiesel's text, "of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an 'infinity of silence,' [one of the judges, a scholar of Talmud,] looked at the sky and said 'It's time for evening prayers,' and the members of the tribunal recited Maariv, the evening service" (vii).

The idea of a trial of God arises when one of the inmates, Moishe, asks his fellow Kuhn why he is bothering to pray. Initially incredulous, Moishe's anger suddenly boils over: "He hears me, and He does nothing about it. He's a bigger bastard than I thought…He should be here, not us. We should put the bastard on trial. Then maybe then He'll hear us" (10:44-11:03). Apparently there is discussion not recorded in the film, for we cut to a scene a little later wherein Mordechai

and his father, Kuhn, are arguing over the idea of putting God on trial. "In fact it would not be blasphemy," another inmate, Schmidt, interrupts. "Abraham haggled with God over Sodom. Jacob wrestled with God. The name 'Israel' means 'he that struggles with God'" (11:20-11:34). Eventually it is agreed to hold a trial of God. A judge, Baumgarten, is chosen as the Av Beth Din, along with Mordechai as the Dayan and Schmidt as the Rosh Beth Din.

The very idea of a trial of God is possible in Judaism for reasons implied by Levinas' "cosmology," if so it can be called. If religion is made possible when infinity refuses to assimilate the other unto itself but "contracts" itself and so makes a space for the other, this implies a God who opts not to settle things in advance. He eschews thematization, which is tantamount to omnicontrol; and this in turn entails creating man to be naturally "atheist": "One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one is an I, an egoism," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. "The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I" (58-59). Man's atheism does not mean that God simply leaves man to himself, without guidance or aid. We have already seen Levinas' high regard for Torah and for the endless dialogue it engenders, the wrestling and questioning evinced in Talmud and Midrash. God reveals, but in a manner that eschews coercion—say, by overwhelming the reader with irrefutable ratiocination and argument. His Tanakh instead provokes as many or more questions as it answers. The very fact of God's making space for man (and indeed creation) to be and to grow and to come implies something profound about God's character. God risks the messiness and fractiousness and misunderstanding because it is *necessary* for a genuinely kenotic

relationship. The fact that man can argue with God to the extent of putting God on trial is the foundation for Levinas' ethic. Only insofar as God has undertaken a radical orientation towards the world and man can man do likewise towards his fellows and his world.

To return to *God on Trial*, it is determined that God is being tried for breaking His part of the Covenant. "So the case before us is that He did not fulfill His Covenant," Baumgarten summarizes. "Who would like to start?" (16:45-16:50). Mordechai recites Psalm 89:3-4 ("'I have made a covenant with My Chosen; / I have sworn to David My servant, / I will establish your seed forever, / And build up your throne to all generations'" [NASV]), then asks the members of the court if God has fulfilled His promise. After a nearly unanimous *no*, Baumgarten remarks, "Well, it's hard to see how the charge can be refuted, what defense there could be" (17:13-17:18). "Bad things have happened before," Kuhn interjects. "Read the Torah. Read you history. We are *Jews*. We *suffer*" (17:26-17:37). Kuhn surveys Jewish history, citing the Babylonian captivity, Masada, Spain, Russia and Nazi Germany. "This is a test of our faith," he avers. He goes on to argue that God's "betrayal" of the Covenant is in fact a punishment for the sin of forsaking the Torah for secular religions like socialism, Zionism, capitalism, and anarchism. Baumgarten brings up the point that in law the punishment must be proportionate to the crime. "What crime could justify a punishment like this? The children—there are *children* in the camp. What punishment does a little child deserve?" he asks (23:56-24:08). Schmidt points to the Flood, explaining that God's punishments aren't always proportionate. "The mistake is to make this personal," he concludes (24:26-24:27). The punishment is against the Jewish *people* as opposed to specific *individuals*. But of what use, Mordecai challenges, is an impersonal God? An impersonal God is like the weather—merely another force in the world.

Schmidt then changes his tactic, explaining the Shoah as a kind of purification—like a surgeon removing a gangrenous appendage. He points to the Babylonian captivity, arguing that it brought unimagined good to the Jews in the long run. What if their current situation, he asks, should prove analogous? He goes further, speculating that their suffering is just that—a *Shoah*, a sacrifice made in order to better the world. In a final move, he reminds the inmates of Masada. The Romans are gone, but the Torah survives. Likewise, Hitler will be vanquished, but the Torah will endure. "So you see, we must not despair. Our suffering is a privilege if it is a part of God's plan. We are fortunate to be purifying the people through our pain" (29:46-29:59). Mordecai challenges the idea that God would demand the death of innocent children, women and men as a sacrifice, in which case Hitler, Mengele et al are but God's tools. "If Hitler is doing God's work, then logic says that to stand in Hitler's way is to stand in God's way. To take arms against Hitler is wrong. Now does anybody here believe that? Is there any way that that could possibly be true? Isn't that *insane*?!" (32:15-32:36). Later on in the trial, the subject of reconciling God's power and His goodness arises. "Oh, He can do all things?" Mordecai observes with evident irony. "Well, if He can do all things, why can He not purify His people without gassing them?" "He is all-powerful," Kuhn insists. "How can He be all-powerful and just? Either He's all-powerful, in which case He could have stopped this but He chose not to because He is not just, or He'd like to stop this but He could not" (36:41-37:07). Schmidt counters that the answer is free will: God allows man to choose his own course. Moishe will have none of such talk, however, pointing to an inmate named Lieble, who was forced to choose one of his three sons to remain with him while the other two—twins, as it turns out—were taken into Mengele's custody. "Excuse me, I don't want free will. I want my sons…You talk about

free will, where was my will then? What choice did I have?" (40:53-41:10). Schmidt, taken aback, nevertheless returns to his claim that Hitler will die while the people and the Torah will survive. "You're saying that people will survive," Baumgarten replies grimly, "but tomorrow morning half of the people in this room are dead. Don't they have a share in their Covenant?" "Their share is to bear witness, to keep alive the flame," Schmidt replies (41:54-42:10). Moishe sarcastically observes that Mengele is more concerned for Lieble's sons than God and that God is the one who ought to be gassed. Schmidt acknowledges a Scriptural precedent for his claim about God's indifference to individual suffering—namely, the Book of Job. The idea that Lieble's children are martyrs, their suffering part of God's great plan to refine the world, prompts Mordecai to retort disgustedly, "To be a martyr a man must *choose* martyrdom" (43:55-43:58). Lieble, however, goes on to pursue Moishe's remark about God being gassed. Perhaps God, he says, suffers as well; perhaps He is not all-powerful and impassible but needs *us*. The exasperated Moishe responds that a God who suffers is of no use, but Lieble is undeterred, going on to remark that thus far they have spoken only of the evil in the world, allowing the goodness in the world to pass unremarked. How do we account for goodness?

The kind of questions set forth here are apropos of Levinas' own writings, however indirectly at times. We have seen that Levinas' work might be described in terms of antitheodicy, rejecting explanations, however pious or rational, that would undermine man's "atheism." Like Mordecai, Levinas would by no means adopt the views of a Kuhn or a Schmidt, which seem to entail a Divine utilitarianism wherein "Goodness" (note the capitalization/thematization!) is monergistic and the separation between God and man diminished. At the same time, however, one suspects that Levinas would praise the idea of a trial of God, implying as it does a dynamic, unsettled

relation with God and, what is more, affording an opportunity for the kind of calling into question of the self without which genuine ethics is impossible. (We will say more about this last point presently.)

The trial is disrupted when the SS arrive to take the new prisoners for processing, and when the latter return it seems as if the inmates have gone off the idea and have no desire to see it finished. One man, however, asks Schmidt to resume the trial. We should start what we have finished and be *men*, he says—and one suspects the word the screenwriter, Frank Cottrell Boyce, has in mind is *mensch*, "human beings," beings made in the image of God and capable of crying out to Him, of opposing Him when necessary—exactly as per Samuel Balentine's thoughts on Job:

> I suggest that God's speech may be interpreted not as a rebuke or a denial of Job, but rather as a radical summons to a new understanding of what it means for humankind to be created in the image of God. In this view, it is not silence and submission that God requires; it is steadfast lament and relentless opposition to injustice and innocent suffering, wherever it appears. In this view of the divine speeches, God regards Job not as an aberration within the created order that is to be corrected or eliminated. He is rather a supreme model for humankind that God is committed to nurture and sustain.[33]

No less significantly, another inmate, Ezra Shapira, adds that the trial is a kind of prayer and that the Law is *meant* to be debated.

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[33] Samuel E. Balentine, "'What Are Human Beings, That You Make So Much of Them?'" In *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, 259-278 (260).

Schmidt reiterates his claim that Hitler will die and the Jews and the Torah will survive. Human beings cannot fathom the mind of God, he concludes. God is altogether too great for that. Baumgarten, however, interrupts him, objecting that the topic under discussion isn't God's mind but His Covenant with the Jews. "We don't have to fathom the mind of God…We're not *concerned* with its mind. This is covenant. We don't have to fathom *that*…We simply have to determine whether He's in breach of its terms" (51:16-51:34). Shortly thereafter he expresses his opinion that God is guilty because the Covenant promises to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people, yet the survival of the people is now in grave doubt. Schmidt returns to his claims about not fathoming the mind of God, Baumgarten his counterargument that it's not about God's mind but His Covenant with the Jews. Later another inmate, a professor of physics, challenges Schmidt's naiveté for believing that of all the peoples of the world, God loves the Jews more dearly than any other. Why should He make a cosmos of millions of worlds if the Jewish people are the sole object of His love? Still later, he casts doubt upon the idea of God's wisdom and goodness by pointing to the Ichneumonidae wasp, which lays its eggs inside a living caterpillar, which dies a painful death when the grubs hatch and burrow their way to the surface. He implores the court to use its reason, to look at the world like men rather than infants.

After consulting, the judges prepare to render their verdict but are interrupted by Rabbi Akiba, who has remained silent until this moment. Early on in the program, Ezra Shapira described him as a *lamed vovnik*, one of the thirty-six righteous souls who bear the evil of the world on their backs; but his talk, a diatribe recounting God's unjust, cruel, and even genocidal commands throughout the Tanakh, seems more apropos of an atheist or a misotheist. Among other things, he reminds his fellows how God killed the firstborn of Egypt for Pharaoh's sins, the

painful death of a David's newborn son for committing the sin of adultery with Bathsheba, and the manner by which God commanded the Israelites to slaughter the Moabites and the Amalekites. They died according to His purposes, as we are dying even now, he says—in abject fear. What did they learn?

…..They learned that Adonai, the Lord our God—our God—is not good. He is *not good*. He was not ever good, He was only on our side. God is *not good*. Oh, at the beginning, when He repented that He had made human beings and flooded the earth—*why*? What had they done to deserve to deserve annihilation? What *could* they have done to deserve such wholesale slaughter? What *could* they have done that was so bad? *God is not good.* When He asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham should have said *no*. We should have taught our God the justice that was in our hearts. We should have stood up to Him. He is not good, He has simply been strong. He has simply been on our side. When we were brought here, we were brought by train. A guard slapped my face. On their belts they had written, *Gott mit uns.* "God is with us." Now who is to say that He is not? Perhaps He is. Is there any other explanation? What do we see here? His power, His majesty, His might—all these things, but turned against us. He is still God, but not *our* God. He has become our enemy. That's what's happened to the Covenant. He has made a *new* covenant with someone else. (1:17:17-1:19:18)

The guards arise soon after, and as Moishe is about to be dragged to his death, he asks Rabbi Akiba, "What do we do now? Now [that] God's guilty, what do we do now?" "Now—now we *pray*," Akiba answers. And indeed the inmates, both those selected and not, begin to recite the Kiddush.

I would argue that *God on Trial* has much to reveal to us about Levinas' motives and purposes. We have spoken of Levinas' prophetic mediation in terms of his outcry against the metaphysical idolatry of the West, which reduces God-talk to ontological considerations and thereby thematizes God. We have seen, as well, that this thematization is inimical to the project of ethics insofar as God becomes, or, perhaps better, is confineable within, a totality. *Esse* and *natura* reign supreme. There is no *Who* or *Why*, only the utilitarian *What* and *How.* Ethics disappears, as does man himself. Hence Levinas' outcry against totality, his remonstrance of Western man. We have only begun, by contrast, to address Levinas' remonstrance of *God*.

Rabbi Akiba's jeremiad resonates with Levinas' own thoughts on Job. How so? For one, his words provoke the listeners, many of whom are doubtless on the verge of dismissing God as irrelevant or "useless," to continue to think on God and His relationship to evil. He keeps God in the foreground of his listeners' minds as opposed to slipping away into abstraction. For another, it is as if he is striving to rile his listeners into some kind of action, to jar them from their paralysis—and his efforts are not in vain, as evidenced by Kuhn's intercession for his son. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, one suspects he is also attempting to provoke or even shame God, "defeating" Him by means of His own Scriptures. In this light, one cannot but think of Levinas' own writings on evil, in this case in his "Postface" to Philippe Nemo's *Job and the Excess of Evil*:

> Does the "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" of verse 38:4, at the opening of the speech attributed to God, where Job is reminded of his absence during the hour of Creation, merely reprimand the impudence of a creature who allows himself to judge the Creator? Does it merely expound a

> theodicy in which the economy of a harmoniously and wisely constructed whole houses evil with a regard limited to a part of this whole? Can we not understand this "Where were you?" as a record of truancy, which can only make sense if the humanity of the human being stands in fraternal solidarity with Creation, that is to say, if man is responsible for what was neither his I nor his work, and if this solidarity and this responsibility for everything and for everyone—which is impossible without pain—is spirit itself? (180)

Does Levinas *truly* believe that the Shoah is simply a case of human truancy? Or is he placing such monolithic emphasis on *human* responsibility so as to shame God into an answer? For even if one argues that God, qua infinity, qua *Otherwise*, precludes Him from omnicontrol, does that thereby let Him off the hook? Is it not also the case that God, realizing the potential for evil resulting from a "kenotic creation," might have restrained Himself? In a way, are we not back to the arguments in *God on Trial?*—Specifically, to the arguments about human free will. Is freedom so inherently valuable as to justify a Shoah? Is not God in some sense accountable even in a kenotic creation?

In order to more fully answer these questions, however, we must take a step backwards, as it were, and explore in greater depth certain key Levinasian concepts, such as totality and infinity, kenosis, and maternity and bearing.

CHAPTER 2

SELECTED KEY CONCEPTS

Ethics for Levinas has ultimately to do with the relational questions of the *Why?* and *Who*? as opposed to the pragmatic questions of the *How?* and *What?* "For [him], the question is not 'what is?' but 'what is *better*?,'" David Patterson says in a related vein.[34] This is not to say, however, that the former, relational considerations are divorced from the latter, pragmatic ones; in point of fact, such an assumption is the fatal error made by the majority of philosophies and theologies, whether atheistic, theistic, or agnostic. To couch the issue in terms of Buber's *I and Thou*, "Without [the I-It mode] you cannot remain alive; its reliability preserves you; but if you were to die into it, then you would be buried in nothingness….And in all seriousness of truth, listen: without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" (83, 85). The ethical cannot flee into abstraction or spirituality, cannot divorce itself from the concrete and temporal. Indeed, as Levinas argues, only a being possessing concreteness and temporality can in fact be ethical. "Existence of itself harbors something tragic which is not only there because of its finitude," he maintains. "Something that death cannot resolve."—And this "something," David Patterson explains, is *responsibility*. Namely, the responsibility of one person for another.[35] But this is to get ahead of ourselves.

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[34] Class notes, HUHI 7134: Advanced Topics in European Thought, Culture, and Society (spring 2016).

[35] *Existence and Existents*, 5. As David Patterson explains in this regard, "There is no better place [than the material world]; only here, in the flesh and blood world, is sacrifice possible." This all-important notion of *responsibility*, what is more, transcends even death, inasmuch as it is infinite. (Class notes, HUHI 7134: Advanced Topics in European Thought, Culture, and Society [spring 2016].)

Ethics, for Levinas, cannot be understood apart from two interrelated terms: totality and infinity. The former precludes the possibility of ethics and is, in fact, what ethics militates against. The latter, by contrast, is the very wellspring of ethics and indeed mankind itself; without Infinity, man would not be man—that is, man would "not be able to begin history, to break the block of being stupidly sufficient unto itself, like Haman drinking with King Ahasuerus." Nor would mankind "be able to exorcise fatality, the coherence of determined events."[36]

So: what does Levinas mean by these two all-important terms?

Levinas' conception of totality resonates with Buber's I-It mode: "In the It-world causality holds unlimited sway. Every event that is either perceivable by the senses and 'physical' or discovered or found in introspection and 'psychological' is considered to be of necessity caused and a cause." Hence the connection Buber makes between the "biologistic and historiosophical orientations of this age" and its unprecedented "faith in doom" (*I and Thou*, 100, 105). Likewise, Levinas maintains that "Totalization is accomplished only in history—in the history of the historiographers, that is, among the survivors." Totalization implies a universal History, which in turn renders even the life and death of the individual existent "into a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system" (*Totality and Infinity*, 55-56).

What, then, is the antidote to the totalization of God, man, and world? How might we undo the dehumanization of contemporary life?

The first step, Levinas might say, is to acknowledge that totalization begins in our minds; in the very process of *knowing itself*.—Or, perhaps better, in the obsession with a certain *kind* of

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[36] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, pp. 30-50 (30).

knowing. Behind our ideal of "epistemic distance" and "objectivity" lurks a desire for a knowledge without accountability. We want to know life, human and otherwise, in all its debased and exalted details, but without risk. Above all, we wish to evade the risk of *accountability*. Eschewing accountability entails calculation—we weigh the odds and consider every angle so as to apprehend everything *without* compromising our solipsistic insulation. As Levinas would say, we wish to maintain our pure and resolute sameness.

Ironically, this tendency calls to mind the impassibility of God: Like and unlike the God of classical theism, we do not wish to allow ourselves to be changed by the knowledge we acquire. We do not wish to be called to account or to question our own existence. We wish merely to expand ourselves, to appropriate reality to the Same. This sort of knowledge, Levinas avers, lies at the root of all violence. "It will no longer leave the other in its otherness but will always include it in the whole, approaching it, as they say today, in historical perspective, at the horizon of the All. From this stems the inability to recognize the other person as other person, as outside all calculation, as neighbor, as first come."[37]

Hence Levinas' claim in *Totality and Infinity* that "The idea of totality and the idea of infinity differ precisely in that the first is purely theoretical, while the second is moral." And if totality precludes the possibility of ethics, infinity provides its very ground: "It is necessary to have the idea of infinity, the idea of the perfect, as Descartes would say, in order to know one's imperfection…Thus this way of measuring oneself against the perfection of infinity is not a theoretical consideration; it is accomplished as shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise" (83-84).

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[37] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, pp. 30-50 (34-35).

But is the idea of infinity merely that and no more? An abstract moral standard?

In a word, *No*.

"We propose to call "religion" the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality," Levinas declares in *Totality and Infinity* (40). And herein lies the seed of what I will call a *Levinasian cosmology.*

If totality represents a system—whether theological, philosophical, scientific, religious, or political, along with the *reductionisms* appropriate thereunto—infinity is about relationality; or, rather, a two-dimensional relationality including a vertical, Divine-to-human pole and a horizontal, or human-to-human, pole. The two poles are inextricably bound; to separate one from the other is to fatally undermine ethics itself.

Let us consider first the Divine-to-human pole. Comparing the Hellenistic and Hebraic cosmogonies, Levinas observes that "The great force of the [Biblical] idea of creation…is that this creation is *ex nihilo*—not because this represents a work more miraculous than the demiurgic informing of matter, but because the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from the father, but is absolutely other than him" (63). The created order—including and in particular man—is completely separate from God, wholly *other*. The fetus is not another "organ" of its mother, an extension of her biology, but something other, a complete person unto her/himself; only in this way can there exist a genuine *relation* between mother and child. Otherwise maternal love would be little more than solipsism, a reappropriation of the Same.

In this same vein, Levinas contends that man is "naturally atheist," which has as much to do with ontology as epistemology: Only by virtue of the fact that man exists independently of God's being (contra Parmenides and Hegel, e.g.) is he an individual. What is more, such is the degree

of man's separation from God that he is in no wise "epistemologically coerced." Neither theism nor atheism in any senses of the terms, that is, is a foregone conclusion; the relation with God is not a question of discerning the evidence aright. Rather, this relation transcends evidence or knowledge as such. It is more (though not entirely) a question of vigilance, sensitivity, and desire. "It is not as if something were 'given' and this were then deduced from it. This is what confronts us immediately and first and always, and legitimately it can only be addressed, not asserted," to borrow once again from Buber's *I and Thou* (129). Only a being open to being addressed—"Ready, not seeking, he goes his way"[38]—may enter into relation with God. And, of course, only a truly separate being, fully other, may be addressed or address in turn. Writes Levinas: "It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with itself. We name 'will' a being conditioned in such a way that without being *causa sui* it is first with respect to its cause. The psychism is the possibility for such a being" (*Totality and Infinity*, 58-59).

Another key passage speaks of God's transcendence in ethical/relational terms, defining it as "a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance" (41-42). And while it also applies to the human-to-human relation, militating against the possibility of appropriating the Other, of reducing her/him to sameness, it is grounded, so to say, in the God-to-human relation. How so? Insofar as ethics, as we have stressed, would not be possible without an "infinite" distancing on God's part. And yet it is more than mere distancing; it entails, above and

[38] Buber, *I and Thou*, 128.

beyond that, a radical self-limitation on God's part. "Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being," Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity*. "Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a space for a separated being exists divinely" (104). Levinas' use of the word *contraction* calls to mind the Kabbalistic idea of *tstimtsum*, the radical self-limitation or withdrawal undertaken by God prior to the creation of the cosmos. The contrast with totality and totalization cannot be overstressed: Totality objectifies, reifies, and appropriates everything, leaving no space for a genuine other; Infinity, by contrast, calls itself into question, as it were, for the sake of the other, sacrificing its self-regard that the other might have the space to be and to grow and to come in its own time. Far from suggesting mere passivity, however, in this process of self-limitation Infinity unleashes the dynamism of ethics. As Richard A. Cohen so excellently puts it, "*Infinity* bursts, breaks, ruptures, disturbs, troubles, traumatizes, awakens, inspires, ruins, obsesses, and otherwise exerts the pacific force of a 'more' ('greater,' 'nobler,' 'better') on the less."[39] This self-giving and –limiting love, not power, is the essence of the God of Biblical theism, as Levinas argues: "By contrast with totalization we have called it religion. Multiplicity and the limitation of the creative Infinite are compatible with the perfection of the Infinite; they articulate the meaning of this perfection."[40]

Perhaps the most efficacious explanation of *tsimtsum* is to be found in Buber's *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*. He begins with a seemingly abstract line of questioning: If God is

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[39] "Some Notes on the Title of Totality and Infinity." In *Levinasian Meditations*, 107-27 (111).

[40] *Totality and Infinity*, 104.

infinite and eternal, what place is there for a world separate from God? "The Kabbala [*sic*] answers: God contracted Himself to world because He, nondual and relationless unity, wanted to allow relation to emerge; because He wanted to be known, loved, wanted; because He wanted to allow to arise from His primarily one Being, in which thinking and thought are one, the otherness that strives to unity" (119). Yet this contraction of God does not imply the sort of withdrawal associated with the watchmaker god of Deism, who creates and then withdraws to observe the cosmos from a literal and metaphorical distance; God also remains attentive and open to His creation, a "Most Moved Mover," to borrow once more from Heschel. As Buber explains, "[God] Himself, as far as He has sent it forth out of Himself, has clad Himself in it, dwells in it, He Himself in His Shekinah has His fate in the world" (119-20). Buber then raises another trenchant set of questions, all of which center around the need for a *material* creation. Why should God not be content for His creation to exist ideationally, as pure spirit? "Why must the act bring forth beyond itself ever 'lower,' more distant, shell-enclosed spheres, down to this obdurate, troubled, burdened world in which we creatures, we things live?" Why, in short, must man be soiled by materiality, by the egregious needs and limitations of bodily existence? "And it is answered, God wanted to be known, loved, wanted, that is: God willed a freely existing, in freedom knowing, in freedom loving, in freedom willing otherness; *he set it free*." As a result of this *tsimtsum*, "contradiction," the power shed by God "flooded" the created order—"Becoming broke forth out of being, what the Kabbala [*sic*] calls 'the mystery of the Breaking of the Vessels' took place. Sphere extended itself out of sphere, world climbed away over world, shell joined itself to shell, unto the limit of the transformations" (120-21).

In a footnote, Buber cites a brief passage from Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. The original text (Scholem's, i.e.) is worth quoting in full for its deeper explanation of the term *tsimtsum*:

> [Isaac] Luria's theory…is based upon the doctrine of *Tsimtsum*, one of the most amazing and far-reaching conceptions ever put forward in the whole history of Kabbalism. *Tsimtsum* originally means "concentration" or "contraction," but if used in the Kabbalistic parlance it is best translated by "withdrawal" or "retreat." (260)

Scholem goes on to relate that Luria's concept of *tsimtsum* apparently has its origins in Midrashic teachings dating to the third century describing God's residence in the Temple, i.e., the Holy of Holies, in terms of a contraction of His being to a single point in space. Ironically, Luria intends the reverse of this idea—"not…the concentration of God *at* a point, but his retreat *away* from a point" (260). And the purpose of this contraction, as we have already indicated, is best understood ethically rather than ontologically. The true significance, that is, is that God's first creation, an emptiness or nothingness, is an *ethical* act, a limitation undertaken for the sake of something radically *other* than God. Scholem, it must be acknowledged, seems not to consider it from this perspective, focusing more on the practical effects of this process:

> The first act of all is not an act of revelation but one of limitation. Only in the second act does God send out a ray of his light and begin His revelation, or rather His unfolding as God the Creator, in the primordial space of His own creation…and but for this perpetual tension, this ever repeated effort with which God holds Himself back, nothing in the world would exist. There is fascinating power and profundity in this

> doctrine. This paradox of *Tsimtsum*—as Jacob Emden has said—is the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing. (261-62)

For our purposes here, to say again, it is of far greater importance to consider the act of *tsimtsum* as a revelation of the *Who* of God rather than a pragmatic exploration of the *how* and/or *what* of His "nature" or ontology.

Any attempt to establish a correlation between Levinas' talk of Infinity and the Kabbalistic idea of *tsimtsum*, however, is problematized not merely by the closely-related idea of the "Shattering of the Vessels," which has no analogue in Levinas' thought; infinitely more damning is the monism inherent to the idea of *tsimtsum*. Michael Fagenblat's *A Covenant of Creatures* acknowledges that while there are several scholars, including Oona Eisenstadt, Catherine Chalier, and Charles Mopsik, who discern a correlation between infinity and *tsimtsum* similar to the one being elucidated here, the connection is, when all is said and done, an *abortive* one because of this implicit monism:

> Lurianic Kabbalah explains evil by inscribing it in the primordial creative act, whereas Levinas denies that evil has any creative value or that it can be sanctified at all. Levinas and Luria cannot be reconciled because Luria is a monist for whom the cause of all being and the end of all being are one, whereas Levinas is a monotheistic moral dualist for whom evil is separate and other than God. (61)

If this were not bad enough, Gershom Scholem's discussion of *tsimtsum* only confirms Fagenblat's criticism:

> The existence of evil *in potential*, indeed, of Satan himself, is rooted in God; but whereas prior to *tsimtsum* it was included in the light of the Infinite, which

> contains the seeds of darkness, evil become progressively more independent during the course of a dialectic process in which, on the one hand, God continually restricts Himself through repeated acts of *tsimtsum* and, on the other, He manifests His potencies by means of the Sefirotic system. (*The Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 82-83)

As Scholem goes on to observe:

> The question as to why God did not create a perfect world, Himself being perfection, would have seemed absurd to the Kabbalists of the Lurianic school: a perfect world cannot be created, for it would then be identical to God Himself, who cannot duplicate Himself, but only restrict Himself. Precisely because God cannot reproduce Himself, His Creation must be based upon that estrangement—one might indeed employ the Hegelian term *Entfremdung*—in which evil is embodied within Creation so that it may be itself. (ibid, 83-84)

A question immediately arises: Need the idea of *tsimtsum* as God undertaking a withdrawal for the sake of the created order entail a shedding of power which then "floods" the cosmos, resulting in the "Breaking of the Vessels" and the sundering of the created order? Are these two ideas *necessarily* related?

Let us return to Levinas' talk of atheism:

> The marvel of creation does not only consist in being a creation *ex nihilo*, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself in question. The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being. And this implies precisely atheism, but at the same time, beyond

> atheism, shame for the arbitrariness of the freedom that constitutes it. (*Totality and Infinity*, 89)

Let us recall, too, Scholem's final observation in the preceding citation from *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead*: "Precisely because God cannot reproduce Himself, His Creation must be based upon that estrangement—one might indeed employ the Hegelian term *Entfremdung*—in which evil is embodied within Creation **so** that it may be itself" (83-84).

What are the necessary conditions for freedom? Specifically, what are the necessary preconditions for human freedom in the sense Levinas is describing? Must man somehow be both good *and* evil in order to be free? And what does this imply about man's origins?

And let us go one step further: If God enters into relationship not only with man but with creation itself, as Elizabeth Johnson and others argue, what qualities or traits would make possible that relation? Can the created order be said to possess freedom? Animals, plants, cells—even minerals? And if so, what does this imply about the *origin* of the created order? What preconditions are necessary in order for creation itself to be free? Must the creation be permeated with good as well as evil in order to be free? Or, perhaps better—what are the necessary preconditions for *freedom itself*?

While there is no doubt that Levinas was at least familiar with Kabbalah—if only through his encounter with Chouchani—it may well be that it was Fyodor Dostoevsky who played a key role in Levinas' idea of infinity and its resonance *tsimtsum*. Could it be that Dostoevsky's *kenotic Christianity* influenced Levinas and that, through his appreciation of kenosis, he developed a respect for *tsimtsum*, itself a closely related idea to kenosis? (At the least, could Dostoevsky's

kenotic Christianity have inclined Levinas, consciously or no, to conceive of infinity in terms reminiscent of *tsimtsum*?) Could it be, what is more, that Levinas' conception of infinity anticipates current ideas regarding the idea of a "kenotic creation"-?

To put it differently: Perhaps Levinas' essay "Judaism and Kenosis" may shed some light on the idea of infinity and its connections to *tsimtsum*.

I believe that Levinas' idea of infinity is indeed influenced by the idea of *tsimtsum*, albeit generally as opposed to literally and down to every last detail; and, what is more, I believe that Levinas came to his appreciation for the idea of *tsimtsum* through his love for Dostoevsky and his kenotic Christianity. He saw the *connection* between kenosis and *tsimtsum*.

To begin, it must be stressed that Levinas conceives this withdrawal or contraction on God's part not (primarily) in ontological terms but as a sort of radical orientation towards the other—i.e., an ethical act, a loving act ("love without concupiscence," i.e.). This act involves a calling into question of God's own self. God is infinitely distant, but this distance does not undermine the relation; it *protects* the relation. God is non-thematizable in essence, to put it crudely, but He gives Himself over to the *possibility* of thematization insofar as He reveals Himself to man (through Torah and the histories it preserves), gives His Name (risking its appropriation and abuse), and suffers with man's sufferings. Levinasian transcendence protects man, and yet it does not protect God—not fully. God "stoops down" and considers human suffering from close up; what is more, He makes the world dependent on human collaboration. In the process, He puts His will, His plans, and even Himself—insofar as he co-suffers—at risk. Levinas says as much in "Judaism and Kenosis."

Before we address this essay, however, we must consider a fleeting and seemingly inconsequential allusion in Levinas' roundtable discussion in *Is It Righteous to Be?* wherein he equates kenosis with the Jewish idea of "the universality of the common element in all human beings, and the universality of what is *for* human beings. This is how I understand Christianity: to live and die for everyone" (257). Levinas rightly sees in Christ's kenosis (and death) an expression of living "for-the-other" that, like the face of the Other, summons man to a life characterized by the radical orientation towards the Other. Kenosis, the emptying of power and self-regard, is sacrifice. *Radical* sacrifice, a concept, we shall see, at once problematizing and problematic, for God as well as man. And this is precisely the subject of "Judaism and Kenosis."

Levinas begins this remarkable (and sadly overlooked) essay by noting the explicitly Christian expression of this idea of kenosis—namely, Philippians 2:6-8. He goes on to observe that "…kenosis also has its full meaning in the religious sensibility of Judaism[, as] demonstrated in the first instance by biblical texts themselves." More crucial to our purposes, he goes on to suggest a connection between kenosis and the all-important idea of *bearing* set forth in *Otherwise than Being*: "Terms evoking Divine Majesty and loftiness are often followed or preceded by those describing a God bending down to look at human misery or *inhabiting* that misery" (101). He proceeds to cite various psalms wherein Divine humility is key, stressing that their importance for Judaism is revealed by the fact that they have incorporated into Jewish liturgy. Of one such passage, Psalm 68:5-6, he observes, "Most remarkably, here that humility means mainly the proximity of God to human suffering" (102). Divine humility, that is, not as an end in itself or an "attribute" but for the sake of the Other—specifically, the *sufferings* of the Other.

The essay relates the parable of God and the Moon, wherein the Moon enters into an exchange with God over her diminished status. Initially the two seem to be equal, but at some point God requires her to "contract" herself, as it were, and assume the status of a lesser light. In the end, the Moon breaks off the debate, but not because she has acquiesced; hers is, rather, a "dissatisfied silence," as Levinas says. The parable thereby makes manifest the ambiguity of greatness-in-humility, which to avid readers of Levinas recalls his response to Paul Ricœur's disparaging "'Your ''I'' has no esteem for itself.'" Levinas acknowledges the problematic nature of the for-the-other, which "can, of course, appear as a form of subjection, as an infinite subjection."[41] How strange that autonomy is predicated on the complete and utter *surrender* of said autonomy for the sake of the Other! Yet if this is problematic in *human* terms, how much more so when applied to *God*? For rather than rebuking the Moon or seeking to overcome "this residue of the stubborn contention of a nature persevering in its being, imperturbably asserting itself," God assumes responsibility for the Moon's dissatisfaction. "Here is the humility of God assuming responsibility for this ambiguity," Levinas explains. "The greatness of humility is also the humiliation of greatness. It is the sublime kenosis of a God who accepts the questioning of his holiness in a world incapable of restricting itself to the light of his Revelation" (105). This interpretation, let us take care to note, is borne out in rabbinical literature itself; as for instance in Rabbi Simeon Ben Laquish's commentary on Numbers 28:15, which stresses the timing of the prescribed sacrifice of the goat, observing that "'The Holy One, blessed be He, says, in effect: The goat must serve for me to be forgiven for having reduced the size of the Moon'" (105).

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[41] "In the Name of the Other." In *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 188-99 (192).

Levinas sees in the Parable of the Moon a picture of Israel's predicament in history: This tiny, insignificant people, like its God, likewise undertakes a kenosis for the sake of the world. Hence its lunar calendar, which not only recalls the Parable of the Moon but stands in stark contrast to the solar calendar of the nations of that time. "Perhaps it was necessary that among the categories of ontology—or despite these categories—the category 'Israel' should arise, in order that the notion of a smallness as great as—or greater than—greatness should take on meaning" (104). This bespeaks not only the idea of Israel as the testament people, the people of witness, but—dare we say it?—as the "incarnation" of God in the earth.

Turning from the Scriptures and Rabbinic literature per se, Levinas finds evidence for kenosis in the writings of the Lithuanian rabbi Haim of Volozhin (1759-1821)—specifically, in his *Nefesh Hahaim* ("The Soul of Life," i.e.). This text becomes the focus of the remainder of "Judaism and Kenosis." In his contextualizing remarks on *Nefesh Hahaim*, Levinas takes pains to note that while the Torah was of course the primary source, "…it was a reading of those texts through the problematic and the hermeneutic of the Talmud, using the kabbalah of the *Zohar* and that of the sixteenth century (which is called the kabbalah of *Safed*) as points of reference. And there is nothing in that study that comes from modern philosophy!" (107).

The text stresses the ambiguity inherent to the Scriptural and rabbinic treatments of Divine power—an ambiguity, what is more, that finds an analogue in *human* power. Is not man, after all, made in the image of God? Is it so incomprehensible, then, that kenosis characterizes Divinity *as well as* humanity? But while the commonality of kenosis to God and man alike may seem simple and straightforward (due to the *Imago Dei*, i.e.), the idea of kenosis itself, especially

insofar as God is concerned, *is*, to say again, both problematic and problematizing. Such is the subject of *Nefesh Hahaim*, at least in Levinas' reading.

What seems most striking to Levinas is the essential role of Divine kenosis in the creation of humanity, which, in turn, makes God *dependent* on man: "But it so happens, according to the doctrine presented in [*Nefesh Hahaim*], that this God…master of power, is powerless to associate himself with the world he creates and recreates, enlightens and sanctifies and maintains in being by that very association, without a certain behavior of man—a being created, but ontologically extraordinary." What is more, it is worth noting, Levinas describes this Divine kenosis in terms of *cosmology*: "And so it is that, in the cosmology of *Nefesh Hahaim* (if one may call its ordering of the world a cosmos), the power of the master of all powers is subordinate, to a certain extent, to the Human, as if omnipotence were not yet the privilege of the Divine!" (109). In this manner, Levinas underscores the essential role of kenosis in understanding not only God's relation to humanity, but—potentially, at least—God's relation to the cosmos itself. This, we cannot overemphasize, represents the key to Levinas and to his dictum "Ethics as first philosophy." Kenosis—ethics *par excellence*, "love without concupiscence,"[42] "responsibility of an I for a You,"[43] "responsibility which can extend all the way to persecution"[44]—is the key to cosmic and human origins, and therefore to every aspect of human life—science, history, theology, aesthetics, *everything*. Levinas' deceptively simple dictum constitutes a sort of "unified field theory" explaining the *Who?* and *Why?* of existence—*all* existence.

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[42] "In the Name of the Other." In *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 188-199 (193).

[43] Buber, *I and Thou*, 66.

[44] "Interview with Simon Malka." In *Is It Righteous To Be?*, 93-102 (100).

"What a remarkable ontology there is in this cosmology!" Levinas proclaims. "God associates or withdraws from the worlds, depending on human behavior. Man is answerable for the universe!" The significance of man's potential for goodness (obedience to the Torah, i.e.) should not be minimized, Levinas cautions; it is not just a question of his personal salvation—rather, "the being, elevation and light of the worlds are dependent on it…As if through that responsibility, which constitutes man's very identity, each of us were similar to *Elohim*" (111).

If this "cosmology" can be described in terms of a hierarchy, it is a complex and even confusing one: God is at once both Creator of all worlds and master of power, and therefore in once sense at the summit of the hierarchy; while man, clothed in flesh and at the mercy of being, seemingly is confined to the nadir. And yet God, deliberately limiting His power, is "lower" than man in that He makes His will dependent on human obedience, thereby subordinating Himself, in a very real sense, to man. "There is kenosis in this sub-," Levinas sums up (109).

The implications of this strange, almost convolutedly intertwined hierarchy are profound. "The last to be created and raised to the highest by the divine breath that gives him life, [man] carries within his being a residuum of all the levels of the creature" (110). This idea, which seems almost to echo the Darwinian principle that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," again drives home the significance of human action. Man becomes at once a partner to God in His work of *creatio continua*, an ambassador, a bridge, a conduit. One might even say that man becomes the Eve to God's Adam, i.e., "a helper against Him." God becomes subordinate to man in that God's hands in this ongoing work are loosed or bound depending on man's response.[45] This idea is shocking enough (especially for those who espouse notions of Divine timelessness,

[45] In a related vein, see Martin Buber's *The Eclipse of God*.

impassibility, and omnicontrol); but what is particularly fascinating is the idea that man's being contains "a residuum of all the levels of the creature." In order to draw down God's power into the earth, man would have to simultaneously partake in the created nature *and* the Divine nature. Man is both a descent of God and an ascent of the created order. This, in turn, accords rather nicely with the ideas of evolution and deep time. But we will return to this idea presently. For now, let us return to "Judaism and Kenosis":

> Man is, like the Creator himself, at the apex of the hierarchy of the worlds, the soul of the universe…The literal meaning [of man being a "living soul"] is more profound: man is the soul of all 'the worlds,' of all beings, all life, like the Creator himself. And this, not in the name of any pride or diabolical pretension, but by the will of God himself, who did not recoil from that equality with a human, or even from a certain kind of subordination with the human, a God who states in *Isaiah 51:16*, 'And I have put My words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of My hand, that I may plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth…'…The acts, words and thoughts of man have some power over the created world and the forces of creation! (111-112)

Levinas stresses, however, that it isn't simply Man, corporately or abstractly, who is responsible for the world; it is *I*, the individual, who must shoulder this unimaginable burden. "God has subordinated his efficacy—his association with the real and the very presence of the real—to my merit or demerit. And so God reigns only by the intermediary of an ethical order, an order in which one being is answerable for another" (112). Small wonder, then, that Ricœur reacts with such repugnance to Levinas' being-for-the-other and its implicit "infinite subjection."

We must recall, too, Levinas' repeated references to Dostoevsky throughout his body of work: "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible…It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky [*sic*] said, '*We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others*'" (*Ethics and Infinity*, 101, italics his). For the kind of behavior God expects and indeed *needs* of man is tantamount to a kind of holy folly, an idiocy.

Towards the end of "Judaism and Kenosis," Levinas turns to the subject of prayer in *Nefesh Hahaim*. Specifically, the question of prayer as an expression of being-for-the-other—and not merely for one's fellow humans and the created order but, as we shall see, for God Himself, once more reflecting the strange, almost surreal intertwining of high and low, God and man. Prayer, as a mode of being-for-the-other, is expressed in *Nefesh Hahaim* "as a forgetting of self in 'fear and trembling' for the other, for the worlds and the other human beings (an abnegation which also expresses a God giving up his omnipotence and finding satisfaction only in the for-the-other)" (114). Prayer is therefore a sacrifice to God, entailing what Levinas calls a "dis-inter-esting" of the self "in the etymological sense of the term." By prayer, the self seeks to alleviate not merely the suffering in the world but the suffering of God as well, inasmuch as God suffers with the created order. Ergo, the self need not beseech God for relief from its own sufferings, insofar as the self's sufferings are already God's. "Is it not said (in *Psalm 91:15*): 'I am with him in his suffering'? And does not *Isaiah 63:9* speak of God who suffers in the suffering of man?...One prays….to relieve the suffering of God, who suffers both for man's sin and for the suffering of his atonement….It is in God's suffering that the redemption of sin is realized—to the point of abridging suffering" (116).

Another crucial concept for Levinas, *maternity*—with its connotations of *bearing*—is inextricably bound to the closely-related ideas of kenosis and *tsimtsum*, which, as we have stressed, are so relevant to Levinas' understanding not only of the God-world relation but, by extension, of his entire ethical program besides.

The maternal connotations of kenosis and *tsimtsum* are borne out by Elizabeth Johnson, whom Denis Edwards cites in the following passage from *The God of Evolution*:

> …….[Jürgen Moltmann] suggests, rightly in my view, that we need to think of the creation of the universe as involving a "withdrawal" of God to make space for creation. God makes space for the emergence of a universe and for the evolution of living creatures. Elizabeth Johnson agrees with these insights and points out, "To be so structured that you have room inside yourself for another to dwell is quintessentially a female experience." She points out that every human being "has lived and moved and had their being inside a woman, for the better part of the year it took for them to be knit together." I find this experience of a mother making space in the womb for another a wonderfully rich and evocative image for the divine generativity by which the universe is brought forth from within God. (33)

Needless to say, this idea of a God who makes space for an Other to be and to grow and to come in her, his or its own time—a God who creates kenotically, in other words—has profound and undeniable resonances with Levinas' claims that infinity is nothing less than a "contraction that leaves space for the separated being" and thereby eschews the assimilating force of totality: "An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological

extension so as to leave a space for a separated being exists divinely," as he argues in *Totality and Infinity* (63, 104). Only *separated* beings can share a language and the possibility of a genuinely ethical relationship. Infinity's allocation of space for the Other is the primordial and supremely ethical act that makes possible *all* ethical behavior, serving as its wellspring as well as its "model," so to say. And let us be clear that this creative action (like ethics) is not a solitary act but is in fact a *creatio continua*, an ongoing process. Writes Jürgen Moltmann in "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World"[46]:

> From the creation, by way of reconciliation, right down to the redemption, God's self-humiliation and self-emptying deepen and unfold. Why? Because the creation proceeds from God's love, and this love respects the particular existence of all things, and the freedom of the human beings who have been created. A love that gives the beloved space, allows them time, and expects and demands of them freedom is the power of lovers who can withdraw in order to allow the beloved to grow and to come. Consequently, it is not just self-giving that belongs to creative love; it is self-limitation too; not only affection, but respect for the unique nature of the others as well. (147)

It is precisely this sort of creative, self-limiting love that Levinas has in mind when he speaks of "maternity," with its connotations of "bearing," in texts like *Otherwise than Being*. The love described by Johnson and Moltmann is implied in Levinas' talk of infinity and maternity, which are themselves linked inextricably together. Ethics is "bearing" for Levinas precisely insofar as

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[46] In *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (137-151).

the self must not only make space for the Other suffer but endure the "persecution" associated with the face of the Other: On beholding her or his face, one is struck not so much by the distinct features of that face but by its destitution, its suffering, its need. One is "commanded" to not leave the Other alone but to do whatever one must in order to alleviate her or his sufferings. Like pregnancy and birth, viewing the face of the other entails a "passivity more passive than passivity." One is compelled to embrace a *being-for-the-Other* comparable to that of the pregnant mother: Not only does one experience a sort of self-limitation or even self-humiliation, setting aside one's own comforts in order to give the Other space; one takes upon oneself the Other's burdens much as the mother endures the limitations and discomforts associated with bearing another life or lives within herself, doing what amounts to a sort of "double-duty" for her own physical needs as well as those of the life/lives within her. The persecution wrought by the face of the Other, Levinas maintains, is exactly like the maternal condition: "…it is maternity, gestation of the other in the same. Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne? In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks." Not merely gestation but birth, too, is a supreme expression of the Levinasian ethos; just as the mother endures the pain of labor and birth, experiencing not only the physical distress of the delivery but the loss of the intimacy with the child (thereby making an even greater space for the child, albeit in a more metaphysical and psychological sense), so, too, does the self sacrifice its happiness and contentment for the Other, as when she or he takes the bread from its own mouth and presents it to the Other. "Maternity, which is bearing par

excellence," Levinas concludes, "bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor" (75). Whatever the pain of the labor and/or birth, most mothers forget that when presented with their newborn child or children. Rather than dwelling on what she has sacrificed and/or the pain she has endured in childbirth, the mother's entire focus shifts to the needs of the child/children. She gladly bears this pain for the sake of the new Other she has borne. The self, likewise, assumes responsibility for the "persecution" of the Other, neither resenting nor seeking but thinking only of her or his needs. Just as the mother takes an incredible risk in releasing her child, sacrificing not only the intimacy but the level of control (i.e., her necessary ability to make choices for that life, as for instance in terms of the foods she eats—or not), the Self, too, risks a very great deal in embracing a *being-for-the-Other*. As the mother has no guarantee that her newborn child will be safe or return her love or feel gratitude for her sacrifice on her or his behalf, so, too, does the self risk the possibility that the Other will make the wrong choices or feel no appreciation. Much the same can be said of the Biblical God, who risks creating a being who may despise and abuse the gift of a truly separate or "atheist" existence and/or the name of its creator.

En bref, many of Levinas' key concepts are underlain and indeed permeated by the idea of kenosis and its "Jewish analogue," *tsimtsum*. True enough, it would take more time than we are permitted here to adequately defend this position, but we have at least made a start. Levinasian terms and ideas like said and saying, alterity, persecution and bearing, to name but a very few, also carry deeply kenotic connotations. However obliquely, later chapters of this work will touch on the essential "kenoticism," for want of a better word, inherent to the constellation of Levinasian motifs and terminology. For now it is enough to note that Levinas' reliance on the

idea of kenosis, with its Jewish analogue, *tsimtsum*, goes a long way to explaining his reticence to speak more overtly about God and the incredible burden he places on mankind.

In order to explore more deeply the full nature of kenosis and the "persecution" associated with *being-for-the-other*, we will now turn our attention to Fyodor Dostoevsky, the kenotic author *par excellence*—and not only thematically but methodologically as well.

CHAPTER 3

LEVINAS, DOSTOEVSKY, AND KENOSIS

Only apostate am I faithful…

—Paul Celan[47]

If Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* had a subtitle, Larry and Carol Lacy suggest, it would be something very close to "Or, Is It Possible to Love?" They offer a second possibility as well: "Is Love Too Hard?"[48] This of course recalls Levinas' Preface to *Totality and Infinity*: Are we duped by morality? We will see, before all is said and done, that for both men these questions are *inextricably linked*. For Dostoevsky and Levinas alike, love—specifically, self-giving and self-emptying love, or *kenotic* love—is the very essence of ethics. What is more, and in the same vein, love is the key to the problem of evil, an issue which permeates the work and thought of both men.—Although, as we have stressed time and again, in Levinas' case it isn't readily apparent; though that fact makes it no less profound.

Why, however, should Levinas be so reticent to discuss an event of such monumental significance as the Shoah? Observes Philippe Nemo in his Foreword to Salomon Malka's *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*: "For [Michael Kigel], Levinas's work is organized entirely around a hidden referent, the Shoah." Why *hidden*? Perhaps because discussing the issue is so very fraught with peril—whether the risk of thematizing the victims by inadvertently

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[47] Trans by Jon Felstiner in *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*,

[48] From a study of *The Brothers Karamazov* conducted by Drs. Larry and Carol Lacy in their home in March, April and May of 2012.

rationalizing their sufferings[49] and/or thematizing God by reducing Him to a "god of forces"; or, equally untenable for Levinas, that of exposing the dishonesty of ethics by failing to find a sufficient grounding (i.e., by anchoring it to totality or Being—thereby *negating* ethics—as opposed to infinity or the *Otherwise*). Continues Nemo: "I think this hypothesis is illuminating and indeed explains the genesis of his work….In fact, Levinas devoted all of his spiritual energy, all of his philosophical genius, to providing an entirely universal form to biblical ethics" (x-xi). Hence the shrillness of Levinas' voice, its ability to command—precisely *because* he is grappling with profound and profoundly interrelated questions, such as the nature of good and evil and the relationship of God to the creation. Precisely *because* so very much is at stake. *Have we been duped by morality?*—A question which, as with Dostoevsky, is tied directly to that of God.

Dostoevsky's influence on Levinas is profound, yet relatively little has been written on it. Few if any have even begun to explore the depth of their intellectual and spiritual kinship. To be sure, Levinas' talks more about Grossman in the various interviews anthologized in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, but he cites Dostoevsky—chiefly *The Brothers Karamazov*—in virtually every major work. I will argue that his relationship with Dostoevsky is at least as profound as the one he shares with Grossman; that both men are driven by a similar question—namely, the problem

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[49] Peter Bank expounds upon this risk of thematizing victims in *The Forgiveness to Come*: "In this sense, the juridical concept of 'crimes against humanity' would be at once a defense against—as well as a testimony of—the possibility that *nothing at all* remains sacred, least of all 'the humanity of the human being or man'" (73). Even the most well-intentioned attempts to safeguard humanity, then, can result in thematization. The very idea of a crime against humanity negates the sufferings of the flesh-and-blood victim by reducing him/her and/or his/her sufferings to an abstraction. Likewise, Michael Kigel, one of the translators (with Sonja M. Embree) of Malka's *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, writes in the Translator's Notes (xiii-xxvi) that Levinas' reluctance to speak directly on the Shoah stems from "…the solitude of a Jew surviving the Nazis, for whom silence is not a matter of noble discretion. The Said that would break this silence is more like a logical mistake that the survivor cannot make because of an extremely heightened logical sensitivity" (xviii).

of evil, particularly as it is expressed by Ivan in "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor"—and that each attempts to answer the problem in essentially the same fashion, i.e., via the idea of *kenosis*. We have already seen how the idea of the holy fool in Grossman resonates with Levinas' own views on ethics, and we have stressed that although Grossman's idea of "holy folly" is more secular, it cannot be denied that its roots are in the kenotic tradition so essential to Russian Orthodoxy. With our discussion of Dostoevsky, however, we will see that Levinas' views go beyond Grossman's to incorporate overtly religious elements, elements far closer to the Christian kenoticism so essential to novels like *The Idiot*, *Demons*, and most of all *The Brothers Karamazov*. "What led you to philosophy?" asks François Poirié. "I think it was first of all my readings in Russian, specifically Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky, above all Dostoevsky," comes the response. Later on in the interview, Levinas contrasts his own ethics with Buberian reciprocity by once again invoking Dostoevsky: "My point of departure is in Dostoevsky and in the phrase I quoted to you earlier: 'Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everything, and I more than the others.'"[50] Furthermore, as we explore Levinas' incorporation of Dostoyevskian kenoticism, we will also see note the connection he makes between holy folly and maternity—which, as we will see, are of a piece with Paul's talk of Christ's kenosis in his epistle to the Philippians.

If asked to identify Levinas with one of the Karamazov brothers, most would point to Alyosha. David Patterson and Val Vinokur, for instance, detect a profound resonance in the

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[50] "Interview with François Poirié." In *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 23-83 (28, 72).

words and deeds of Alyosha and the writings of Levinas.[51] Without disputing their similarities, I would go a step beyond that and argue that there is more than a little of Levinas in Ivan and Dmitri as well. Each brother, one might say, represents a crucial aspect of Levinas' thought: Ivan, the struggle with the issue of evil vis-à-vis God; Dmitri (the "sensualist") the necessity of incarnation, especially as outlined in *Existence and Existents*; Alyosha, the emphasis on kenosis and kenotic love. Before we begin our analysis of Ivan's kinship with Levinas, though, we should stress that Levinas' undeniable resonance with Dostoevsky is hardly a one-way affair: As Vinokur explains in *The Trace of Judaism: Dostoevsky, Babel, Mandelstam, Levinas*, "What I am proposing, then, is not only that Levinas is in some ways 'less Jewish' and 'more Russian' than many assume, but, perhaps more provocatively, that Dostoevsky may be 'less Christian' and 'more Jewish' than anyone has yet considered" (35-36). Should this thesis be so "provocative," though? We have stressed that Levinas' understanding of the God-world relationship owes much to the Kabbalistic idea of *tsimtsum*, which is, in turn, closely related to the Christian idea of kenosis. Might it be more accurate to say that Levinas and Dostoevsky share such a profound resonance because they are both *Biblical theists* who therefore share a common view of God and His relation to the world? *Tsimtsum* is, after all, a kind of "kenotic creation"; or, as the various writers in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* emphasize, creation *itself* is kenotic. And this is as true of Judaism as it is of Christianity. Writes Jürgen Moltmann in *God in Creation*:

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[51] From a personal conversation with David Patterson, date unknown. As to Vinokur, see *The Trace of Judaism*, p. 35: "…Levinas (at least in his notions of ethics and justice) evokes Alyosha."

> "The Shekinah, the descent of God to human beings and his dwelling among them, is conceived of as a division which takes place in God himself. God cuts himself off from himself. He gives himself away to his people. He suffers with their sufferings, he goes with them through the misery of the foreign land...." This is the way Franz Rosenzweig describes God's Shekinah among the people of his choice. But the same thing is true in its own degree of the indwelling of God in the creation of his love: he gives himself away to the beings he has created, he suffers with their sufferings, he goes with them through the misery of the foreign land. The God who in the Spirit dwells in his creation is present to every one of his creatures and remains bound to each of them, in joy and sorrow. (15)

For all the centuries of (Christian) caricatures of Judaism as "legalistic," then, the God of Israel is supremely and unashamedly *relational*—as opposed, say, to the God of classical theism, or that of Islam. Accordingly, it behooves us to question Vinokur's detection of Judaism in Dostoevsky as somehow "provocative"; as we have already seen (and will see again), Dostoevsky's kenotic Christianity is deeply indebted to Judaism. Buber, Rosenzweig, and Heschel all attest to the idea of a God who inhabits the sufferings of man. Levinas, too, albeit (as a rule) more guardedly. The relationship shared by Levinas and Dostoevsky is therefore synergistic and mutual.(—One might even say *anarchic* after a fashion, with a mutual interpenetration that defies the strictly chronological.)

Let us begin our analysis of Levinas' profound intellectual and spiritual intimacy with Dostoevsky with a discussion of the character of Ivan Karamazov.

Ivan is often appropriated by those of a stridently secular or skeptical mindset as a forward-thinking rationalist who recognizes the perniciousness of Biblical theism. For this writer, however, what Ivan rejects is not *Biblical* theism per se but *classical* theism. He recognizes the egregious failure of the immutable, impassible, omnicontrolling God of classical theism—of Augustine, Aquinas et al—to account for the existence of evil. He makes this entirely clear in his first conversation with Alyosha, explaining that whereas he has but a three-dimensional mind, there are thinkers "who doubt that the whole universe, or, even more broadly, the whole of being, was created purely in accordance with Euclidean geometry; they even dare to dream that two parallel lines, which according to Euclid cannot possibly meet on earth, may perhaps meet somewhere in infinity.'" He proceeds to unpack the significance of this idea for the question of God's relation to the created order, which is to say, Providence: He explains that it isn't God he rejects but the world He created—a world wherein evil and suffering will, when all is said and done, be seen as part of a Divine plan:

> "I have a childlike conviction that the sufferings will be healed and smoothed over, that the whole offensive comedy of human contradictions will disappear like a pitiful mirage, a vile concoction of man's Euclidean mind, feeble and puny as an atom, and that ultimately, at the world's finale, in the moment of eternal harmony, there will occur and be revealed something so precious that it will suffice for all hearts, to allay all indignation, to redeem all human villainy, all bloodshed; it will suffice not only to make forgiveness possible, but also to justify everything that has happened with men—let this, let all of it come true and be revealed, but I do not accept it and I do not want to accept it! Let the parallel lines meet even before my own eyes: I shall look and say, yes, they meet,

> and still I will not accept it. That is my essence, Alyosha, that is my essence, that is my thesis….My dear little brother, it's not that I want to corrupt you and push you off your foundation; perhaps I want to be healed by you," Ivan suddenly smiled just like a meek little boy. Never before had Alyosha seen him smile that way. (235-36)

Ivan claims he *wants* to believe; and some, like John Gray in *Seven Varieties of Atheism*, would argue that he *does* in fact believe. He is not an atheist, denying God's existence, so much as he is a misotheist, raging at God for His mismanagement of the world. The intellectual and emotional energies with which Ivan invests his arguments seem more apropos of a believer than an unbeliever; what is there to rage about if there is only the naked *is* of a purely materialistic existence? And is it not also true that hatred and love are but the opposing sides of the same coin? Is it not the case that only what one cares for/about intensely—i.e., loves—can become the object of one's deepest hatred?

Ivan reveals to Alyosha that he collects stories from local newspapers (much as did Dostoevsky himself) recounting particularly insidious acts of cruelty. One such story he is that of a little girl of five years who soiled herself in the middle of the night. Her infuriated parents "'beat her, flogged her, kicked her…until her whole body was bruises,'" then "'smeared her face with her excrement and made her eat the excrement'" before locking her overnight in the "'freezing cold'" of the outhouse (242). In their endnotes, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky explain that this story is based on an actual court case recounted by Dostoevsky in his *Diary of a Writer* (1876), adding that the defense attorney in the case, V. D. Spassovich, is the likely model for Fetyukovich in *Brothers Karamazov* (785, 2.5.4, n. 7).

One cannot but be reminded of Primo Levi's account of the Nazis' "excremental assault" on their victims in order both to bestialize and degrade the victims as well as to justify their actions: "…people like this deserve their fate, just look at how they behave. These are not *Menschen*, human beings, but animals; it's clear as the light of day."[52] The point here is that the parents' violence is likewise a calculated cruelty, serving not to correct but to degrade. And the fact that such instances are commonplace, Ivan goes on to argue—as would Levinas—defies any sort of teleological justification or theodicy. To ascribe a Divine meaning or utility to such sadism is unconscionable. What possible end could justify the brutality meted out upon this little girl? "'Without [suffering], they say, man could not even have lived on earth, for he would not have known good and evil. Who wants to know this damned good and evil at such a price? The whole world of knowledge is not worth the tears of that little child to ''dear God.'' I'm not talking about the suffering of grown-ups, they ate the apple and to hell with them, let the devil take them all, but these little ones!'" (242). This last point resonates quite profoundly with Levinas' talk of "useless suffering," as Richard A. Cohen explains in "What good is the Shoah? On Suffering and evil": "What can suffering mean when suffering is rendered so obviously 'useless' (*inutile*), useless to its core?...Jews were tortured and murdered for no other reason than that they were born Jewish—how else 'explain' the torture and murder of one million Jewish babies and small children? What had they done?"[53]

Ivan proceeds to relate the story of a general who commands his hunting dogs to devour an eight-year-old boy who unintentionally hurt the paw of his favorite hound. In Ivan's account,

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[52] *The Drowned and the Saved*, 111.

[53] In *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy*, 266-82 (269).

Jesus would bid the mother of the boy to embrace the general in forgiveness; after all, in the end his action will be seen to have served a higher Good. Ivan, however, cries out for justice. "'I need retribution, otherwise I will destroy myself,'" he avers. He confesses that he is hopelessly torn: That while some part of him wants to see all made well in the end, all the violence and suffering revealed to have served a higher purpose, at the same time another part recoils in horror and outrage from the notion that the victims' sufferings are thereby "'manure for someone's future harmony.'" He returns again to the theme of the suffering of innocent children: "'It's quite incomprehensible why they should have to suffer, and why they should buy harmony with their suffering. Why do they get thrown on the pile, to manure someone's future harmony with themselves?'" Ivan reiterates that on some level he wants to believe in that future higher harmony, "'when all in heaven and under earth merge in one voice of praise, and all that lives and has lived cries out: ''Just art thou, O Lord, for thy ways are revealed!'' On another level, as we have seen, he cannot reconcile his "Euclidean" mind to such an egregious utilitarianism, as if the Divine ends always justify the means, irrespective of how much violence and degradation the latter entail.—Which, as Levinas might say, is tantamount to God thematizing the world, reducing it to the Same as opposed to treating it as a genuine other.[54] Ivan's talk of his "Euclidean" mind, then, implies an inability to accept the sort of abstruse theodicies that subvert the value of the concrete, incarnate world and make a mockery of genuine ethics by rendering God or The Good monergistic in a causal sense. Such theodicies appeal to antinomy, i.e., to

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[54] True enough; Levinas argues that man is not God's other; but I think what he seeks to avoid is the sense of reciprocity entailed in Buber's I-Thou relationship. As we have seen, Levinas is profoundly iconoclastic. At the same time, however, it seems clear that his talk of infinity representing a refusal to become a totality is uttered very much with God in mind. Indeed, it might be argued that his entire ethos, which might be summarized as "a radical orientation towards the other," is predicated on God's undertaking such a radical orientation towards the creation. Cf. *Totality and Infinity* and "Judaism and Kenosis."

man's inability to comprehend the ways of God, emphasizing that what seems irreconcilable and impossible to man should be ascribed to Mystery. God's power and knowledge are such that He can overcome (reduce to the Same?) binaries like freedom and non-freedom, possibility and impossibility, good and evil. One might thereby describe such theologies as "non-Euclidean" insofar as they posit an order hopelessly beyond man's ken. Augustinian theology, the *sine qua non* of the predestinarian theologies of Thomism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism, forces one to affirm that evil is, in the last analysis, *good*: For Augustine, as David Ray Griffin explains in *God, Power, and Evil*, "there is only one thing that is clearly evil intrinsically, and this in sin, or evil willing," but in the end such evil "is only apparently evil" insofar as it serves the purposes of God. Ergo, "those things which seem instrumentally evil within a limited context or from a partial perspective are not evil within the context of the universe as a whole. Accordingly there is no genuine evil in reality" (71).

While such a view may be logically consistent, one must perforce inquire as to whether it accords with our experience. Does the reality of the Shoah, for instance, substantiate or cast doubt upon such a view? And what does the Shoah imply for the teachings of Jesus? If all is seen to be good in the end, why pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in Heaven (Matthew 6: 10)? For an unchanging, omnicontrolling God, *everything* that transpires, whether in realms heavenly or earthly, is His will! If God is immutable, impassible, timeless and omnipotent, and if He is morally perfect, the only conclusion is one *that violates our most basic intuitions, morally and otherwise, as humans*: that there is no *real* imperfection—or evil—in the cosmos. Only one blessed with a "non-Euclidean" mind could affirm that evil is, in the end, good. Only such a "non-Euclidean" mindset could affirm that ours is not to question why but to

humbly obey, that we cannot but accept that we are both free *and* predestined and that what *appears* evil, whether the fall of Satan or that of man, is ultimately Good: *O felix culpa!*

For his part, Levinas would argue that such a view affirms Existence—read *power*—over existents: "it is to subordinate the [ethical] relation with *someone*, who is an existent…to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom." It stands to reason that Levinas would see the God-world relation in the selfsame light; that for God qua Being, qua timelessness, qua omnicontrol, "'I think' comes down to 'I can'—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality" (*Totality and Infinity*, 45-46). One might go still farther, make the claim that for Levinas this move effectually equivocates God's power with His personhood, making God a slave to His own ontological attributes: Because God is timeless, immutable, and impassible, He cannot do otherwise than exercise omnicontrol, however oblique—thereby reducing the creation to the status of a mere object. Goodness is therefore monergistic: Every last flood, fire, famine and fart is in some sense the outworking of the will of God.

Paradoxically, this move thematizes God even as it posits His thematization of the creation. By depicting God in ultimately *ontological* terms, as Being or Power, God is appropriated by man! For while He is the Almighty, in grasping this fact man exercises a kind of power that not only sets him on an equal footing with God but in some sense leads to His appropriation by man. At the very least, God becomes a node on man's mental map of the cosmos; at worst, God becomes the justification of man's countless earthly totalities, including Fascism and Communism (to name but two), which in the end have their roots in this view of a God Who is

Power.[55] Insofar as man is made in God's image, and insofar as that image obtains in Power, then what can man *do* but emulate God by exercising dominion over his world, including his fellow men? Yet for Levinas, we have stressed, God's creation is not about almightiness but about making a space for the other, man (and indeed the cosmos itself, as we will see), to be and to grow and to come. To put it differently, it is about "separation" and "atheism": "Separation and atheism, these negative notions, are produced by positive events. To be I, atheist, at home with oneself, separated, happy, created—these are synonyms," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (148). *This* is the foundation for Levinas' ethic: A God who creates man "atheist and free"—i.e., kenotically—implies an ethic wherein the individual must likewise call himself into question for the sake of the other, accord him the same space to be and to grow and to come.

For now, however, let us return to Ivan and his "Euclidean" solution to the "non-Euclidean" theodicies of Augustine et al, all of which are united in their belief in a "Higher Harmony."

"'I don't want harmony, for love of mankind I don't want it,'" Ivan maintains. "'I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket'" (245). Such a harmony, as Levinas would doubtless say, necessarily implies totality rather than infinity. Insofar as totality is concerned—whether an abstract Good, a political State, or even the God of a theology like Augustinianism or Calvinism—the individual is merely a cog, a small part in a far greater process. He or she has value only with regard to the greater whole;

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[55] Cf. Jean Bodin (1530-1596), who writes in the *Six Books of the Commonwealth* that "'He who contemns [sic] his sovereign prince, contemns [sic] God whose image he is.'" Cited in *Communism, Fascism, and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations*, ed. Carl Cohen (272).

utility is the ultimate determiner of value. In Augustinian and Calvinistic theologies, what matters is one's usefulness to the Divine ends. Everything and everyone is in this sense thematized, reduced to mere means to God's ends. Genuine otherness is sacrificed, as the other is effectually rendered into an extension of God in some sense—as when, e.g., one prays to the predestinating God, inasmuch as prayer to this God is but God talking to God's self. Ethics, too, is sacrificed; how can there be truly ethical deeds if every action is predetermined by God, however indirectly? How can there be genuine evil if every act serves ultimately to further God's ends? If the Shoah, as writers like Erwin Lutzer claim, is but the outworking of God's will, then what does it *matter* that millions of lives were extinguished, often in the most degrading ways imaginable? What answer *is* there but the one Lutzer offers in *Hitler's Cross*: "The Almighty created the world; He created Lucifer, who sinned and became Satan; He is the one who supervises and directs everything that comes to pass through secondary causes" (51). As John Polkinghorne remarks on the idea of God working through secondary causes, "Any attempt to exhibit the 'causal joint' by which the double agency of divine and creaturely causalities are related to each other is held to be impossible, or even impious....Nothing is outside God's control, an assertion that poses obvious difficulties for theodicy. The veiled and mysterious nature of primary causality can only be matched by the veiled and mysterious claim that in the end all will be seen to have been well."[56]

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[56] "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action." In *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne, 90-106 (97).

This is the real meaning, to reiterate, of Ivan's ironic profession of having merely a "Euclidean" mind. Only a "non-Euclidean" mind can posit a reality wherein God is the cause of Evil and yet not culpable insofar as He works through secondary causes.

Ivan then proceeds to the infamous "Grand Inquisitor" chapter of Book Five, turning his energies against another possible answer to the question of evil: the so-called free-will defense. Evil, it is claimed, is the result of free will. God made the world and man free, and man chose to misuse that freedom, resulting in the suffering in which our world abounds. Essentially Ivan envisions a sort of trial in which Jesus is condemned by a world-weary inquisitor for choosing freedom of choice over freedom from suffering.

> 'But you did not want to deprive man of freedom and rejected [Satan's] offer, for what sort of freedom is it, you reasoned, if obedience is bought with loaves of bread? You objected that man does not live by bread alone, but do you know that in the name of this very earthly bread, the spirit of the earth will rise against you and fight with you, and everyone will follow him exclaiming: "Who can compare to this beast, for he has given us fire from heaven!" Do you know that centuries will pass and mankind will proclaim with the mouth of its wisdom and science that there is no crime, and therefore no sin, but only hungry men?"—that is what they will write on the banner they raise against you, and by which your temple will be destroyed.' (252-53)

The issue at the heart of the Inquisitor's charge is that free will and freedom from suffering are mutually exclusive. Hunger will always exist where there is freedom, inasmuch as man is a slave to his selfishness and solipsism. "'And if in the name of heavenly bread thousands and tens of thousands will follow you, what will become of the millions and tens of thousands of

millions of creatures who will not be strong enough to forgo earthly bread for the sake of the heavenly?'" (253). Does God care only for the spiritually strong? So it would seem! For the inquisitor, though, the weak cannot be thusly dismissed and damned. Accordingly, he informs Jesus, he and his ilk will "suffer freedom" by lying to the masses that they come in the name of God, ruling mankind in His name. By his very nature, the inquisitor argues, man wishes nothing more than to surrender his freedom. But you, he informs Jesus, did the very opposite: Rather than ruling over mankind, and thereby eliminating suffering and need, you increased that freedom many times over, opening the floodgates to still greater degrees of evil. "'Instead of the firm ancient law, man had henceforth to decide for himself, with a free heart, what is good and what is evil, having only your image before him as a guide—but did it not occur to you that he would eventually reject and dispute even your image and your truth if he was oppressed by so terrible a burden as freedom?'" (255). Power, he avers, is all that can overcome man's essentially slavish nature. By *eschewing* power, Jesus left mankind utterly helpless, in thrall to its baser nature. By eschewing the miraculous, which would have effectually coerced mankind to follow the good, Jesus guaranteed man's ongoing rebellion and idolatry. "'Respecting him less, you would have demanded less of him, and that would be closer to love, for his burden would be lighter. He is weak and mean'" (256). The inquisitor and his allies, then, will step into the breach, as it were, and assume power in the name of "'*miracle*, *mystery*, and *authority*,'" teaching the mass of mankind "'that it is not the free choice of the heart that matters, and not love, but the mystery, which they must blindly obey, even setting aside their own conscience'" (257). The inquisitor again reproaches Jesus for eschewing the power of the sword, for not following the example of mighty conquerors, "Tamerlanes and Genghis Khans," adding that

whereas even these mighty spirits failed owing to their own too-human need to be ruled, Jesus would have succeeded. Had you only accepted Satan's offer to make you ruler of the world, he says, "you would have furnished all that man seeks on earth, that is: someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience, and a means for uniting everyone at last into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill—for the need for universal union is the third and last torment of men'" (257). Instead, the inquisitors must bear this burden: "'There will be thousands of millions of happy babes, and a hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil'" (259).

Ivan has eliminated the "non-Euclidean" solution posed by classical theism, e.g., Augustinianism and Calvinism, which opts for a monergistic creation, which in turn renders "evil" only *apparently* so, insofar as it serves the Higher Harmony. Instead, he has opted for a "Euclidean" solution, i.e., an *earthly* totality; one wherein there is no freedom but no suffering either. His answer does not necessarily deny God's existence, but it renders Him essentially irrelevant to human life; if anything, his rulers retain the idea of God merely as a useful tool. Or, as Dostoevsky himself put it, Ivan's beliefs represent "'…a synthesis of contemporary Russian anarchism. The rejection not of God, but of the meaning of His creation.'"[57] Better that man rule himself, even if doing so inevitably entails the creation of a totality of some sort. Despite Ivan's protestations that mankind is debased and needs to be ruled, he sees no recourse but to entrust the governance of mankind to men. It would seem he feels that the burden placed upon these exceptional, fiery souls, these latter-day Tamerlanes and Genghis Khans, is somehow less

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[57] *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, 788. As we will soon see, the love of the creation—world as well as man—is tied inextricably to the love for God. Levinas stresses that you simply cannot have one without the other.

onerous or impossible than the burden resulting from Jesus' act of vouchsafing human free agency by refusing to make a display of naked power.

Ivan's solution to the problem of evil in "The Grand Inquisitor," it is worth noting, bears a striking resemblance to Walden Two, the utopian society depicted in B. F. Skinner's eponymous novel. The goal of this society is to eliminate unhappiness and inefficiency through an exceptionally subtle form of control, which is itself the fruit of Skinner's Behaviorism. "Here, on the contrary—here we can begin to understand and build the first Superorganism. We can construct groups of artists and scientists who will act as smoothly and efficiently as champion football teams," explains the community's architect, Frazier. "And all the while, Burris, we shall be increasing the net power of the community by leaps and bounds" (293). Per certain predestinarian theologies, the citizens will think they are performing free acts, when in point of fact the society, through various pedagogical and social techniques, has predetermined their desires. Frazier's ideas, Levinas would be quick to point out, cannot but call to mind an early definition of "totality" from *Totality and Infinity*: "The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy. Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknownst to themselves" (21).

The conversation between Burris, the narrator, and Frazier comes to a head in a passage worth quoting at length:

> "It must be a great satisfaction," I said finally. "A world of your own making." "Yes," he said. "I look upon my work, and, behold, it is good." He was lying flat on his back, his arms stretched out at full length. His legs were straight but his ankles were lightly crossed. He allowed his head to fall limply to one side, and I reflected that his beard

> made him look a little like Christ. Then, with a shock, I saw that he had assumed the position of crucifixion. "A joke's a joke," I said. "But I'm not joking." "You mean you think you're God?" I said, deciding to get it over with. Frazier snorted in disgust. "I said there was a curious similarity," he said. "Don't be absurd." "No, really. The parallel is quite fascinating. Our friend Castle is worried about the conflict between long-range dictatorship and freedom. Doesn't he know he's merely raising the old question of predestination and free will? All that happens is contained in an original plan, yet at every stage the individual seems to be making choices and determining the outcome. The same is true of Walden Two. Our members are practically always doing what they want to do—what they 'choose' to do—but we see to it that they will want to do precisely the things which are best for themselves and the community. Their behavior is determined, yet they're free." (295-97)

Frazier is less concerned with solving the problem of evil than he is with building a more efficient system, which entails the elimination of suffering—hence, one suspects, his half-joking imitation of Christ on the Cross. With the irrelevance of God commences the gradual irrelevance of good and evil. However idealistic the beginnings, *utility* becomes the overriding goal when all is said and done. Lovers of *I and Thou* will doubtless be reminded of Buber's distinction between prayer and sacrifice, on the one hand, and magic on the other: The former necessarily entail a genuine relation of an I to a You, a genuine give and take; whereas the latter wishes to exercise its power in the absence of any such relation, preserving its autonomy at the expense of the other (131). Magic is, at root, a desire to circumvent time—and *relation*—exactly as Levinas explains in *Existence and Existents*: "Magic is indifferent to duration. It is the chateau built in a

night, the sudden appearance of the gilded carriage on a stroke of the magic wand…For [the magician] is not involved in the instant in which the work is really effected; *he follows it from a distance*" (21, italics mine). The magician wishes to eschew involvement, to maintain his autonomy even as he works upon the world. Magic is of a piece with technique, and therefore technology. Hence the birth of the great totalities like Marxism, which for all their initial idealism quickly degenerate into totalities wherein relationality and ethics are subverted by technique and technology. "The improvement of the ability to experience and use," Buber avers, "generally involves a decrease in man's ability to relate [ethically]" (92).

And, in point of fact, Ivan's (and Dostoevsky's) concerns extend beyond the literary and metaphysical to include the political, pointing ahead to the great totalizing movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in particular Marxism, with which Levinas also wrestles. For all the abuses that came of it, it was borne of a spirit of beneficence and idealism. As Levinas says, "Marxism represented a generosity, whatever the way in which one understands the materialist doctrine which is its basis." Materialism as a totalizing -ism is one thing, but as an acknowledgement of man's material needs and the right of every human to not be denied those needs, it is indeed "sublime," as Levinas calls it.[58] The tragedy is that this "noble hope" inevitably deteriorated into a totality. Despite the death of God—or, better, the death of the god of forces—man remains "yoked into an inescapable process that he cannot resist," albeit "biologistic and historiosophical" as opposed to theological. Hence the rise of "the dogma of running down," which, after the fashion of the omnicontrolling God of classical theism, "offers

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[58] "Judaism and Revolution." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 94-119 (97).

you only one choice as you face its game: to observe the rules or drop out."[59] Hence, finally, the despair of modern man, who has simply (if unwittingly) exchanged one totality for another. "And the regime of charity becomes Stalinism and [complicitous] Hitlerian horror," writes Levinas. "That's what Grossman shows, who was there, who participated in the enthusiasm of the beginnings. An absolutely overwhelming testimony and a complete despair."[60] The point to stress is that Levinas acknowledges the *nobility* of the Marxist goal, however misguided in terms of its rejection of God or an *Otherwise*. Furthermore, in so doing he reveals his profound sympathy for Ivan and his "Euclidean" mindset *even as he demonstrates that the Euclidean/non-Euclidean dichotomy is a false one*—false, that is, insofar as it is alien to Judaism and its God-talk. Indeed, Ivan's Euclidean/non-Euclidean distinction betrays an unspoken devotion to the *classical* aspect of the Biblical-Classical synthesis. As if God could be understood in terms of a formula or a theology; *apprehended*, as in what Levinas calls the "temptation of temptation," which is the temptation of knowledge.

And let us not forget that whereas infinity is ethical, and therefore discursive, totality is theoretical and visual. There is no need for discourse in a totality; otherness is in the end assimilated to the sameness of The One. This is of a piece with our prior talk of Levinas as a prophet. Levinas' writings are prophetic insofar as they are "eschatological": He does not envision some future utopian totality wherein the "peace" of The One is attained. "[Eschatology] does not envisage the end of history within being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality," he argues in *Totality*

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[59] Buber, *I and Thou*, 105, 106.

[60] "The Proximity of the Other." In *Is It Righteous to Be?, 211-218* (217).

and Infinity. "The first 'vision' of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reveals the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a signification without contexts" (23). As David Patterson helpfully notes, what is revealed here is a set of very different modes of being: *seeing* versus *speaking*. Alexander the Great, he points out, came and *saw* and *conquered*. "Violence," he continues, "ensues when language ceases."[61] For of what use is discourse when the other is simply to be assimilated to the Same? Such assimilation may be (and almost always *is*, as in *Walden Two*) borne of a utopian vision, but biblical eschatology is *not* utopian; eschatology is about the other, and hence about affording a "glimpse," so to say, of the *Otherwise*. A piercing of the *is* in order that the *Otherwise* might be made manifest, perhaps it is best to say.

Ivan, it should be stressed, is "prophetic" ("eschatological") insofar as he recognizes the totalizing tendencies inherent to the project of theodicy, which objectifies the victims and their sufferings by reducing them to abstractions, an intellectual puzzle to be resolved on a theoretical plane. In this he does indeed betray a hope for "a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality." Tragically, however, Ivan sees no recourse but to endorse a literal, merely "earthly" totality. Hence the denial of freedom (or the *value* thereof) in the parable of the Grand Inquisitor. Yet on some level his anxieties persist, remaining unresolved even at the novel's end. Despite his enthusiasm for the totality of the Grand Inquisitor, one senses that on some level he is well aware of the bankruptcy of his "Euclidean" alternative. In the end, he concedes to Alyosha, what will save him from the inevitable temptation of suicide is not the strength of his philosophical vision but "The Karamazov force…the force of the Karamazov baseness" (263). It

[61] Class notes from HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016).

is worth noting in this same light that Dostoevsky was planning a sequel to *Brothers* wherein the future of the Karamazov brothers was to be revealed. Larry and Carol Lacy point to passages such as the following, which in their view represent the "seed" for this sequel. In the passage in question, Ivan is reassuring Alyosha that, contrary to his fears that his brother will find the nihilistic implications his philosophy unbearable and commit suicide, he will go on living: "'…I will also make you a promise: when I'm thirty and want ''to smash the cup on the floor,'' then, wherever you may be, I will still come to talk things over with you once more…even from America, I assure you'" (264).[62]

Dostoevsky and Levinas alike, *en bref*, share Ivan's horror at evil, and they likewise understand only too well what is at stake. *Can God and man coexist? Can they enter into genuine relation, or must one suffer thematization for the sake of the other? And if God must be sacrificed, what becomes of the good? Are we duped by goodness? Is everything permitted?*

—And this returns us to Dostoevsky's formulation of the problem in *The Brothers Karamazov*: *Is love possible?* Or, *Why is love so hard?* Indeed, Dostoevsky's epigram to *Brothers* implies this selfsame question: "'I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds'" (John 12:24). Levinas, as we will see, defines goodness as a kind of death to self; a setting aside of the self's desires and needs for the sake of the Other. The implications of such an ethics are profound indeed, a matter of nothing less than life and death. Hence Levinas' query in the opening of *Totality and Infinity*: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance

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[62] From a study of *The Brothers Karamazov* conducted by Drs. Larry and Carol Lacy in their home in March, April and May of 2012.

to know whether we are not duped by morality" (21). The understatement is as considered as it is prophetic, a rhetorical inversion intended to drive home the enormity of what is at stake.

That Dostoevsky and Levinas are united by this overarching concern is not so bizarre as it might sound. Levinas says that the truest "proof" for the existence of God would be a love entirely without self-regard, a giving without any thought of reward. Only in this fashion can there be hope of escaping the totality created by *esse* and *natura*. Or, as Dostoevsky says, "If there is no God, everything is permitted."[63] In this, too, Dostoevsky and Levinas are united. Despite the fact that people misread Levinas' talk of separation and atheism, the fact of the matter is that his philosophy comes to nothing without God—qua infinity, qua Otherwise, qua *Torah*. As Richard Cohen notes in "G-d in Levinas: The Justification of Justice and Philosophy," while philosophy generally dismisses or mocks the question "'Why philosophy?' (*OBBE* 157)," for Levinas "G-d demands philosophy because G-d demands justice. Indeed, G-d passes into the realm of human signification by means of precisely these demands, which themselves originate in a deeper dimension of the divine, namely, the disturbing anarchy of infinite responsibility one-for-the-other, in a proximity which is morality itself, and, again, 'the dimension of the divine.'"[64] If ethics begins with the self calling itself into question—*Is it righteous for me to be?*—this would seem to necessitate at the very least a God who questions; beyond that, as we will argue, it necessitates a God who calls *Himself* into question, undertaking a kenosis for the sake of His creation.

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[63] *The Brothers Karamazov*,

[64] In *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, pp. 173-194 (194).

Returning to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan, we have seen, becomes entrapped in a false dilemma. He believes, mistakenly as we will see, that one must embrace either a "non-Euclidean" view whereby God achieves the good through some "Higher Harmony" that relentlessly defies human comprehension (à la Augustine et al) or a "Euclidean" view wherein man more or less rejects God as useless, merely uses His name or His mystery to create a totality sans suffering but sans freedom as well. As we have suggested, Ivan's pathos is sincere and therefore persuasive. The reader is tempted—as were, no doubt, Dostoevsky and Levinas after him—to question whether an existence sans freedom is so terrible. Would it be better if God had begun by reducing humanity to an *It* and thereby eliminated the suffering and degradation of the billions of lives that have existed? Would a society founded by Ivan's Grand Inquisitor or Skinner's Frazier be such a terrible thing? Is freedom worth the cost?

Dostoevsky's answer to these questions is to be found in his very method and style and—dare we say it?—*raison d'être* as a writer. And, as we will argue in the proceeding chapter, this is perhaps why Levinas experienced so profound a resonance in reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. For Dostoevsky—whom Mikhail Bakhtin, the subject of our next chapter, describes as an author who *writes* kenotically, making space in various ways for his characters to have a life of their own—took seriously Ivan's objections and did his utmost to give them their due.—So much so, as Larry and Carol Lacy point out, that he sometimes feared he had *failed* to refute Ivan's argument, which in the end becomes an argument against God, i.e., His "uselessness" (*relationality* might be more apt) to man, especially in answering the problem of evil and

suffering.[65] *God may exist*, Ivan more or less concludes, *but He doesn't matter, inasmuch as He is either too abstract or too naïve to do anything about the suffering of mankind. Man, then, is better off without Him. Man should be his own end. If he retains God at all, it is for purely pragmatic considerations.*

Alexander Boyce Gibson makes much the same point in *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, arguing that Dostoevsky's faith "emerged from a cauldron of doubt" and that Ivan is in some sense the embodiment of that doubt. Dostoevsky's kenotic emphasis and style is such that he takes great pains to make Ivan not merely an entirely credible character but to endow him with a separateness that calls to mind Levinas' account of God's creation of man as "atheist." No mere mouthpiece, then, Ivan! Such is Dostoevsky's success, in fact, "that good critics have concluded that artistically at least he failed in his objective: he allowed Ivan to steal the show" (169).

Likewise, Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* essentially substantiates the Lacy's point. As he notes, Dostoevsky sought to reassure those who, like his friend the Jurist Konstantin Pobedonstev (1827-1907), feared that he had failed to properly refute Ivan's attacks. In a letter to Pobedonstev, Dostoevsky points to the teachings of Zosima in Book Six, which, he "incautiously" claims, were "designed specifically to answer the accusations of Ivan against God."

> Later, however, in an entry in his notebook set down *after* the work had been completed, he wrote that "the whole book" was a reply to the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor (27: 48). This remark indicates much more accurately the

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[65] From a book club reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* conducted by Drs. Larry and Carol Lacy in their home in March, April and May of 2012.

> linkages that exist between the dominant situation reflected in Ivan's poem and the conflicts of all but the most accessory and secondary characters. (850)

The "shorthand" of Dostoevsky's answer to Ivan is to suggest what might be termed an *alternative* to the "Euclidean" and "non-Euclidean" understandings of the God-world relation—one that is predicated not on ontology or epistemology but on the idea of *kenosis*. Rather than *coercing* belief, as by predestination or by overwhelming reason or evidence (both of which harkens back to what Levinas contemptuously calls Nietzsche's "good of forces"), this model suggests a God-world relation wherein God *persuades*.—Which is to say, God creates and governs *kenotically*, through self-limiting and -giving love. But what does this entail? We will explore this question in greater depth when we come to our discussion of Alyosha.

Frank goes on to stress that for Dostoevsky, the removal of God for whatever reasons, however sincere or idealistic, would lead to the extinction of morality. Dostoevsky insists upon the existence of the Biblical God but *recasts* the traditional (Western) understanding of His relation to the world. The question of the relation with this God parallels and is revealed by Dostoevsky in the trial and conviction of Dimtry:

> The central plot is carefully constructed so as to lead, with irresistible logic, to the conclusion of Dimitry's guilt; the accumulated mass of circumstantial evidence pointing to him as the murder is literally overwhelming. The fact remains, however, that he is innocent of the crime (though implicated by his parricidal impulses), and the reader is thus constantly confronted with the discrepancy between what reason might conclude and the intangible mystery of the human personality, capable even at the last moment of conquering the drives

> of hatred and loathing. The entire arrangement of the plot action thus compels the reader to participate in the experience of discovering the limits of reason. Only those among the characters willing to believe *against* all the evidence—only those whose love for Dimitry and whose faith, deriving from this love, are stronger than the concatenation of facts—only they are able to pierce through to the reality of moral-spiritual, as well as legal, truth in its most literal sense, and this motif illustrates why Dostoevsky could legitimately maintain that "the whole book" is a reply to the "Euclidean understanding" that created the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. (851)

In this manner, only those willing to *question* the purely epistemological or ontological—which entails a calling into question of themselves and their mode of being—will see through to the truth of the matter.

The Brothers Karamazov and *Totality and Infinity*, then, are united in that each insists that *(a.)* without God we are duped by morality and that *(b.)* the only viable solution to the problem of evil and suffering is to reformulate the God-world relation in such a way that *neither part*y in the relation is thematized. Dostoevsky and Levinas alike would agree that if there truly is no God, no *Otherwise*, man is trapped within the confines of a totality wherein *utility* is the sole arbiter of truth—the inane "'that's just the way it is' claimed by the Power of the powerful," as Levinas says. Only by virtue of Torah may the tyranny of *esse* and *natura* be transformed into a realm wherein the humanity of the human (i.e., his capacity for kenosis) is preserved.[66] Indeed,

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[66] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

the Torah itself represents a kind of kenosis, exactly as Richard Cohen argues in "Humanism and the Rights of Exegesis."[67]

Indeed, it is legitimate to see in *The Brothers Karamazov* the essence of Levinas' entire philosophy. To simplify things, let us consider only the three brothers, Ivan, Dmitri, and Alyosha. Ivan, we have argued, represents Levinas' own struggle with the question of God and evil via the Shoah. Alyosha's kenoticism, accordingly, represents Levinas' "answer" to this question. But what of Dmitri? Dmitri, we will argue, is no less influential for Levinas than his brothers Ivan and Alyosha, inasmuch as Dmitri's life illustrates one very crucial aspect of Levinas' thought: the importance of *incarnation* for ethics. In fact, we may go still farther: Dmitri, the self-styled sensualist, embodies Levinas' description of the journey from the solipsism of the *conatus essendi* to the kenosis of the *Otherwise*. For while each of the brothers experience his own struggle with this "Karamazov force," which may indeed be described (in part) as a "baseness," in Dmitri it is the most blatant. Before we proceed to discuss Alyosha and Levinas' answer to the question of evil, let us examine Dmitri in some depth in order to understand the process whereby one is freed from the absolutely vital yet potentially damning fleshiness or carnality or "baseness," even, of the *conatus essendi*.

In some ways, Dmitri is the most compelling of the brothers—a high claim indeed when discussing a writer so profoundly kenotic as Dostoevsky. This is because his growth and transformation is played out in no small detail before our very eyes. Our first in-depth encounter with Dmitri is via Alyosha in the chapter entitled "The Confession of an Ardent Heart. In

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[67] In *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy*, pp. 216-56. The Tablets of the Law, Cohen relates, were, as the sole product of God's hand, too *sublime* for mankind, too *coercive*; hence their destruction and collaborative re-creation with Moses. Even here, God "stoops low" so as to meet mankind where he is. This is of a piece with Levinas' insights in "Judaism and Kenosis."

Verse." Alyosha is en route to the home of Katerina Ivanovna Verkhovtsev, with whom Dmitri has become entangled in a complex game of "one-upmanship," we might say, after an act of pridefulness on his part. Dmitri is covertly observing Katerina's home from the safety of a decaying green gazebo, which is tucked away in the corner of a garden of about three acres. The scene abounds with the nature imagery so beloved by the Romantics: there are apple trees, maples, lindens and birches surrounding the perimeter of the garden. "There were rows of raspberries, gooseberries, currants, all near the fence as well," while the gazebo itself is surrounded by "a thicket of lindens and old currant, elder, snow ball, and lilac bushes" (103). Surely Dostoevsky's attention to the details of the scene, which might best be described in terms of Romantic naturalism, is intended to suggest something deeper about Dmitri the sensualist—namely, a potential for something far more than mere hedonism. Dmitri's profound love for beauty in all its forms, in fact, is tied to what might be termed his awareness, however dim, of the *Otherwise* than being. As the novel unfolds and Dmitri's person and history are laid bare for us, we cannot but be reminded of Levinas' analysis of the bodily and the sensual: "The signification of the gustatory and the olfactory, of eating and enjoying, has to be sought on the basis of the signifyingness of signification, the one-for-the-other."[68] Ethics, he goes on to stress, is a question of liberating the whole person from the comfort of the *conatus*. Only a being separate from God, capable of enjoying its separateness and relishing the pleasures of the world to which its separateness is tied, has the potential for genuinely ethical behavior—which, as we have seen, entails a setting aside of self-regard, a *pouring out* of the self, for the sake of the other. The for-the-other is meaningful precisely insofar as it is so supremely difficult,

[68] *Otherwise than Being*, 72.

tantamount to a tearing of the self from itself. "It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. *But for this one has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it*. Enjoyment is an ineluctable moment of sensibility."[69]

One might tighten the focus of the preceding analysis by singling out Dmitri's love of *natural* beauty, which seems tantamount to a kind of quasi-pantheism—as when he cites the "Eleusian Festival" of Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805): "That man to man again may soar, / Let man and Earth with one another / Make a compact evermore— / Man the son, and Earth the mother…" "'There's just one thing,'" he remarks afterwards: "'how can I make a compact with the earth evermore? I don't kiss the earth, I don't tear open her bosom; what should I do, become a peasant or a shepherd? I keep going, and I don't know: have I gotten into stench and shame, or into light and joy?'" (107). His own confusion or ambivalence at these "pantheistic" impulses, as we will see when we come to discuss the figure of his brother Alyosha, suggests that he is experiencing something utterly different from pantheism, something more akin to what Levinas describes as "insomnia": "But at the same time there is a coring out (*denucleation*), of the imperfect happiness which is the murmur of sensibility. There is a non-coinciding of the ego with itself, restlessness, insomnia, beyond what is found again in the present" (*Otherwise than Being*, 64). Dmitri, in the midst of this coring out, mistakes the feeling of being summoned for an impulse to worship the earth. Soon enough, however, he will understand the true nature of the experience, which marks the beginning of a summons to an *otherwise*.

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[69] *Otherwise than Being*, 72 (italics mine).

Appearances notwithstanding, Dmitri, it cannot be overstressed, is no mere sensualist in the vulgar sense of the term. Within the confines of the ruinous gazebo there stands an old table and two benches, all serviceable, and atop the table is a bottle of cognac, half consumed. "'I see your look: ''He's drinking again!'' Do not believe the phantom,'" laughs Dmitri, who then proceeds to cite two lines from a poem by Nikolai Nekrasov (1821-1878): "Do not believe the empty, lying crowd, / Forget your doubts…" The poem, "When from the Darkness of Error" (1865), was beloved by Dostoevsky and relates the story of a "rescued prostitute" (783, 1.3.3. n. 2). Dmitri's allusion to these lines reveals much about his contradictory nature, including his love for Grushenka, a disreputable, unruly woman who, like Dmitri, conceals a soul capable of profound nobility, particularly after her meeting with Alyosha. This reference also calls to mind the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), who influenced movements such as the Fauves and the German Expressionists. As in Nekrasov's poem, van Gogh attempted to rescue a prostitute, Clasina Maria "Sien" Hoornik, and her children. Like Dmitri, van Gogh was an admixture of the base and the noble; both men display a profound love of beauty, which they connect to the divine. Much of van Gogh's art, particularly in the later years, can be understood as a means of conveying the Gospel to the poor—such is his faith in the power of beauty to reveal God. Both men, in short, share a sensitivity to beauty that opens them to the possibility of an *Otherwise*, which in turn makes possible the genuine one-for-the-other of ethics.

Dmitri alludes not merely to Nekrasov and Schiller but to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), who is noted for his pantheistic love of nature. As *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (ed. Margaret Drabble) relates, Goethe "made important discoveries in connection with plant and animal life" and "was also a lyric poet of great genius," to such an

extent that quite a number of his poems and songs "were set to music by German Romantic composers" (398). As with Dmitri's "pantheistic" tendencies, his love of poetry suggests something more than mere hedonism. Sven Birkerts, interestingly, argues that poetry and indeed all art can open our eyes to a vertical plane of existence, which is suggestive of Levinas' talk of an *Otherwise* than being: "Immersed in a ballet performance, planted in front of a painting, we shatter the horizontal plane. Not without some expense of energy, however. The more we live according to the lateral orientation, the greater a blow is required, and the more disorienting is the effect. A rather unfortunate vicious cycle can result, for the harder it is to do the work, the more we need to do it" (*The Gutenberg Elegies*, 74-75). The effort required by such immersion says much about Dmitri's depth of character. The evident value he attaches to poetry implies what Levinas would call "inwardness" and even "a contract with existence," which in turn imparts a "duality" to human life: "The ego has a self, in which it is not only reflected, but with which it is involved like a companion or a partner…It is never innocently alone, nor innocently poor" (*Existence and Existents*, 16).

Dmitri, certainly, is never innocently alone; he is, in fact, at war with himself, his *conatus* forever at odds with his potential for kenosis: "'My friend, my friend, still fallen, still fallen even now," he proclaims as he seizes Alyosha's hand. "There's so terribly much suffering for man on earth, so terribly much grief for him! Don't think I'm just a brute of an officer who drinks cognac and goes whoring. No, brother, I hardly think of anything else, of anything but that fallen man, if only I'm not lying now. God keep me from lying, and from praising myself! I think about that man, because I myself am such a man'" (106-07). Here we see the contradiction of Dmitri, and indeed that of *all* incarnate existence. Dmitri isn't proud of his faults, though it

might be said he hates and loves them simultaneously. He is aware of the existence of evil in the world and yearns for the good, but that is not enough in itself. To willfully *choose* the Good, as Levinas would say, is quite impossible; it is only because God, qua the anarchic, "predestines" us—which is to say, summons us to the ethical relation—that we are capable of ethical behavior. "The present is a beginning in my freedom, whereas the Good is not presented to freedom; it has chosen me before I have chosen it. No one is good voluntarily," as Levinas observes in *Otherwise than Being* (11). Dmitri bears out Levinas' point when he relates the futility of his turn to poetry, however exalted, whenever he feels himself drawn to sin:

> ….."'Did it set me right? Never! Because I'm a Karamazov. Because when I fall into the abyss, I go straight into it, head down and heels up…Let me be cursed, let me be base and vile, but let me also kiss the hem of that garment in which my God is clothed; let me be following the devil at the same time, but still I am also your son, Lord, and I love you, and I feel a joy without which the world cannot stand and be'" (107).

Perhaps, ironically, Dmitri's "Karamazov baseness" makes him more aware than most of his impotence in the face of evil. Perhaps this is why he is so keenly aware that his soul is, as he describes it, a "battleground" (108); a battleground, we have stressed, whereon his *conatus* wars continuously (and largely impotently) with his capacity for *kenosis*. One is reminded of Levinas' thoughts in "Intention, Event, and the Other": "In life being is immediately war. What did Heidegger say at the beginning of *Being and Time*? *Dasein* is distinguished by the fact that, in its very being, that being is an issue for it. He meant then, 'being is an issue' which is 'an issue of the understanding of being.' But in *Being and Time*, it is almost formulated in a Darwinian manner: 'Being is an issue for *itself*.'" Levinas does not dispute Heidegger's view of being,

make no mistake; he does not challenge the notion that being and war (hence solipsism) are interconnected. He merely proposes an *otherwise* to being—namely, the madness of the for-the-other, or kenosis.[70] The contradiction is not merely Dmitri's, then: bodily incarnation, in its separateness and ability to enjoy, is *necessary* for kenosis—and yet the two impulses, if you will, are endlessly at odds in man. "'The terrible thing is that beauty is not only fearful but also mysterious. Here the Devil is struggling with God, and the battlefield is the human heart," Dmitri observes along these same lines (108).

Despite Dmitri's "engagement" to Katerina Ivanovna, their entire history seems little more than a "game," as Levinas might say,[71] wherein each attempts to outdo the other—Katerina in what might be termed a pseudo-kenosis reminiscent of Tolstoy's Father Sergius in the tale of the same name, Dmitri in his incessant vacillation between nobility and baseness, the "ideal of the Madonna and…the ideal of Sodom."[72] Both, in short, are entrapped in the solipsism of the *conatus*, Katerina more so in that she fails to recognize her entrapment ("'She loves her own virtue, not me,'" Dmitri relates [117]). Dmitri is closer to "redemption" in that he displays a greater capacity to call himself into question—the prerequisite for genuinely ethical action. "The marvel of creation does not only consist in being a creation *ex nihilo*, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself in question," writes Levinas in this same vein. "The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being. And

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[70] In *Is It Righteous To Be?*, pp. 140-57 (145).

[71] Cf. *Otherwise than Being,* 106-07: "If the return to self proper to cognition, the original truth of being, consciousness, can be realized, it is because a recurrence of ipseity has already been produced. This is an inversion in the process of essence, *a withdrawing from the game that being plays in consciousness*. It is a withdrawal in-oneself which is an exile in oneself, without a foundation in anything else, a non-condition" (italics mine).

[72] *The Brothers Karamazov*, 108.

this implies precisely atheism, but at the same time, beyond atheism, *shame for the arbitrariness of the freedom that constitutes it*."[73] Though Dmitri reproaches himself for his conduct with Katerina, the other who disturbs his *conatus* the most profoundly is Agrafena Alexandrovna Svetlov, better known as Grushenka. Their relationship is hardly a peaceable or respectable one, yet real love lies beneath the furor. When he learns that Grushenka has seemingly abandoned him by returning to her former lover, he is overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. He is torn between his jealousy and his fear that Grushenka is returning to her former beau so as to seek refuge from his father, Fyodor, with whom he has been in heated conflict since the opening of the novel. Grushenka, you see, is possessed of no small wealth and, what is more, a talent for *acquiring* wealth. The parasitic Fyodor has indeed cast a lascivious eye upon her, riling Dmitri's jealousy as well as his protectiveness. He borrows a pair of pistols from a friend, then stops to pen a short letter. As he writes, he drinks, toasting life itself. "'Why am I so pleased with myself? I'm base, but I'm pleased with myself, and yet it pains me to be base and still pleased with myself. I bless creation, I'm ready right now to bless God and his creation, but…I must exterminate one foul insect, so that it will not crawl about spoiling life for others…" (406).

Two points are of paramount importance: First, Dmitri is growing, progressing; he is poised to acknowledge the value of creation, of the necessity of loving the creation in order to love God—thereby recalling Levinas' injunction that there is no love of God without a love of the world and man. Second, his remark about exterminating an "insect" for the good of others refers

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[73] *Totality and Infinity*, 89 (italics mine).

to his desire to protect Grushenka from the destructive impulses of his father.[74] Dmitri intuits where this course of action will likely lead; hence his letter, which amounts to a suicide note. One might see in this a willingness to sacrifice himself for Grushenka the very "insomnia" or "disturbance" Levinas associates with ethical behavior; prior to this time it was more or less nascent, but now that it has as its focus a concrete object—a flesh and blood face, Grushenka's—it is becoming more wakeful, emerging from its quiescence and impotence and pushing Dmitri closer towards a genuine for-the-other.

Dmitri proceeds to Fyodor's house but chooses not to commit parricide. He does, however unwittingly, injure one of Fyodor's servants (possibly fatally, he only later reflects), but the fact remains that he turns from the violence he originally intended.

Dmitri then rushes off to Grushenka, bringing with him a profligate amount of delectables—partly, one suspects, out of a desire for self-exaltation, but partly out of a genuine desire to give. When in fact he comes face to face with Grushenka and her erstwhile love, Dmitri does almost an about-face, generously freeing Grushenka to follow her heart and greeting her former lover and his companions as friends. They play a game of cards, but Dmitri's success transforms the general mood of *bonhomie* into one of ire. Dmitri generously offers to return the money he has won, but this only adds fuel to the fire.

Despite the ensuing "delirium" of the chapter, Dmitri and Grushenka experience, more or less simultaneously, a profound extirpation from their respective *conatus*. Dmitri, for his part, exults that Grushenka is at last his; abruptly, however, he is reminded of his assault on Fyodor's

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[74] It should be noted, too, that Dmitri recognizes his own Karamazov baseness and refers to himself on a number of occasions as an "insect" and a "bedbug."

servant. "So now all he had to do was live, but…but he could not live, he could not, oh, damnation! 'God, restore him who was struck down at the fence! Let this terrible cup pass from me! You worked miracles, O Lord, for sinners just like me! And what, what if the old man is alive?...But no, no, oh, fainthearted, impossible dreams! Oh damnation!'" Dmitri is sincere in his desire for forgiveness—more so, Larry and Carol Lacy note, than almost any others in the novel.[75] For her part, Grushenka confesses that it is Dmitri she has loved all along, that her apparent interest in Fyodor was no more than spitefulness and vindictiveness. She begs his forgiveness and the two embrace rapturously. "'Kiss me! Beat me, torment me, do something to me…Oh, how I deserve to be tormented…Stop! Wait, not now, I don't want it to be like that….,' she suddenly pushed him away. 'Go, Mitka, I'll drink wine now, I want to get drunk, I'm going to get drunk and dance. I want to, I want to!'" (438-39). Despite the drunkenness and the aforementioned "delirium," note the Lacys, beneath it all there is a tremendous *reorientation* transpiring in Dmitri and Grushenka alike.—Which Levinas, for his part, would associate with the "madness" of ethics, the "holy folly" associated with the radical orientation towards the other, or kenosis. For Levinas, ethics entails not a new order or even a *dis*ordering, which leave us trapped within the domain of totality. Instead he uses the term "anarchy," which bespeaks the voice of the *Otherwise than being* that shatters the "'that's the way it is' of the Power of the powerful."[76] The self is summoned to move at widdershins to the realm of ontology and naturalism, *Esse* and *Natura*. "Anarchy is persecution. Obsession is a persecution where the

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[75] From a study of *The Brothers Karamazov* conducted by Drs. Larry and Carol Lacy in their home in March, April and May of 2012.

[76] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

persecution does not make up the content of a consciousness gone mad; it designates the form in which the ego is affected, a form which is a defecting from consciousness. This inversion of consciousness is no doubt a passivity—but it is a passivity beneath all passivity."[77] Ethics for Levinas does indeed entail the kind of loss of control not unlike that associated with drunkenness and delirium in that it is not an intentional act or movement; one is rendered passive, overwhelmed—*persecuted*, Levinas describes it—by the face of the other. To the denizens of the totality, wherein "ethics" is tantamount to "pragmatics"—i.e., reductionistic and utilitarian—Levinas' words would indeed seem like madness, drunkenness, delirium. Dmitri and Grushenka are being reoriented towards the other, and are therefore becoming increasingly "out of sync" with the world about them, possessed by an (*ethical*) awareness that transcends the purely spatial or temporal. One is reminded of the Biblical prophets, who were likewise summoned despite themselves—indeed, Jeremiah even describes the process in terms of rape![78]—and were often accused by their contemporaries of drunkenness or madness.[79]

In order to guard against potential misunderstanding on this last point, it must be stressed that this "madness" is only *seemingly* so, i.e., to the denizens of the totality. In Judaism, as Heschel helpfully relates in *The Prophets*, the word for madness, *tardemah*, is associated only with false

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[77] *Otherwise than Being*, 101.

[78] Jeremiah 20:7: "O LORD, Thou hast deceived me and I was deceived; / Thou hast overcome me and prevailed…" Walter Brueggemann in *A Commentary on Jeremiah* explains that the focus of these lines

> …is on the ways of Yahweh…The complaint begins with an accusation that Yahweh has seduced him (v. 7). The verb rendered "deceived" could be rendered more strongly as "harassed," "taken advantage of," "abused," even "raped"….Yahweh's power is beyond challenge, and that places the prophet in an unbearable, "no-win" situation. On the one hand, Jeremiah is mandated to speak against Jerusalem, but his speaking evokes deep hostility (Jer. 20:8). On the other hand, when he does not speak (in order to avoid the hostility) he is even more troubled, for the word of Yahweh is a burning compulsion to him (v. 9). (181-82)

[79] Cf. Acts 26:24.

prophets. In Hellenism, to be sure, prophecy (as well as genius and poetic inspiration) is associated with ecstasy and madness. Such is not the case, however, for Judaism: "Ecstasy, [the rabbis] maintained, is the mark that distinguished Moses from the pagan prophet Balaam. 'Moses received his revelation while retaining his full power of consciousness,…whereas Balaam lost his power of consciousness in the moment of revelation, as it said, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, yet with opened eyes (num. 24:4)'" (432-33). When Levinas speaks of ethics as "madness," then, he is driving at something altogether different from *tardemah*, something more akin to the "idiocy" or "holy folly" of Myshkin in *The Idiot*, Tikhon in *Demons*, and most of all Zosima and his disciple Alyosha (and Dmitri as well, as we will see in short order) in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Jesus, too, is in a certain sense the apex of such madness or idiocy: that God should *empty Himself* of His power and self-regard for the sake of His relation with mankind is so unfathomable that not only do the Jews but even many *Christians* struggle profoundly with the idea—hence in Christian theology the subversion of kenosis by the more palatable talk of God's perfection (timelessness, immutability, impassibility, omnicontrol) and the *Dignum Deo*. It is an idea that *should* arouse bewilderment and intellectual dissonance in Christians. It *should* draw people up short and confound them. Christians would do well to heed the disturbance it provokes in Jews, for it is a truly unfathomable thing.—And, dare we say, an *unpalatable* thing as well, owing to its implications for *ethics*. Kenosis, one might say, is far more than a Divine action; it is also a Divine *command*. It is implied in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 16:24: "'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." But this will be the subject of our fifth and final chapter…

This idea of ethics as a kind of folly or idiocy or madness is driven home by Dostoevsky's depiction of Dmitri's vision of the "Wee One." This is preceded by Dmitri's arrest after the body of his Fyodor is discovered. During his interrogation, he confesses that he despised his father: "'You see, gentlemen, I did not like his appearance, it was somehow dishonorable, boastful, trampling on all that's holy, mockery and unbelief, loathsome, loathsome! But now that he's dead, I think differently.'" "'How differently?'" the district attorney asks. "'Not differently, but I'm sorry I hated him so much,'" comes the response. When asked if he feels repentant, he replies with his characteristic sincerity, "'No, not really repentant, don't write that down. I'm not good myself, gentlemen, that's the thing, I'm not so beautiful myself, and therefore I had no right to consider him repulsive, that's the thing. Perhaps you can write that down'" (462). We see that Dmitri is still in the process of undergoing his transition from solipsism to kenosis. He acknowledges his failings but goes no further. A little later, however, Grushenka appears, and in order to protect her from possible suspicion he speaks boldly on her behalf, essentially taking all the blame for the difficulties in his relationship with Fyodor (when in fact Grushenka played her part in riling the situation and exacerbating Dmitri's and Fyodor's mutual loathing): "'Did you hear her cry: ''I'll go with you—even to execution''? And what have I, a naked beggar, given her, why such love for me, am I—a clumsy and shameful creature with a shameful face—worthy of such love, that she should go to hard labor with me?'" (464). Dmitri's love for Grushenka has jarred him from his solipsism, but he is not yet entirely free of it. She has helped him to call himself into question to such a degree that has is being pulled gradually outwards, towards the other; but the fact that their love is mutual—*reciprocal*, as Buber would say, as in a genuine an I-Thou relation—suggests, from a Levinasian perspective,

that the transition is not yet complete. "For Buber the relation between the I and the Thou is straightaway experienced as reciprocity," he explains in an interview with François Poiré: "My point of departure [from Buber] is in Dostoevsky and in the phrase I quoted to you earlier: 'Each of us is guilty before everyone, and I more than the others.'"[80]

The remainder of Dmitri's transformation occurs during a lull in the procedures, allowing the exhausted Dmitri a brief nap. During this respite, he experiences a dream with distinctly prophetic overtones (and effects): He is journeying through the steppe on a bitterly cold November day; "the snow is pouring down in big, wet flakes that melt as soon as they touch the ground." His driver, a peasant, takes them through a village full of "black, black huts," half of them burnt. Dmitri beholds a large crowd of peasant women lining the road, "all of them thin, wasted, their faces a brown color." One woman, who stands at the end of the line, is especially poignant, tall and bony and with flat, dried-out breasts despite the babe in her arms. "And the baby is crying, crying, reaching out its bare little arms, its little fists somehow all blue from the cold. "'Why are they crying? Why are they crying?'" Dmitri asks his driver. "'The wee one,' the driver answers, 'it's the wee one crying'" (507).

Dostoevsky beautifully conveys the final transformation of Dmitri's character, as by his repeated use of words and phrases connoting idiocy or folly. "'But why is it crying?' Mitya insists, as if he were foolish, 'why are its little arms bare, why don't they wrap it up?'" The driver explains that the clothes of the wee one have frozen to his body. "'But why is it so?' foolish Mitya will not leave off." "'They're poor, burnt out, they've got no bread, they're begging for their burnt-down place,'" the driver replies. It is as if Dmitri's mind has failed him;

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[80] "Interview with François Poirié." In *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 23-83 (72).

he seems not to grasp the harsh reality of his world. "'No, no,' Mitya still seems not to understand, 'tell me: why are these burnt-out mothers standing here, why are these people poor, why is the wee one poor, why is the steppe bare, why don't they embrace and kiss, why don't they sing joyful songs, why are they blackened with such black misery, why don't they feed the wee one?'" In the totality, characterized as it is by reductionism—ontology and materialism, e.g.—there *is* no why. Not in an ethical or personal sense. There is only the *is* of existence. All is utilitarian—*How?* and *What?* are the prime considerations. Hence, to cite Buber yet again, "the biologistic and historiosophical orientations of the age, which…have combined to produce a faith in doom that is more obdurate and anxious that any such faith has ever been."[81] Hence, too, the unwitting depth of the guard's words to Primo Levi: *There is no why here*.[82] Fascism—like most if not all of Modernity's –isms and –asms—does away with the *why*, and therefore the *otherwise*. As Levinas attests in *Ethics and Infinity*, "Moral force is a scandal for ontological thinking…It escapes and judges the synthesizing, centralizing forces" (13). What is the *Why?* if not an outcry against the reductionism of the ontological order, a challenge to the "that's just the way the world is"? But what point is the *Why?* if there is nothing beyond being and nature? For much contemporary philosophy and science, there is only the totality (or the *system*), whether the Superorganism or the Cosmos or the unifying philosophy of Oneness sought by all utopias. The contrast with infinity cannot be overstressed: "Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being. Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in

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[81] *I and Thou*, 105.

[82] *Survival in Auschwitz*, 29.

upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a space for a separated being exists divinely."[83]

This is the key to Dmitri's inability to accept or make sense of the awful reality of the Wee One. "And he feels within himself that, though his questions have no reason or sense, he still certainly wants to ask in just that way, and he should ask in just that way." More than that—or, better, as a necessary corollary of that—Dmitri is overcome with a compassion he has never known before. Dmitri "wants to do something for them all, so that the wee one will no longer cry, so that the blackened, dried-up mother of the wee one will no longer cry either, so that there will be no more tears in anyone from that on, and it must be done at once…" (507-08).

Just before Dmitri wakes from his dream, he hears "from somewhere near him" Grushenka's promise to go with him to whatever end. "And his whole heart blazed up and turned towards some sort of light, and he wanted to live and live, to go on and on along some path, towards the new, beckoning light, and to hurry, hurry, right now, at once!" With this, Dmitri's transformation is complete. His self-regard is gone; he wakes and almost immediately is invited to read and sign the transcript against him. Dmitri signs it unquestioningly; his focus is on the anonymous individual who placed a pillow beneath his head as he slept: "…his whole soul was as if shaken with tears. He went up to the table and declared that he would sign whatever they wanted" (508).

Shortly thereafter, he delivers a speech that beautifully encapsulates his transformation and new vision of life: "'Gentlemen, we are all cruel, we are all monsters, we all make people weep, mothers and nursing babies, but of all—let it be settled here and now—of all, I am the lowest

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[83] *Totality and Infinity*, 104.

vermin! So be it! Every day of my life I've been beating my breast and promising to reform, and every day I've done the same vile things. I understand that for men such as I a blow is needed, a blow of fate, to catch them as with a noose and bind them by an external force'" (509). Larry and Carol Lacy are quick to point out that the phrase "blow of fate" would be better translated "blow from *Heaven*"[84]—recalling Levinas' talk about the face breaking up totality and revealing something of the *Otherwise* than being. This does not, to be sure, entail a revelation of some dogmatic truth, i.e., something reducible to the merely doctrinal or mystical.[85] Instead it is a summons that disrupts the self's conatus, a sort of rending that can legitimately be described as apocalyptic.[86] In the process, God is revealed, but God qua Infinity, qua *kenosis*. The God, i.e., who contracts so as to leave a genuine space for a separate, non-thematized creation.

This "blow from Heaven"—beginning with Dmitri's encounter with the face of Grushenka and culminating in his "vision" of the face of the Wee One—is just that, a revelation of the trace of God. It is a "blow," Levinas would concur, insofar as one is compelled to "[measure] oneself against the perfection of infinity," resulting in "shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise."[87] Dmitri has already attested that he is the lowest of vermin, and he now proceeds to acknowledge his moral impotence: "'Never, never would I have risen by myself! But the thunder has struck. I accept the torment of accusation and of my disgrace before all…But hear me, all the same, for the last time: I am not guilty of my father's blood! I accept

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[84] From a study of *The Brothers Karamazov* conducted by Drs. Larry and Carol Lacy in their home in March, April and May of 2012.

[85] Ibid, 24-25.

[86] *Otherwise than Being*, 89.

[87] *Totality and Infinity*, 83-84.

punishment not because I killed him, but because I wanted to kill him, and might well have killed him'" (509). He still intends to fight to proclaim his innocence, to be sure; but he is willing to be tried and accused out of a sense of his profound responsibility all the same.

Later on, during a conversation with Alyosha, Dmitri proclaims,

> ….."…a new man has arisen in me!...What do I care if I spend twenty years pounding out iron ore in the mines, I'm afraid of that not at all, but I'm afraid of something else now: that this risen man not depart from me!...Why did I have a dream about a 'wee one' at such a moment? 'Why is the wee one poor?' It was a prophecy to me at that moment! It's for the 'wee one' that I will go. Because everyone is guilty for everyone else. For all the 'wee ones,' because there are little children and big children. All people are 'wee ones.' And I'll go for all of them, because there must be someone who will go for all of them. I didn't kill father, but I must go. I accept!" (591)

Dmitri has reached that point described by Levinas as "passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form" in the early pages of *Otherwise than Being*. Dmitri has become a hostage, not only for the "Wee One" but for all mankind; his very identity is compromised; no longer is he Dmitri Karamazov, the man intensely concerned for his personal honor and glory (even while acknowledging his status as a "bedbug"). Now he has become a "hostage" for all mankind. "And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation" (14). Prior to this point, Levinas would say, Dmitri has been involved in a game despite his high-minded talk and self-recrimination. To be sure, the potential was there; Dmitri was somehow more open than many of his compatriots in the novel to being "addressed" by God

through the face of the other. Nevertheless, God, qua Infinity, qua *Otherwise*, qua the Anarchic, has addressed Dmitri, disrupting his penchant for solipsistic games (such as those who plays with Katerina Ivanovna): "Anarchy troubles being over and beyond these alternatives. It brings to a halt the ontological play which, precisely qua play, is consciousness, where being is lost and found again, and thus illuminated."[88]

Now let us continue our discussion of Dostoevsky and his impact on Levinas by turning to the ideas of the premier interpreter of Dostoevsky, Mikhail Bakhtin. Not only will we achieve a deeper understanding of the profound connection between Dostoevsky and Levinas vis-à-vis kenosis and its implications for mankind; we will expose resonances between Levinas and Bakhtin as well, who like Dostoevsky is an Orthodox Christian and therefore on the alert, so to say, for these kenotic motifs and connotations.

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[88] *Otherwise than Being*, 101.

CHAPTER 4

LEVINAS, BAKHTIN, AND THE KENOTIC AUTHOR

Before we begin, we should perhaps address the question of Bakhtin's faith. As with Levinas, there are those who contend that he is not a theist in any sense of the term. Bakhtin is often regarded as a Marxist (if not always an orthodox one) and an atheist. Ruth Coates' *Christianity in Bakhtin*, however, takes this view to task, addressing specific claims or readings offered as proof of Bakhtin's commitment to Marxist ideology. In contrast to the Marxist emphasis on an authoritative party line, for instance, Bakhtin praises Dostoevsky for crafting novels that represent "a 'plurality of unmerged consciousness'…where the one is not lost in the many, a community rather than a collective" (67-68). This idea, as we will soon see, is informed and permeated by a commitment to the Biblical idea of kenosis. As regards the question of authority itself, which is to say, of political and authorial authority, Bakhtin's writings on Dostoevsky celebrate the latter's "[refusal] to fix his characters in a finalised [*sic*] and evaluated image," instead "allowing them to speak for themselves." In Bakhtin's view, Dostoevsky eschews the right to reduce his characters to automata or mere symbols "of a particular social or ideological purview"; instead he allows them to seek after their own words and beliefs and to this end sets them into a dialogue with one another (69). This is of course of a piece with his rejection of materialism as a worldview, i.e., a totalizing –ism that reifies, and thereby dehumanizes, mankind. "There seems little doubt that Marxism's materialistic monism would offend Bakhtin…inasmuch as it is another kind of reduction of the plurality of existence," Coates relates—an idea she goes on to connect with Bakhtin's belief in transcendence: "Bakhtin's work

has a place not only for transcendence in [a] limited, 'horizontal' sense, but also for a 'vertical' transcendental dimension"—a stance clearly at odds with Marxist materialism (71).

For these and other reasons, Coates views Bakhtin as a Christian, albeit not of an Orthodox persuasion, although she concedes that "Quite possibly I do not hear the Orthodox voice in Bakhtin, not being sufficiently familiar with its dialect" (22). In Alexandar Mihailovic's estimation, however, evidence for Bakhtin's faith as an Orthodox Christian is readily apparent: "In the final analysis, the only record that really matters is the one on which Bakhtin's reputation rests: the texts themselves. That Bakhtin and other members of his circle were observant Christians is evident from letters (many still unpublished) kept in the Yudina collection at the Russian State Library Archives in Moscow" (*Corporeal Words*, 14). He goes on to observe the "highly evocative" nature of Bakhtin's "intense and protracted mining" of specifically Christological and Trinitarian ideas, adding that this aspect of Bakhtin's thought cannot be attributable to a casual, noncommittal borrowing or cherry-picking when viewed against the backdrop of Soviet antitheism (15).

Bakhtin's significance for denizens of the twenty-first century, however, is by no means confined to purely theological or philosophical realms. The twenty-first century has witnessed a veritable conflagration surrounding such close-knit topics as ethnocentrism (Eurocentrism), racism, cultural imperialism, and colonialism. Much energy is devoted to the *political* aspect of the aforementioned topics and precious little to their *metaphysics*—which is to say, their metaphysical origins and/or implications.

Let us consider one underlying topic endemic to each of these debates: *language*. To be more accurate, the question of multilingualism and monolingualism. While the two might be regarded

as antitheses, it is for this very reason that they are in fact bound inextricably to one another. Multilingualism seems to cast doubt upon the possibility (and desirability) of monolingualism, insofar as language itself seems impossible without the sort of disunity implied by multilingualism; yet at the same time, multilingualism itself implies, if only theoretically, the *possibility* of monolingualism. (And this is to avoid altogether the question of the desirability of one mode over the other.)

Behind these questions there lies a deeper question, that of monism. In this case, what might be termed a "linguistic monism," which posits some form of superiority of one language over the others, whether by virtue of chronology, ontology, epistemology, or politics. Even apart from more dubious, i.e., essentialistic or nationalistic, considerations, the unifying power of monolingualism would seem at first blush to be a desirable thing. In the Bible, for instance, God confounds the language of man, splintering it into a multiplicity of tongues lest man successfully challenge His authority. Pragmatically speaking, then, does not monolingualism seem to suggest solidarity, cooperation, a unity of understanding and purpose? Of what benefit can a multiplicity of tongues be? Is not the idea of babble—"Babel"—a *negative* thing, implying division and disunity?

In his "Vanishing Voices," Rus Rhymer draws attention to the darker side of monolingualism, likening the rapid disappearance of languages throughout the world to what some have taken to calling the "sixth extinction." "Within the next century, linguists think, nearly half of the world's current stock of languages may disappear. More than a thousand are listed as critically or severely endangered—teetering on the edge of oblivion," he explains. "The ongoing collapse of the world's biodiversity is more than just an apt metaphor for the crisis of language extinction.

The disappearance of a language deprives us of knowledge no less valuable than some future miracle drug that may be lost when a species goes extinct."[89]

An individual human language, it might be argued, represents a unique perspective on the world, replete with its own wealth of invaluable insights, whether historical, metaphysical, scientific, ethical, and so on and so forth. Most regard Western modes of thought—ontology and epistemology, to name but two—in monolithic terms. Accordingly, Westerners tend to regard their culture's understanding of such things as "time, number, and color" as "settled and universal." Is this an innocuous assumption, a mere matter of belief? Or does it represent a sort of malignancy, an intellectual malaise—or, worse, an impulse to repress alterity, as some have claimed? Without counterperspectives, are we not in danger of stagnation, to say nothing of hubris? Consider the language of Tuva, where "the past is always spoken of as ahead of one, and the future is behind one's back. 'We could never say, I'm looking forward to doing something,' a Tuvan told me. Indeed, he might say, 'I'm looking forward to the day before yesterday.' It makes total sense if you think of it in a Tuvan sort of way: If the future were ahead of you, wouldn't it be in plain view?"[90] However inconsequential such a "heterodox" understanding of time might seem, it represents a counterperspective essential to real dialogue and the incessant *questioning* that drives a culture onwards. Monolingualism implies a *loss* of counterperspectives, or at any rate contributes to a reduction of the number of counterperspectives, and thereby quashes (however unintentionally) the challenge of alterity—which is, to say again, essential for disturbing the solipsism of the self (or indeed the culture at

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[89] *National Geographic*, July 2012, pp. 60-93 (73, 62).

[90] Ibid, 77.

large). Without this calling into question of the One (whether the self or the culture), intellectual growth, to say nothing of ethics, is stymied.

If the question of monolingualism versus multilingualism represents an underlying aspect of the debates about racism and ethnocentrism raging throughout the culture, this question is itself engendered and made possible by a still deeper one: that of totality and infinity—exactly as per Levinas' eponymous magnum opus. Totality, Levinas maintains, necessarily implies monism; a dogmatic belief in a unitary mode of being. Totality quashes any and all challenges to this monism, whether by force ("business and war," as Levinas says) or by indirectly appropriating the other unto itself, as through the promulgation of alluring technologies. Infinity, by contrast, is ethical—specifically, kenotic, entailing a pouring-out of the self for the sake of the other, a *being-for-the-other*. Ergo, infinity is at widdershins with monism and its ineluctable reductionism whereby each and every person and thing is tantamount to a mere cog. To put it in more contemporary terms, infinity makes possible *diversity* (and therefore *multilingualism*), which in turn entails a radical separation of beings, humans in particular. Separation, not unity or union (however benign or oblique), makes ethics possible. Only separate, corporeal beings can undertake kenosis on behalf of their fellows. "Separation and interiority, truth and language constitute the categories of the idea of infinity or metaphysics," as Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity* (62). And, as he goes on to relate in more detail not too long after, "Language, far from presupposing universality and generality, first makes them possible. Language presupposes interlocutors, a plurality....Discourse is thus the experience of something utterly foreign, a *pure* 'knowledge' or 'experience,' a *traumatism of astonishment*" (73). Yet "from Parmenides to Spinoza to Hegel," Levinas continues, monism has been affirmed and separation deemed an

affront to reason and a fall from perfection. Accordingly, the West has sought to impose unity in virtually every sphere, including, it needs hardly be said, the linguistic one. Rhymer's concern about the ongoing extinction of languages, then, is neither academic nor esoteric in the pejorative sense of either term; it is in fact *ethical* inasmuch as it is a manifestation of the West's inevitable reification of individual human beings to Human Being:

> The de facto separation with which metaphysics begins would result from an illusion or a fault. As a stage the separated being traverses on the way of its return to its metaphysical source, a moment of a history that will be concluded by union, metaphysics would be an Odyssey, and its disquietude nostalgia. But the philosophy of unity has never been able to say whence came this accidental illusion and fall, inconceivable in the Infinite, the Absolute, the Perfect. (*Totality and Infinity*, 102)

Such a schema, Levinas maintains, is poison to a genuinely ethical relation.

Here it might be objected that monolingualism need not undermine ethics. After all, two English-speaking individuals can behave ethically—or not!—towards one another. The idea to be borne in mind, however, is that monolingualism is more in keeping with totality than infinity. Monolingualism goes hand-in-hand with the exaltation of utility. Monolingualism is necessary for the efficiency and productivity of an all-encompassing system wherein each person is but a cog in the greater machine. As such, monolingualism implies *reductionism*. The self becomes a cog, as does the Other, and is therefore *replaceable*. The urgency of ethics as Levinas conceives it is thereby undermined. The selfhood of the self is no longer predicated, per Levinas, on her or his willingness to embrace a *being-for-the-Other*; rather, the self is reducible to her or his place or coordinates within the system. In Buberian terms, the I-It mode trumps the I-Thou mode.

"The improvement of the ability to experience and use generally involves a decrease in man's ability to relate," as he observes in *I and Thou* (92). Relationality—in particular the ethical relation so crucial to Levinas—is not, as a rule, something that comes easily; alterity is a *challenge* to the self, necessarily entailing a calling into question of the self. Monolingualism is just one more way that the self is lulled to sleep, ethically speaking, and led to regard the totality in which it exists as the ultimate reality. There is only being and no *otherwise* than being.

But let us now return to a more straightforward discussion of Bakhtin.

Bakhtin, interestingly enough, would find in Levinas a kindred soul, not least in the matter of monolingualism versus multilingualism and the implications of each for ethics. This is exemplified in "Discourse in the Novel," wherein Bakhtin introduces such vital terms as "heteroglossia," "monoglossia," and "dialogism." Bakhtin's contrast of poetry and the novel, we will see, is veritably Levinasian in its insistence upon language as a means of relating to the other qua other as opposed to appropriating, and thereby negating, that other.

For Bakhtin, poetry by its nature resists change and process and thereby serves, however unwittingly, the impulse to monoglossia, which insists upon *one* voice, *one* language, *one* way of perceiving the world. Whatever poetics one adopts, he explains, whether Aristotelian, Augustinian, Cartesian, or Leibnizean, "…whatever their differences in nuance, give expression to the same centripetal forces in socio-linguistic and ideological life; they serve one and the same project of centralizing and unifying the European languages" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 271). By "centripetal" Bakhtin means those centralizing forces at work in a language or society. "The rulers and the high poetic genres of any era exercise a centripetal—a homogenizing and hierarchicizing—influence," Michael Holquist helpfully explains in his glossary in *The Dialogic*

Imagination (425). Rather than fostering multiple tongues or perspectives or an ongoing dialogue comprised of multiple voices, then, poetry lends itself to monoglossia; which, in turn, engenders a kind of monism. One language, one mode of perceiving, is privileged above all others, which are at best marginalized or at worst quashed. A certain exalted language, or mode of language, is designed to be set above other languages—essentially turning a deaf ear to alterity itself. And it must be stressed that the monism Bakhtin is describing and critiquing isn't merely aesthetic or epistemological; it also has profoundly *ethical* implications, as we will soon see in greater detail.

In stark contrast to the monoglossia inherent to poetry, Bakhtin argues, the advent of the novel represents an awakening of the forces of heteroglossia, which denotes the unique context of a text and resists the reification of that individual word into *the* Word. With the birth of the novel, "Two myths perish simultaneously: the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified," Bakhtin observes in "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" (in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 68). If poetry represents a centripetal force, the novel is characterized by its centrifugal nature—which is to say, its decentralizing/decentering tendencies. By its very nature, it challenges the idea of a dominant language or discourse and encourages an endless questioning—and therefore openness, not only to other ideas but to those who represent or advocate those ideas.

As an aside, Bakhtin also lauds comedy and the grotesque for their centrifugal influences: as Holquist relates in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the "forces of the clown, mimic and rogue create alternative 'degraded' genres down below," thereby resisting attempts at an authoritative genre or discourse (425)—an idea to which we will turn in the third section of this chapter. For now, it

is enough to note that figures like Tikhon, Zosima, and Alyosha in Dostoevsky and Ikonnikov in Grossman are regarded by their peers as holy fools and derided as misfits, clowns, even rogues. By their very mode of being—a *being-for-the-other*—they are at widdershins with the world, and therefore mocked as such. Not only does the medium in which these figures exist (the novel, i.e.) represent a challenge to an authoritative discourse; they themselves instantiate such a challenge. Would they be able to do so with such effectiveness apart from the novel? No; in any other genre, their words and deeds would risk degenerating into a sort of monoglossia. They are more truly kenotic because the novel is itself a kenotic medium.

Bakhtin holds that the very atmosphere in which we live and speak and think is permeated with countless words, ideas, arguments, narratives, and worldviews, many quite alien to one another. By and large, humans are oblivious to this dimension of communication and thought. As two or more people engage in dialogue, each and every word they address to one another "enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile" (276). Discourse, then, is a prodigiously rich and quite complex affair, which is one of the key reasons behind Bakhtin's rejection of monoglossia. However much a culture, a government, or a worldview may attempt to reduce discourse to monoglossia, these efforts are doomed to failure when all is said and done.—Which is not to deny, to be sure, that governments and worldviews *consistently* make that attempt, inflicting grievous harm to other peoples, cultures, and subcultures in the process. Even unintentionally, as Rhymer suggests in

"Vanishing Voices," one culture or handful of cultures may impose a monolingualism on other peoples throughout the world.[91]

Along slightly different lines, one is reminded of the countless –isms and –asms whereby people try to create a totality, "taming" reality by denying its complexity and establishing one fixed language, culture, narrative, and so on. One might describe such movements as utopian, even religious, seeking a return to some lost primordial unity. Bakhtin and Levinas alike regard this reductionistic impulse—this universalizing salvationary impulse, one might almost call it, however oblique or secular—as inimical to reality. For them, reality is not unitary or simple but relational (hence *diverse*) and ethical.

> Highly significant in this respect is the struggle that must be undertaken in such movements as Rousseauism, Naturalism, Impressionism, Acmeism, Dadaism, Surrealism and analogous schools with the "qualified" nature of the object (a struggle occasioned by the idea of a return to primordial consciousness, to original consciousness, to the object itself in itself, to pure perception and so forth. (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 277, fn)

The novel, Bakhtin maintains, reflects and honors the relational, "socially heteroglot" nature of reality by *embodying* social heteroglossia. "Instead of the virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness," he maintains:

> Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object

[91] In *National Geographic*, July 2012, pp. 60-93.

> are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it. For the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they "do not sound." (278)

Holquist picks up on this idea and argues in a lecture entitled "What Would Bakhtin Do?" that Bakhtin understands reality as profoundly interconnected.[92] "In the beginning is the relation," Buber says in *I and Thou* (69)—an idea with which Bakhtin would entirely concur. For Bakhtin, the essence or primordial nature of communication lies not in abstraction—say, in the truths of linguistics or semiotics—but in the living, historically- and socially-conditioned words exchanged by flesh-and-blood individuals. It is an exchange, but in an ethical rather than a business sense. For discourse implies "interillumination" or "mutual illumination," as Holquist explains in *The Dialogic Imagination*. "We see here Bakhtin's fondness for visual metaphors…as well as [his] play with the Russian word *provescenie* [education, enlightenment], which comes about only in the light of another" (429-430). This would seem to imply, among other things, that each and every human shares a kind of accountability for her or his historical- and social- (and so on) situatedness within a specific epoch and locale. Specifically, an accountability to maintain an ongoing dialogue with her or his fellow human beings, both near and far, metaphorically as well as literally. Such might be termed an "ethic of dialogism." It does not seem a stretch of the imagination to argue that one aspect of this ethic entails a calling into question of the self and the self's social- and cultural-situatedness.—An idea, it is worth

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[92] Presentation given by Holquist at University of Arizona, April 13, 2012

noting, closely akin to Levinas' maxim "Is it righteous [for *me*] to be?" As well, it would seem to entail a commitment to openness, to *ongoing dialogue* with the other, irrespective of the degree of alterity between oneself and that other. And the kind of dialogue implied here is no mere academic discussion but something far deeper, entailing vulnerability, an offering, a going out of the self not merely to but *for* the other—which in turn suggests consistent discipline, sacrifice, and therefore *ethics*. Levinas implies as much in *Totality and Infinity*: "The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation [*discourse*], where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an 'I,' as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself" (39). Thirdly, an ethic of dialogism necessitates a committed opposition to those forces that would threaten the openness and accountability to which each person must dedicate her/himself as a human being.—An opposition, in other words, to monoglossia and all forms of monism, whether Parmenidean, Spinozistic, Hegelian, or whatever other forms this adulation of The One might take. Again, the resonances with Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* in particular, are undeniable: "Separation and interiority were held to be incomprehensible and irrational. The metaphysical knowledge which puts the same in touch with the other then would reflect this fallenness. Metaphysics would endeavor to suppress this separation, to unite…" (102). This citation is apropos of our earlier argument that *Totality and Infinity* has resonances with the Prophetic books of the Old Testament and that it represents a crying out against and a critique of Western ontotheology. We have further argued that it is at its heart a kind of cosmology, an attempt to correct misconceptions about the God-world relation. Bakhtin's work, likewise, can be viewed as a critique of ontotheology (religious or secular), an idea to which we will eventually return.

For now, let us simply note that Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, Grossman and Levinas look to kenosis and holy folly as the only source for a truly viable ethic insofar as it rejects totalizing –isms and –asms and the inevitable reification attendant to such systems. By its very nature, it esteems the temporal, the particular, the flesh-and-blood.

Ruth Coates' *Christianity in Bakhtin* bears out the aforementioned connections between Bakhtin and Levinas, i.e., their shared critique of totalizing modes of speech and thought:

> The monologic 'unitary language' embodies a particular point of view on the world, and therefore its striving for linguistic dominance is at the same time a bid for ideological dominancy…In this way the unofficial and official nature of heteroglossia respectively is developed polemically by Bakhtin. The dominant, official language is presented as a destructive force, opposed to linguistic and ideological diversity in principle. Bakhtin makes his position in this struggle very plain: a language's claim to be the only language, and is truth to be the only truth, is a 'myth' ('Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', 432 [68]), and its imposition an unpardonable act of violence. (106)

Dialogism and heteroglossia should be fostered, not quashed. And this brings us to another point of commonality between Bakhtin and Levinas: Namely, that for both thinkers the underlying impetus for embracing dialogism and heteroglossia is *Biblical*—Bakhtin as a Russian Orthodox believer, Levinas as an Orthodox Jewish believer. What is more, their convictions in this matter arise from their shared attraction to the idea of kenosis. Writes Alexandar Milhailovic in *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse*: "In its metapoetic and metalinguistic transformation, the divine Word becomes flesh only when it joins the mortal

confraternity of human context. Bakhtin's description of the concretizing transformation of utterances into discourse is highly reminiscent of the [Biblical] notion of the emptying or kenosis [of God the Son]" (38). Elsewhere, Milhailovic elaborates on this kenotic motif in Bakhtin's thought: "The descent of Christ represents…a state of active answerability through self-renunciation; it is 'a great symbol of self-activity' [*velikii simvol aktivnosti*]…There is something almost Pentecostal about this descent in its transformation of disparate humanity into communicants of the spirit of kenotic self-renunciation, into an actual community" (75). Bakhtin's core ideas—dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony—cannot be understood apart from the Biblical idea of kenosis. What must be equally stressed is that kenosis is more than just an action undertaken by God and passively "received" in some sense by man; man, too, is called and empowered to undertake his own kenosis on behalf of the other. Bakhtinian dialogism, with its connotations of heteroglossia, surely implies an outpouring of the self for the sake of the other, a giving of space to the other in the fullest sense of the term—that is, an active openness to the other, a calling into question of the self for the sake of the other, a vulnerability before the other, and (most of all) an accountability to the other—in short, what Levinas calls *being-for-the-other*. Coates, too, bears witness to the impact of Christ's kenosis on Bakhtin's thought: "[Christ's] kenotic act of condescension, his taking on of mortal flesh, is 'the great symbol of activity' (94). Christ's life shows how, in order to sacrifice oneself fully, to be fully selfless, one must nevertheless be active: 'To live out of oneself, from one's unique position, does not by a long way imply living only for oneself (118)" (*Christianity in Bakhtin*, 34). Elsewhere she goes on to describe Bakhtin's respect for Dostoevsky as perhaps the kenotic author par excellence, but before we turn to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, let us conclude this section by addressing

Levinas' own thoughts on the seemingly "Christian" idea of kenosis. For despite the problematic nature of the incarnation and atoning death of God the Son for Judaism, the kenosis, or self-emptying, implied by these actions is hardly inimical to the Jewish view of God, precisely as Levinas argues in "Judaism and Kenosis." The God of Judaism likewise undertakes a kenosis or self-emptying, albeit not to the same degree. He does not offer up His Son, true; but He *does* undertake an ongoing self-limitation for the sake of His creation, man in particular. Kenosis reveals little to nothing about the ontology of God and everything about His *personhood* or *character*. The God of the Tanakh is one who stoops down to interact with humans, even going so far as to inhabit the suffering of the oppressed, the fatherless, the widow. No less crucial, God limits Himself for the sake of man's accountability:

> God has subordinated his efficacy—his association with the real and the very presence of the real—to my merit or demerit…The world is justified in its being by human dis-interestment, which concretely signifies consent to the Torah…More important than God's omnipotence is the subordination of that power to man's ethical consent. And that, too, is one of the primordial meanings of kenosis. (112-13)

Let us compare the preceding with a passage from Bakhtin's *Art and Answerability*:

> My abstracting from my own unique place in Being, my *as it were* disembodying of myself, is itself an answerable act or deed that is actualized from my own unique place, and all knowledge with a determinate content (the possible self-equivalent givenness of Being) that is obtained in this way must be incarnated by me, must be translated into the language of participative (unindifferent)

> thinking, must submit to the question of what obligation the given knowledge imposes upon me—the unique me—from my unique place. *That is, it must be brought into correlation with my own uniqueness or singularity on the basis of my non-alibi in Being and in an emotional-volitional tone.* (48-49, italics mine)

Now that we have more or less concluded our discussion of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, we will turn our attention to another of Bakhtin's key texts: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

At one point in an interview with Levinas, François Poirié inquires, "What led you to philosophy?" "I think that it was first of all my readings in Russian, specifically Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky, above all Dostoevsky," Levinas replies. "Books shot through with anxiety—with an essential, religious anxiety—but readable as a search for the meaning of life." Much later on in the interview, Levinas alludes to the influence of Martin Buber and his talk of the reciprocity of the I-Thou relation. "My point of departure is in Dostoevsky and in the phrase…'Each of us is guilty before everyone for everything, and I more than the others.' The feeling that the I owes everything to the Thou, that its responsibility for the other is gratitude, and that the other has always, and rightfully, a right over me…" (in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 28, 72). Bakhtin, as we have already stressed, holds to a remarkably similar view of ethics as a *being-for-the-other*. "In self-renunciation I actualize with utmost activeness and in full the uniqueness of my place in Being," he observes in *Towards A Philosophy of the Act*; "…self-renunciation is a performance or accomplishment that encompasses Being-as-event. A great symbol of self-activity, the descending[?] of Christ [32 illegible words]. The world from which

Christ has departed will no longer be the world in which he had never existed; it is, in its very principle, a different world" (16).

This idea of Christ's kenosis, or emptying-cum-descent, is, as we have already noted, of paramount importance for Bakhtin and Levinas alike. What is more, both recognize in Dostoevsky's novels perhaps the greatest expressions of kenosis—and not only in terms of characters like Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov (*Crime and Punishment*), Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin (*The Idiot*), Father Tikhon (*Demons*), and Father Zosima (*The Brothers Karamazov*) but in terms of the methodology and style of Dostoevsky the author: "Dostoevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus) , but *free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him…" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 9, italics his). To put it differently, Dostoevsky's novels embody heteroglossia and dialogism not merely stylistically but *methodologically*. If for Bakhtin the novel represents a reawakening of the forces of heteroglossia, Dostoevsky is the exemplary novelist. The Dostoyevskian hero is no mere mouthpieces for the author but is possessed of her or his own unique voice. "[The hero's word] possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, *alongside* the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters" (7). None of the characters can exist independently and separately from the others; rather, all are interconnected, situated within a specific time and place and accountable, as concrete beings, to and for all of their fellows. Dostoevsky, for his part, is likewise accountable to his creations, obliged to grant them the space to be and to grow and to come in their own time—or not. It is primarily for this reason that Bakhtin rejects traditional

approaches to Dostoevsky's corpus: "Both approaches—a passionate philosophizing with the characters, and a dispassionate psychological or psychopathological analysis of them as objects—are equally incapable of penetrating the special artistic architectonics of Dostoevsky's works" (9). This is because traditional approaches entail a reification of the author and his or her characters, assuming that everything can be explained reductionistically; as if both the author and his characters are in thrall to the ontological, biological, and historical forces that delimit (and dehumanize) man. As we see with particular clarity in *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky regards these totalizing explanations with no small hostility: "One of his basic ideas…is precisely the idea that man is not a final and defined quantity upon which firm calculations can be made; man is free, and can therefore violate any regulating norms which might be thrust upon him. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 29-30, 59). This is, needless to say, of a piece with Levinas' polemicizing against totality and thematization: "'I think' comes down to 'I can'—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality," he avers in *Totality and Infinity*. "Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other" (45). In fact, it is not inconceivable that Levinas was influenced to some degree by Dostoevsky's attitudes about the dangers of reification, which is given its most overt expression in *Demons*, which decries the reification and dehumanization—the "possession" if you will—of totalizing –isms and –asms.

Dostoevsky's rejection of reductionism underlies his active embrace of heteroglossia and its closely-related cognate, "polyphony," a more overtly religious description of the ideal, or kenotic, relationship between voices in dialogue, with each voice according the others space, literal and metaphorical, and thereby acknowledging its accountability to and for those others. In

support of his understanding of Dostoevsky's polyphonic writing method, Bakhtin himself points to the writings of Valery Yakovievich Kiroptkin, whom he deems one of the more insightful of the "'official party critics'" to write on Dostoevsky during the Soviet era:

> "Whether the Dostoyevskian narrative is conducted in the first person, or in the form of a confession, or in the person of a narrator-author—in all cases we see that the writer proceeds from an assumption of *equal rights* for **simultaneously existing**, experiencing persons. His world is the world of a multitude of objectively existing and interacting psychologies, and this excludes from his treatment of psychological processes the subjectivism and solipsism so characteristic of bourgeois decadence." (106)

Moreover, Bakhtin notes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics:* "Such are the conclusions of Kiroptin, who, following his own special path, arrived at positions quite similar to our own" (37, boldface/italics his).

In seeking to emulate God's kenosis or self-emptying on behalf of His creatures, Dostoevsky likewise avoids reifying his characters—that is, avoids resorting to objectifying causal or typological analyses and explanations of his characters' actions or motivations, thereby rendering them into mere pawns he deploys according to his overarching purpose(s)—but rather works to endow them with a life of their own. This, in turn, lends to Dostoevsky's works a sense of incompleteness, and therefore ambivalence. Nothing is clearly and finally resolved but is left open-ended in some sense. This is particularly true of *The Brothers Karamazov*: "*…for the author as the author*, Dostoevsky seeks words and plot situations that provoke, tease, extort, dialogize. In this lies the profound originality of Dostoevsky's creative process…In essence only

The Brothers Karamazov has a completely polyphonic ending, but precisely for that reason, from the ordinary (that is, the monologic) point of view, the novel remained uncompleted" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 39-40). Kenosis—including kenotic writing—is necessarily ambiguous and open and does not force a conclusion or finalization. Rather like the Jewish discipline of midrash, alternative and indeed contradictory readings are therefore possible, which in turn opens the door to ongoing dialogue and debate. (By and large, however, precious few critics read Dostoevsky in this light and therefore misunderstand and misread him. A great pity, this last, as Dostoevsky's thematic and methodological kenoticism, including its implications for human conduct, might have worked against the totalizing –isms and –asms that ravaged the West throughout the twentieth century and continue to exert a malignant influence to this day.)

We have argued in the preceding chapter that the thesis or defining question of *The Brothers Karamazov* is "Is love possible?" and that this question is most overtly played out as a sort of oblique discourse between Ivan on the one hand and Zosima and Alyosha (and Dmitri, however belatedly) on the other. Dostoevsky wants to answer this question in the affirmative, and he could have created Zosima and Alyosha in such a manner that neither could "exceed the limits of his own character, typicality or temperament without violating [the author's] monologic design concerning him." And yet it should be clear that Dostoevsky does not attempt to "stack the deck" in this fashion but instead endows not only Zosima but Ivan as well with as much freedom and credibility as he is able. Rather than creating a world dominated by "finalizing definitions" and "a fixed eternal position, a fixed authorial field of vision," Dostoevsky, like the kenotic Creator, renounces all such "monologic premises" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 51-52). Hence his concerns after the novel's completion that he never answered Ivan's challenges as

effectively as he might have—a concern apparently borne out by Joseph Frank's account of the overwhelming number of critics and readers who side with Ivan: "Numerous commentators have understandably stressed the moving pathos of Ivan's humanitarianism; it has even been suggested, as Blake said of Milton, that Dostoevsky was really of the devil's party and could not suppress his emotional agreement with Ivan." And yet Frank hastens to point out that Dostoevsky's kenotic writing (my word, not his) precluded any attempts to stack the deck against Ivan by reducing his argument against God to a mere straw man. "Faith, as Dostoevsky wishes it to be felt in *The Brothers Karamazov*, must be totally pure, a commitment supported by nothing except a devotion to the image and example of Christ," which necessitates that "the opposing arguments…must be given at their fullest strength" (*Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, 871-72). *The Brothers Karamazov* deliberately allows for ongoing debate and multiple conflicting interpretations. As with the kenotic God of Biblical theism, it grants not only its characters but its readers the space to accept or reject its "gospel," as it were—namely, that yes, (kenotic) love is indeed possible—and refuses to strong-arm us, however subtly, into agreement with the author's belief. And while Dostoevsky's characters are not, when all is said and done, flesh-and-blood existents, the fact that Dostoevsky takes such pains to treat them as if they *were* real serves as a kind of testimony to the essential nature of kenosis and its implications for God's relationship to the world.

To drive home his conception of Dostoevsky's kenoticism as an author, Bakhtin contrasts Dostoevsky with Leo Tolstoy. He speaks of Tolstoy's characters' "self-consciousness and discourse" as being "predestined" insofar as "Tolstoy's discourse and his monologically naïve point of view permeate everywhere, into all corners of the world and the soul, subjugating

everything to its unity." Accordingly, he pronounces Tolstoy's novels as "monolithically monologic," their characters' discourse "confined in the fixed framework of the author's discourse about him" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 56).

At one point in *Problems with Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin turns to *The Brothers Karamazov*—specifically, to the encounter between Alyosha and Nikolai Ilyich Snegiryov, formerly a captain in the Russian infantry—to illustrate Dostoevsky's opposition to mechanistic conceptions of human psychology. This is, needless to say, of a piece with Dostoevsky's emphasis on kenosis, which stresses the lengths to which God goes in order to vouchsafe human freedom and His relationship to humanity as free beings.

Snegiryov has recently suffered a great humiliation at the hands of Dmitri, who accosted him and tore at his beard. This is an egregious indignity, as even laying one's *hand* on a man's face is a "mortal insult"—let alone tearing at his beard, which is to "insult his dignity as a father in the image of the Heavenly Father" and is therefore considered a crime worse than that of murder, as Victor Terras notes in *A Karamazov Companion* (206). Alyosha, at the bidding of Katerina Ivanovna, is sent to atone for Dmitri's crime with two-hundred rubles out of Katerina's own funds. The former captain is described in such terms as to imply similarities with Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, though where the latter is a figure of bathos, the former is portrayed as one of pathos. Snegiryov and his family, several of whom, most notably his son Illyusha, suffer from various ailments, live in relative poverty despite Snegiryov's status as a noble as an ex-army officer. Their plight is exacerbated by the father's fallen status and alcoholism.

After an awkward introduction, his meeting with Alyosha becomes a happy affair and the two seem destined for friendship. When Alyosha actually presents him with the two hundred-ruble

bills, however, his gratitude turns abruptly into something altogether different: "'I, sir…you, sir…And would you like me to show you a nice little trick, sir?' he suddenly whispered in a quick, firm, whisper, his voice no longer faltering." Snegiryov crumples the bills, casts them to the ground, and proceeds to trample them into the sand. "'There's your money, sir!'" he shrieks repeatedly. "'Report to those who sent you that the whiskbroom does not sell his honor, sir!' he cried out, raising his arm in the air." As he makes his retreat, he turns several times to gesture at Alyosha; ultimately his crazed grimace is replaced by tears. "'And what would I tell my boy, if I took money from you for our disgrace?'" he says to Alyosha before disappearing into his home (*The Brothers Karamazov*, 211-12).

A horrified Alyosha recounts the incident to his friend (and beloved) Lise, and in the process displays an uncharacteristic insensitivity, reducing Snegiryov to an object of the very sort of reductionistic psychoanalysis Dostoevsky loathed. Alyosha concludes that the unpleasant scene was for the best, whereupon Lise, taken aback, challenges his assessment. Alyosha explains his reasoning:

> "…if he had taken the money instead of trampling on it, he'd have gone home, and within an hour he'd have been weeping over his humiliation—that's certainly what would have happened. He would weep, and perhaps tomorrow, at the first light, he would come to find me, and maybe throw the bills at me and trample on them as he did today. But now he's gone off feeling terribly proud and triumphant, though he knows that he's 'ruined himself.' And so nothing could be easier now than to get him to accept these same two hundred roubles [*sic*], maybe even tomorrow, because he has already proved his honor, thrown down the

> money, trampled on it…He couldn't have known, when he was trampling on it, that I would bring it to him again tomorrow…Although he is proud of himself now, even today he'll start thinking about the help he has lost. During the night the thought will become stronger still, he will dream about it, and by tomorrow morning he will perhaps be ready to run to me and ask forgiveness. And at that moment I shall appear….And this time he will take it!" [Lise replies], "Ah, Alyosha, how do you know all that? So young, and already he knows what's in the soul….I could never have thought that up…"[…] "Listen, Alexei Fyodorovich, isn't there something in all this reasoning of ours, I mean, of yours…no, better, of ours…isn't there some contempt for him, for this wretched man…that we're examining his soul like this, as if we were looking down on him? That we have decided so certainly, now, that he will accept the money?" (216-217).

It must be acknowledged that Alyosha, though already deemed a holy fool by most, is at this stage in the novel still maturing. In point of fact, he has yet to endure his own crisis of faith—namely, the death of his mentor, Zosima, and the decay Zosima's corpse gives off, apparently belying his status as a true Saint of God. Only after he has successfully endured his own dark night of the soul does he become like his mentor: "He fell to the earth a weak youth and rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life…" (363).

Nevertheless, the youthful Alyosha perhaps unwittingly betrays the reductionism Dostoevsky, like Levinas, so despises. "Dostoevsky saw in [the psychology of his day] a degrading *reification* of a person's soul, a discounting of freedom and its unfinalizability, and of that

peculiar indeterminacy and indefiniteness which in Dostoevsky always represents a person *on the threshold* of a final decision, at a moment of *crisis*, at an unfinalizable—and *unpredeterminable*—turning point in his soul," Bakhtin explains in *Problems with Dostoevsky's Poetics*. "Dostoevsky constantly and severely criticized mechanistic psychology, both its pragmatic line based on concepts of *natural law* and *utility*, and even more its physiological line, which reduced psychology to physiology" (61).

One is reminded of Levinas' critique of the West's obsession with explanation, and therefore reductionism. Again, it is not going too far to suggest that this is a lesson he drew in part from Dostoevsky, in particular texts like *Notes from the Underground* and *Demons*. As well, one thinks, tangentially, of his impatience with theodicy, which attempts to explain the causes of evil in a rational manner—thereby re-inflicting the victim's wounds upon him or her, as if there is a reason for suffering, whether guilt, misfortune, or some "higher good." For Levinas, theodicy is a function of what he calls the "temptation of temptation," which is to say, a purely theoretical engagement with the world whereby the autonomous "I" retains its autonomy and imagines itself unburdened by responsibility. Theodicy, Richard Cohen maintains, "as an interpretation coming *from me*," represents "my flight, rationalization, imposition, as if the other's suffering, meaningless or no, were meaningful to me…That I can explain someone else's pain, that I can justify it, is to pile evil upon evil" (*Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas*, 275). This allusion to theodicy is no mere detour, inasmuch as the kenosis so exemplified in Dostoevsky's writings—thematically as well as methodologically—focuses not on *understanding* evil as in being *accountable* (or *answerable*, as Bakhtin says) for it: "For if I myself were righteous, perhaps there would be no criminal who stands before you and whom you

are judging in your heart. If you are able to take upon yourself the crime of the criminal…, do so at once, and suffer for him yourself, and let him go without reproach," Zosima proclaims, an example, one might say, of kenosis as command (321).

It cannot be forgotten that kenosis is not merely an action; it is revelatory of the personhood of God, His Divine character: "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love," writes the author of 1 John (4:8). It needs hardly be said that the love described here is *kenotic* love, the love that empties itself on behalf of the other. For in the end, to speak of Dostoevsky's kenoticism as a writer is to say that he emulates his Creator-God, who likewise pours Himself out on behalf of His creation, mankind in particular. Kenosis is, for Dostoevsky, command, both ethically and, in his case as a writer, *aesthetically*.

"Let me repeat: to live from within oneself does not mean to live for oneself, but means to be an answerable participant from within oneself, to affirm one's compellent, actual non-alibi in Being," Bakhtin proclaims in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* (49)—echoing, however indirectly, Levinas' own maxim: "Is it righteous [for *me*] to be?" And, as Coates points out in *Christianity in Bakhtin,* the author's kenosis or outpouring on behalf of her or his characters reflects and is grounded in God's own outpouring of self:

> …authorial love is not presented as overbearing, as veiled tyranny, but according to Bakhtin manifests itself as sacrifice. The more powerful partner in the relationship gives of him- or herself for the sake of the less powerful. Christ is described in terms of 'absolute sacrifice of himself and grace for the other' (53). The author likewise sacrifices him- or herself for the hero by adopting the 'difficult' external position necessary to complete the hero aesthetically. (54)

As with Levinas, it is precisely *because* God is kenotic that man, made in His likeness, is capable of (and culpable for) undertaking his own kenosis—or not. Citing Rav Chayyim of Volozhin's *The Soul of Life*, Levinas argues that "God, master of power, is powerless to associate himself with the world he creates and recreates, enlightens and sanctifies and maintains in being by that very association, without a certain behavior of man"[93] —namely, obedience to the Torah, which "challeng[es] the absurd "that's the way it is" claimed by the Power of the powerful" and thereby "transforms being into human history."[94]

Bakhtin, to summarize our arguments thus far, serves as a kind of bridge between Dostoevsky and Levinas; he draws attention to the full depths of the former's kenoticism, methodologically and thematically, and thereby offers us a deeper understanding of why Levinas so admires Dostoevsky. He brings the revolutionary character of Levinas' thought into sharper focus by offering a model of the God-world relationship as conceived in Dostoevsky (God as the kenotic author, i.e.), which corresponds to Levinas' talk of God as infinity as opposed to totality and man as "naturally atheist." Finally, he helps us to more clearly connect the ethical implications for mankind of a God who creates kenotically; his talk of mankind's "non-alibi in being" hammers home the idea that kenosis, whether God's or Christ's, is not about ontology or epistemology but a command to be *lived*.

Man's kenosis, Bakhtin and Levinas alike would argue (albeit for somewhat different Scriptural reasons), is tied to the idea of incarnation; and this, in turn, is for Bakhtin closely

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[93] "Judaism and Kenosis." In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (109).

[94] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

bound up with key literary ideas like the carnivalesque and the grotesque—the subjects of *Rabelais and His World*, to which we now turn.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God…And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory…" (John 1:1, 14). Commenting on John 1:14, Charles Campbell, in "Incarnate Word: Preaching and the Carnivalesque Grotesque," the third lecture in the Beecher Lecture Series at the Yale Divinity School, proposes an almost Talmudic reinterpretation: "The Word became grotesque and dwelt among us." For in stark contrast to classical theism's obsession with the *Dignum Deo*, the Biblical idea of the Incarnation defies classical understandings of perfection, with its accent on the timeless, the impassible, and the omnipotent. The Incarnation, properly understood, suggests a *degradation* of the Divine, "a paradoxical anomaly that transgresses our binary categories and subverts the norms of human and Divine." The Incarnation, the Word become flesh, is in fact "a classical definition of the grotesque." Incarnation calls to mind not only Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque but his talk of the carnivalesque as well. Carnival has as its root *carne*, or flesh, and is a celebration of the fleshly, the carnal, over abstraction—specifically, over *perfection*, as in timelessness, impassibility, and omnipotence. One cannot but recall at this juncture our earlier discussions of Grossman—specifically, Ikonnikov's talk of the reification of the good that obtains between flesh-and-blood individuals, its perversion into The Good, in the name of which all manner of evil is permitted—as well as Levinas, including his talk of the rationalism and abstraction (*thematization*, i.e.) essential to totality versus the inherently ethical (and *kenotic*) infinity.

In fact, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, wherein he discusses at length the history of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, reveals another vital aspect of incarnation—namely, its implications for totality and totalizing regimes or systems of thought. Like Grossman and Levinas before him, Bakhtin experienced the horrors of totalizing political and philosophical systems—hence the striking resonance in many of their key ideas or motifs, including those of incarnation, kenosis, and (holy) folly. As Michael Holquist observes in the Prologue to *Rabelais and His World*, the text is in one sense "a parable and a guidebook for its times." One cannot appreciate Bakhtin's project without regard for the historical context in which he lived and thought. I would argue that *Rabelais and His World* can equally be understood in a *theological* sense; that together with his other texts, in particular *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and *Problems with Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he is crafting a kenotic theology that has implications not merely spiritual but political and aesthetic as well.

Thematically and methodologically, Bakhtin is united with Grossman and Levinas in attempting to make a space for God amidst the antitheistic, totalizing philosophies and political systems of the twentieth century. Each oppose these totalizing tendencies in the same manner, namely, by appeals to kenosis and holy folly—to an *otherwise than being*. For kenosis is at widdershins with the "ways of this world," i.e., the monism of a purely naturalistic or ontological reality as much as the "biologistic and historiosophical"[95] assumptions derived such a reality. The implications for a kenotic understanding of the world and humanity are nothing short of uncanny against this backdrop. "Bakhtin's carnival, surely the most provocative concept in this

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[95] Buber, *I and Thou*, 105.

book, is not only not an impediment to revolutionary change," argues Holquist, "it is revolution itself" (*Rabelais and His World*, xviii).

It is to the Bakhtinian understanding of revolution that we will now turn. As we will see, it has profound resonances with Levinas' ideas and helps to throw light on aspects of his thought that are passed over or ignored altogether.

Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, Holquist notes in his introduction to the text, was written with a two-fold purpose: For one, it is a timeless discussion of the history of literary theory and poetics, capable of addressing fellow scholars in multiple times and places. For another, it represents an oblique but authoritative commentary on the aftermath of the Communist Revolution in Russia—what Levinas, as we have argued, might call a study of the reification inherent to totality—in this case, the infantilization and dehumanization wrought by Soviet totalitarianism (xiv-xv). A third purpose, as we shall see, is suggested by Coates in *Christianity in Bakhtin*, and that is *theological*. True enough; Bakhtin is critical of Catholicism, which leads some read *Rabelais and his World* as a critique of Christianity from a Marxist perspective. They miss Bakhtin's often indirect comparison of sixteenth-century Catholicism to Stalinism, which he links in terms of their attempts to impose a totalizing monoglossia upon their adherents, thereby negating the dialogism so vital to a truly human existence and to ethical behavior in particular. "In a recent article, Turbin reports that Bakhtin once remarked to him, 'The gospel, too, is carnival' (1990, 25)," notes Coates. In this same vein, she goes on to argue that *Rabelais and His World* represents Bakhtin initiating "a dialogue with the Christian world-view as part of a continuing attempt to recuperate some part of this as a meaningful resource for life in a particularly dark twentieth-century context" (126). Hence for him the appeal of the grotesque

and, by extension, incarnation and kenosis: Like Grossman and Levinas, Bakhtin witnessed the murderous reductionism inherent to totalizing philosophies like Communism, which reifies and fetishizes Man at the expense of individual, flesh-and-blood men and women.

Jesus' treatment of the woman with the issue of blood in the Gospel of Mark (5:21-34), to cite but one example, serves as an incredible contrast to the reification and balkanization inherent to totalizing systems like Communism: Jesus, we find, transgresses the social and political boundaries. Not only does he affiliate with the downcast and despised; he allows a diseased woman to come into physical contact with his person. His transgressive nature is further highlighted by the fact that just as the woman leaks blood, Jesus "leaks" power: She reaches for his cloak and is healed as soon as she makes contact. Jesus senses the transmission of power and asks who touched his cloak. Almost comically, his disciples chide him for asking such a question amidst the throng of people. Jesus, we see, is not only a transgressor but capable of being transgressed. This, Bakhtin would say, is the grotesque and the carnivalesque at their best: Boundaries are crossed, hierarchies inverted; the sacred is profaned, but in the process, the sacred highlights the sanctity of the profane.

It is of little wonder, then, that Bakhtin should seek as a remedy to the "gloomy, disincarnated" truths of classical theism and Communism alike the ideas of incarnation and kenosis: "Many aspects of Jesus' ministry reflect and carry forward the materialising [sic] and familiarizing [sic] principle inherent in the act of Incarnation itself," maintains Coates (132-33), an idea echoed by Holquist in his Prologue to *Rabelais and His World*: "The 'grotesque realism' of which so much is made in this book is a point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism" (xvii).

For Bakhtin, Rabelais' works are to be lauded for their rebellion against the monoglossia implicit to the worldview birthed by the Renaissance. The Renaissance represents a rejection of the Medieval celebration of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, which in turn are borne out of the incarnational emphasis of the New Testament (xv). Put in somewhat more Levinasian terms, Rabelais subverts the totalizing behaviors of the Renaissance by means of his focus on the bodily, the concrete, the flesh-and-blood. Punishment is often meted out against those who defy totality, who refuse to be appropriated unto the Same. One such punishment, as Levinas would attest (if only through his love of Dostoyevskian protagonists like Zosima, who are deemed "holy fools"), is to be labeled "irrational," as a "fool" or a "madman." Yet this is precisely what Rabelais' texts celebrate.

It is worth noting, too, that *Rabelais and His World* shares with texts like "The Dialogic Imagination" and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* a profound respect for the novel. All of the aforementioned texts not only celebrate heteroglossia and dialogism but, concordantly, critique the practice of canonization, which Bakhtin regards as a tool of monoglossia in its attempts to impose an all-encompassing narrative and language. "The 'grotesque realism' of which so much is made in this book is a point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism," Holquist observes (xvii). Like Levinas, then, Bakhtin is attempting to answer a remarkably similar question, which might be summarized as follows: question, "Where is God amidst totalizing –isms and –asms of systems like Communism and Fascism?" Underlying this question is of course the matter of God's relationship to the world. Bakhtin, like Levinas—and, for that matter, Dostoevsky and Grossman—promote a holy folly or kenosis in opposition to totalizing systems, whether theological, philosophical, political, or linguistic. In

Bakhtin, this opposition is expressed through his celebration of carnival and the grotesque: As we will see, a God who stoops low and enters into the lives of his creatures and thereby blurs the rational ("ontotheological") distinction between Himself and the world, is a kind of carnival celebration wherein the Upper and the Lower are reversed. Fools and madmen become the highest examples of God's relation to the world—which, as we have said almost to the point of bathos, embody the subversion of the *Dignum Deo* by the kenosis of God. Rabelais' texts, in this same light, are revolutionary for their opposition to the Renaissance's attempts to quash the celebration of the concreteness of individual flesh-and-blood human beings who bleed, excrete, and copulate in favor of an idealized (reified, i.e.) Humanity. And this of course recalls Levinas' opposition to exalting Existence over existents, Being over individual human beings. Only a uniquely physical being, after all, has needs, and can therefore take the bread from his or her own mouth and give it to the other in an ethical act. If the Renaissance unifies and binds together (into a system, e.g.), Rabelais celebrates those forces, like the grotesque, that subvert the carefully-conceived boundaries between people, whether social, political, or even epistemological. Levinas, in a similar vein, argues that ethics is about respecting the Other's alterity while embracing a vulnerability and a nakedness before him or her—a closeness-in-separation. Bakhtin echoes this idea when he writes that,

> carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During

> carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7)

And what, Bakhtin hastens to ask, is carnival without the clown, the fool, the madman? Insofar as he is concerned, such figures are not mere spectacles; they represent the embodiment of a God who shuns the *Dignum Deo* and embraces kenosis, thereby lifting up mankind by stooping low to meet him. Accordingly, clowns and fools negate the hierarchies so beloved by totalizing systems. Like the carnivalesque in general (and to which they were in the Medieval era so inextricably bound), they occupy a kind of middle ground, bringing into dialogue the High and the Low, spiritually but also socially (8). One has but to recall Dmitri and his vision of the "wee one" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which undoes him and renders him a sort of fool (as evidenced by the repeated associations of "foolish" [and related cognates] with Dmitri's name). Like the celebrant in the Medieval carnival, Dmitri has been "reborn," opened to genuine (ethical) relations with his fellows. For Bakhtin—as for Levinas—this rebirth is the essence of genuine utopianism (9). The ontological order, Levinas might say, is suspended, allowing infinity to penetrate totality. And in this same vein, it must be added that this undoing of the social and ontological order represents a return to humanity's origins in God. Man is created separate from God, "atheistic"—yet this implies, however indirectly, a shared capacity to undertake an emptying or kenosis of his own for his fellow human beings. In a further parallel with Levinas, who argues that goodness and ethical behavior represents a folly, a rebellion of sorts against the *conatus essendi*—without which, ironically, ethics is impossible, inasmuch as only a separate, self-contained being can empty himself and sacrifice for the Other—Bakhtin

argues that "Degradation [as celebrated in the carnivalesque] means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better" (23). In the Renaissance, however, the bodily was seen as something to be sloughed in favor of the abstract, the idealized, the reified. The Eternal trumped the temporal, the Spiritual the bodily. Anything in man that denoted imperfection, incompleteness, or ambivalence was therefore demeaned (29). This of course calls to mind Levinas' claim that totality glories in the abstract, the ideal, the theoretical (the incorporeal, in other words).

A key point made by Bakhtin is the role of humor in different eras in human history: If in the Medieval era the laughter elicited by the clown or the fool was a holy laughter, healing the ruptures imposed by society, in other eras it became something altogether different. For the Romantics, for instance, carnival and the grotesque connoted "cold humor, irony, sarcasm…It's positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum" (37-38). Levinas, for his part, would agree with this idea; the humor of carnival, which celebrates the undoing of hierarchies that impede ethical (kenotic) behavior, is an aspect of infinity, which makes space for the other and manifests the *Otherwise* than being in this world. It is no stretch to go on to say that he would likewise regard "cold humor, irony, [and] sarcasm," all of which reinforce hierarchy and division, a function of totality. (By contrast, it might be argued that healthy humor is necessary for a Levinasian ethics, by which we mean a humor directed by the self *towards* itself, inasmuch as such humor necessarily entails a calling into question of the self by itself and therefore implies the possibility of a pouring out of the self—which is to say, a *kenosis*.)

As Bakhtin goes on to argue, the Medieval grotesque inspires laughter and a subversion of hierarchy, and therefore a sort of holy boldness; whereas the Romantic (and the Renaissance, for that matter) grotesque inspires a balkanizing, anti-dialogic fear. It is interesting to note in this same vein the contrast between the fantasy and science fiction of a C. S. Lewis—himself a medievalist—and H. P. Lovecraft, a key figure in the advent of "weird fiction" and a materialist and nihilist: Whereas the latter sees what is alien (fauns or Martians, for instance) as something unqualifiedly positive, a new way of seeing and/or being, for Lovecraft the alien is something inherently antihuman, and therefore a harbinger of insanity (as opposed, i.e., to the life-affirming madness of holy fools and madmen like Zosima and Tikhon). The former's fearlessness, Bakhtin might say, arises from his devotion to incarnation and kenosis; whereas the latter's penchant for horror and madness stems from his rejection of ideas like incarnation and kenosis in favor of the doctrines of what Buber in *I and Thou* calls "biologism" and historiosophy" (105).

Returning to the subject of laughter in Bakhtin, he notes that the laughter associated with Easter and Christmas is centered on the grotesque: Christ, the man-God, violates the hierarchical modes of the world by disregarding the *Dignum Deo* for the sake of the relationship with man. "The Word became grotesque and dwelt among us," as Charles Campbell translates John 1:14 in his aforementioned lecture for the Yale Divinity School. The incarnate Christ not only breaks down barriers between God and humanity but between human and human:

> Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. It unveils the material bodily principle in its true meaning. Laughter opened men's

> eyes on that which is new, on the future. This is why it not only permitted the expression of an antifeudal, popular truth; it helped to uncover this truth and to give it an internal form. (94)

In *Preaching Fools*, Campbell builds on Bakhtin's idea, arguing that the laughter elicited by the Crucifixion is of a double nature; not merely arrogantly mocking the idea of a "grotesquery" like Christ Jesus, but expressing a profound ambivalence, a questioning, of totalizing systems:

> At the deepest level, this laughter is the laughter of unsettled irony, and it is profoundly theological. Such laughter expresses the complex, inexpressible incongruities at the heart of the gospel. It is the unsettled laughter of those who discern that the cross confounds and claims us at the same time. It is laughter in the midst of scandalous paradox, humble laughter that recognizes the impossibility of ever capturing or controlling the cross in human words or systems. It is the laughter of preaching fools. (27)

In rather more Levinasian terms, one might say that medieval laughter celebrates not merely the future, the possibility of living and dying for one's fellows (per the Lord's prayer: "on earth as it is in Heaven," i.e.), but the imperfect—goodness, i.e., which is human and incomplete, as always there is *more* to do—versus Goodness, which implies perfection, what is *inhuman*. Hence, Bakhtin continues a little further on in *Rabelais in His World*, the eighteenth century's derision for Rabelais. "The Enlightenment had a lack of historical sense, an abstract and rationalist utopianism, a mechanistic conception of matter, a tendency to abstract generalization and typification on the one hand, and to documentation on the other hand," he observes (116). In this he recalls Levinas' talk of totality as an exaltation of the theoretical over the ethical, the

abstract over the corporeal, and the *Otherwise* than being over Being itself. Like Rabelais, Levinas' thought, for all its stress on separateness, nevertheless implies a union of sorts originating in the *Otherwise* or infinity, which, contra Being, requires us to make a space for the Other and to exalt his or her own well-being over our own.

In another parallel with Levinas, Bakhtin expresses unreserved praise for Pico della Mirandola, an attitude he shares with Rabelais, whose Pantagruel alludes to Pico's speech *Oratio de hominis dignitae* ("Of the Dignity of Man"). This speech makes the strikingly Levinasian claim that man is superior even to the "celestial spirits" insofar as he is more than a being, i.e., a participant in Being, but represents, a process. This correlates with Levinas' linking of time with meaning: the future has value, he argues in *Time and the Other*, because the future that should concern me is the future of the Other: his needs, his sufferings, his eventual death. Only a being capable of change—of calling him or herself into question, for example, and acknowledging that always there is more to do, that I can never answer the question "Is it righteous [for me] to be?" in the affirmative. One is *never* righteous; one can never do enough to justify the fact that one's place in the sun necessarily entails the fact that others are thereby denied a place in the sun. But Pico's (and for this reason Bakhtin's as well) similarities with Levinas run still deeper:

> He is outside all hierarchies, for a hierarchy can determine only that which represents stable, immovable, and unchangeable being, not free becoming. All the other beings remain forever what they were at the time of their creation, for their nature is ready-made and unchanging [and therefore, per Levinas, incapable of ethics]; it receives only one single seed which can and must develop in them. But man receives at his birth the seeds of every form of life. He may choose the

> seed that will develop and bear fruit. He grows and forms it in himself. Man can become a plant or an animal, but he can also become an angel and a son of God.[96]

Does not Levinas, as we have seen, argue that in some sense God's power is delimited by man's, that the fate of the cosmos—its proximity or distance from God—is incumbent upon man's devotion to the Torah? Does he not in "Judaism and Kenosis" describe God's kenosis precisely in these terms? God willingly subordinates His power to man's free choice? Is it not also true that in "The Temptation of Temptation" Levinas refers to Rav Abdimi bar Hasa's teaching that in Exodus 19:17 "…the Holy One, blessed be He, inclined the mountain over them like a tilted tub and that He said: If you accept the Torah, all is well, if not here will be your grave," and that he proceeds to offer the following gloss:

> What wonderful circumstances in which to exercise one's free will—a sword of Damocles!....The choice of the Jewish way of being, of the difficult freedom of being Jewish, would have been a choice between this way and death. Already *eyn berera!* "the Torah or death," "the truth or death," would not be a dilemma that man gives himself. This dilemma would be imposed by force or the logic of things. The teaching, which the Torah is, cannot come to the human being as a result of a choice. That which must be received in order to make freedom of choice possible cannot have been chosen, unless after the fact. In the beginning was violence.[97]

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[96] *Rabelais and His World*, 364.

[97] In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (34).

It should be noted that Levinas maintains that this choice is all-too real, that its magnitude is such that to choose otherwise leads to death—the death of meaning, of goodness, of the Other. Only mankind, Levinas would say with Pico (and Bakhtin), can bear this burden, insofar as man, like God, is capable of calling himself into question and undertaking his own kenosis of emptying for the sake of the Other.

To return to Pico, Bakhtin goes on to say that

> Pico preserves the language of the hierarchy, he preserves in part the old values, but essentially the hierarchy is suspended. Such concepts as becoming, the existence of many seeds and of many possibilities, the freedom of choice, leads man toward the horizontal line of time and of historic becoming. Let us stress that the body of man reunites in itself all the elements and kingdoms of nature, both the plants and the animals. Man, properly speaking, is not something completed and finished, but open, uncompleted. Such is Pico della Mirandola's basic idea. (364)

Such a view, then, challenges the Classical (Greek, i.e.) idea of the Great Chain of Being. This is because man's height is paradoxically tied to his humility, his lowness. His "baseness" or physicality makes possible his ability to take the bread from his own mouth and offer it to another. Only an imperfect, incomplete being, a flesh-and-blood being, can behave ethically. To take these ideas still further, consider that the idea of the *Dignum Deo* is discretely critiqued here: timelessness, immutability, and impassibility—the classical hallmarks of "perfection"—entail a lack of relationality, and therefore ethics. God, as we have argued elsewhere, is a God

Who *risks.* Carnival is "the feast of becoming, change, and renewal," challenging all that is "immortalized and completed." Along essentially the same lines, Campbell writes in *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* that "Carnival is 'the feast of becoming, change, and renewal,' challenging all that is 'immortalized and completed.' Carnival is, in short, a thoroughly liminal space, in which new relationships, new forms, and new speech become possible" (75).

God does not hide beyond "perfection" but limits Himself for the sake of man, makes man responsible for the elevation or degradation of the world. He risks His name, He risks thematization at the hands of His creatures, and He risks the possibility of a Shoah and, accordingly, the possibility of His own "Shoah." David Patterson and others have made the case that the Shoah is an assault on God, an attempt at Deicide, and Levinas—and likely Dostoevsky and Bakhtin—would concur with such a view. All are, to say again, united by their active embrace of the idea of kenosis.

To return briefly to Campbell's *Preaching Fools*, let us connect his own thoughts on Jesus and the Gospel as grotesque to Levinas' remarks on Rav Abdimi bar Hasa's reading of Exodus 19:17. Levinas makes the case that the Jews are a kind of people who stand in between God and world, like the Biblical prophets, and that their choice is of such immeasurable magnitude is in a sense no choice. Campbell, interestingly enough, makes a similar case for Christians, and for reasons not unrelated to those of Levinas, appearances notwithstanding:

> For Paul, too, the cross is an *interruption*. The cross is an apocalyptic interpretation or invasion of the old age—the old myths and conventions and

> rationalities of the world—by the new. As such, the cross unmasks the powers of the old age [ontology and epistemology, e.g.] for what they are: not the divine regents of life, but the agents of death…And in interrupting the old age with the new, the cross creates a space where we may be liberated from the powers of death, both to resist their deadly ways and to begin living in the new creation….[Ergo,] Christians stand at the "juncture of the ages" or the "turn of the ages." They stand "in-between," in a kind of liminal or threshold space where the two ages overlap, where the old is passing away while the new has not yet fully come. (21)

It should be clarified, however, that this passage need not be read triumphalistically; the "New" is actually a recapitulation of the "Old." Christians do not *replace* Israel but are grafted *onto* the vine of Israel. Despite certain differences, we are witness people to the character or personhood of God, which may be described as Levinas' *Otherwise* than being or infinity. Both groups, in other words, are testaments to God's *kenosis*. Though Christians are wont to forget the need to *live* Christ, to live his kenosis before mankind, the fact of the matter is that kenotic love is the manner by which the world will know that they are called by God. For Judaism it is no different: The two greatest commandments, the ones that capture the essence of and are the wellspring of all the others—love God with all your being and then some and *be* your love for your neighbor (the two commands are inextricably bound)—are the same for both groups. Both groups, to return to Levinas, are, by the world's standards, fools, clowns. And the essence of our folly can be summarized in a single word: *kenosis*. Biblically speaking, Christian fools "recall the disruptive, kenotic—self-emptying—character of the *incarnation*. In the incarnation of

Jesus, as the celebrants of carnival understand so well, God interrupts human presuppositions about the divine by becoming a human body and standing with human beings" (159). True enough: *the* Incarnation is highly problematic for Judaism; yet their view of the Torah is roughly analogous in that it seems to entails both an emptying on God's part, per Levinas in "Judaism and Kenosis," and a kenosis on the part of the orthodox Jew. The key, it cannot be overly stressed, is the *character* of God as it is revealed in His relationship to the world.

In a tangential note, it might be argued that the Church failed to undertake its own kenosis in that it embraced a theology of God as opposed to the Word of God, and not just any theology but a *theologia gloriae*—thereby denying, as Campbell would say, the disruptive, space-creating folly not only of Christ but of *following* Christ in a world wherein Being, ontology, is the defining force. "Preaching fools," by contrast, "are unafraid of being vulnerable. They are more like the self-emptying Christ than the exalted orator…One is reminded of the discerning words of G. K. Chesterton: 'Angels can fly, because they take themselves lightly; the devil fell because of gravity.' Preaching fools, however, playfully interrupt, disturb, and subvert the suffocating prisons of closed seriousness. They play the fool, for Life" (*Preaching Fools*, 161, 165)

Are not *all* followers of the God of Torah required to play the fool? Is this not implied in Levinas' coining of the term *Otherwise than being*? Is the *being-for-the-other* not folly in a world dominated by totality? And would this not ten to explain his admiration for Dostoevsky, the writer of kenosis and kenotic writer *par excellence*?

Now that we have discussed Dostoevsky in some depth and brought to light Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky as a kenotic writer *par excellence*, let us turn to another writer of no small significance for Levinas: Vasily Grossman. Despite the fact that Grossman is a Jew and

apparently an atheist, he looks to holy folly—to the idea of kenosis, in other words—as an answer to the totalizing –isms and –asms that have wrought such devastation throughout the West in the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 5

LEVINAS AND GROSSMAN—TOTALITY, MATERNITY, AND HOLY FOLLY

Death in the guise of belief is not going to prevail over me, for believers now believe anything and everything and do not love the truth, are in fact in despair of the truth, and that is death.

Death in the guise of unbelief is not going to prevail over me, for unbelievers believe nothing, not because truth does not exist but because they have already chosen not to believe, and would not believe, cannot believe, even if the living truth stood before them, and that is death.

….

Death in the form of isms and asms shall not prevail over me, orgasm, enthusiasm, liberalism, conservatism, Communism, Buddhism, Americanism, for an ism is only another way of despairing of the truth.

—Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (272-73)

In this chapter, I will focus on the resonances and shared motifs in Vasily Grossman and Emmanuel Levinas. Specifically, I will discuss their similar critiques of totality; their mutual fascination with maternity; and, finally, their shared "solution" to the problem of evil, which here I will term "holy folly." Holy folly is of course inextricably bound to the idea of kenosis, a powerful motif in Russian Orthodoxy, though it must be acknowledged that Grossman, like Tolstoy, tends to portray it in more secular terms—unlike Dostoevsky, to whom we will turn in the proceeding chapter. (Still, the ideas are related, and whether they can be separated and "secularized" will be a crucial question to be addressed in Chapter 7.) The essence of my

argument is that it is Grossman's appeal to holy folly—related, as we have stressed, to the idea of kenosis—is precisely what most appeals to Levinas about Grossman as a novelist and an ethical thinker. Furthermore, as we will see, their shared critique of totality, emphasis on maternity, and fascination with kenosis are of a piece. One aspect cannot be understood, for Levinas as for Grossman, without recourse to the others.

Before we begin, however, it is necessary to provide evidence of Levinas' high regard for Grossman and the latter's ethical influence on Levinas' thoughts on totality and its inevitable reification. "The great book which impressed me a lot, I have to say, is the book by Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, translated from the Russian, which I read in Russian," Levinas explains to François Poirié. "Grossman is very important, outside his value as a great writer; he is witness to the end of a certain Europe, the definitive end of the hope of instituting charity in the guise of a regime, the end of the socialist hope." Levinas goes on to note that despite all the tremendous hope attached to Marxism, which, theoretically, at least implies a "regime of charity," this hope devolved into "Stalinism and [complicitous] Hitlerian horror." Grossman, he avers, exposes the root of this horror: the reification of the individual human being into a Human, in the name of which any act, no matter how monstrous, can be perpetrated.[98] In a closely related vein, Levinas also praises Grossman's emphasis in *Life and Fate* and elsewhere on "the little act of goodness…[which] remains the sole refuge of the good in being. Unbeaten, it undergoes the violence of evil, which, as little goodness, it can neither vanquish nor drive out.

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[98] "Interview with François Poirié." In *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 23-83 (80-81).

The little goodness going only from man to man, not crossing distances to get to the places where events and forces unfold!"[99]

So: What *is* totality for Grossman? What, precisely, does it entail? *Life and Fate* abounds with examples, but for our purposes here I will focus on an extraordinary, even uncharacteristically esoteric conversation between the nuclear physicist Viktor Shtrum and a colleague from the Institute, Dmitry Chepyzhin. Viktor is facing a grave crisis at this juncture; his views, regardless of their scientific merit, have been deemed "dangerous" to Stalinist doctrine by the Party Committee. His friends and family are urging him to "repent" of his error lest he lose his position, his freedom, and in all likelihood his life. He remains steadfast in his refusal, however, causing even the closest people in his circle to distance themselves for fear of facing imprisonment and interrogation in the hellish Lubyanka. "'And what's particularly painful, almost unbearable, is that for some reason all this has to coincide with the Russian victories,'" he muses exasperatedly (686). Russian victories, of course, allowed Stalin to consolidate his power and to extend his totalitarian system to gradually swallow up everyone and everything, from nuclear physics to literature to painting and architecture, all of which must serve the greater good of the system, reflecting its underlying monism. "'Our fine academicians think that science is the domestic servant of practice, that it can be put to work according to Shchedrin's principle: "Your wish is my command." That's the only reason why science is tolerated at all,'" Chepyzhin observes in an outburst preliminary to a rapturous discourse on the true, inestimable value of Science (686).

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[99] "The Other, Utopia, and Justice." In *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 200-210 (206-207).

On a deeper level, the conversation reveals, perhaps unintentionally, a crucial insight regarding the deep roots of totality: "'And I thought they'd be offering you everything you wanted on a silver platter—on a *golden* platter,' said Chepyzhin. 'Why? I've been "dragging science into the swamp of Talmudic abstraction", cutting it off from reality.'" (687) This allusion to "Talmudic abstraction" is more than a mere anti-Semitic slur—for Viktor is indeed Jewish. It belies an even more fundamental conflict, namely, that between what Levinas calls totality and infinity.—Which of course returns to our prior discussion of Hellenism's obsession with the monism and its penchant for grand, universalizing claims that render further discourse irrelevant. Talmud, by contrast, implies disputation and dialogue, celebrating as it does the proliferation of voices in the endless search for Truth. Ergo, it *necessitates*, as Levinas would say, the other rather as opposed to assimilating her or him to a system and thereby reducing her or him to the Same.

Yet this view of science as "useful" only to the system is but one aspect of the mode of totality, as becomes apparent from Chepyzhin's aforementioned paean to Science. "'No! Scientific discoveries…do more for the perfection of man than steam-engines, turbines, aeroplanes or the whole of metallurgy from Noah to the present day. They perfect the soul! The human soul!'" (687). Thus far, Levinasian readers of Grossman might be thinking of the former's "The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other," wherein he names science as a prerequisite of the idea of the rights of man: "A rational discipline, born in Europe, could broaden out and be available to all humanity. Into a world that until then was felt to be doomed to an arbitrary play of forces that…only counted in proportion to their power, in their obstinacy that Beings and institutions invest in persevering in their being and their traditions—there came

the *a priori* of the rights of man understood as intellectual *a priori*, and becoming in fact the measure of all law."[100] If so, however, such readers are soon in for something of a shock, for Chepyzhin soon after reveals that for him science is religious, or at any rate theological, with all that that implies for Levinas. Viktor at one point vows that he will keep the faith, and it would seem that Chepyzhin interprets this as an invitation to reveal the true breadth and depth of his views. He explains that it is not the case, as is presumed, that "divine power" is the only possible force capable of limiting infinity. The real power, he plunges on despite Viktor's obvious preoccupation, is life itself. And life, in turn, is yoked to freedom. "'Freedom is the fundamental principle of life. That is the boundary—between freedom and slavery, between inanimate matter and life….The whole evolution of the living world has been a movement from a lesser to a greater degree of freedom. This is the very essence of evolution—the highest being is the one with the most freedom'" (690). In a manner oddly reminiscent of Levinas' assertion that "'I think' comes down to 'I can'—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality,"[101] Chepyzhin proceeds to explain that in time mankind will conquer every inch of the globe, causing there to be "'a predominance of animate matter on earth…As humans spread to other planets and galaxies, animate matter will spread—and with it freedom. 'The universe will come to life. Everything in the world will become alive and thus free. Freedom—life itself—will overcome slavery'" (691). In and of itself, perhaps, this statement mightn't be cause for concern. Yet Chepyzhin goes on to argue that whereas he once concerned himself with astronomy, he now recognizes that the biology is of vastly greater import, inasmuch as mankind,

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[100] In *Outside the Subject*, 118-119.

[101] *Totality and Infinity*, 45-46.

endowed with increasingly greater freedom, will soon overcome the problems of transforming matter into energy, the vastness of the cosmos, and the mystery of life itself. In time, man will learn to harness psychic energy, at which point he will find himself endowed with "all the attributes of deity—omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience'" (691). By this point Viktor has been roused from his self absorption, finding himself sincerely provoked by his colleague's predictions:

> '…But man won't just stop there. After attaining equality with God, he will begin to solve the problems that were beyond God. He will establish communication with rational beings from the highest level of evolution, beings from another space and another time to whom the whole history of humanity seems a dim flicker. He will establish communication with the life of the microcosm whose evolution occurs within the twinkling of a man's eye. The abyss of time and space will be overcome. Man will finally be able to look down on God.' (691)
>
> Viktor, appalled at the implications of such knowledge in light of the history unfolding all about them—genocide, famine, collectivization—objects that mankind may soon find itself looking down upon Satan. "'What if [mankind] surpasses *him*? You say life is freedom…What if the life expanding through the universe should use its power to create a slavery still more terrible than your slavery of inanimate matter?'" What good, he asks, will omnipresence and omniscience do mankind if he fails to unlearn the behaviors on display in the Nazi and Soviet brutalities unfolding all around them? "'Do you think this man of the future will surpass Christ in his goodness?...What if he transforms the whole

world into a galactic concentration camp?'" (692). He concludes by asking his interlocutor if he believes that mankind can acquire "'kindness, morality, [and] mercy'" via evolution. Chepyzhin responds in the affirmative, that man's ability to love his fellow creatures will likewise improve with time. For his part, Viktor expresses grave doubts about this prospect, admitting that for all his love of Science, he, like many of his compeers, is motivated most of all by the desire to *get there first*: "'Science today should be entrusted to men of spiritual understanding, to prophets and to saints. But instead it's been left to chess-players and scientists.'" He acknowledges that while Chepyzhin might be motivated by genuinely noble impulses, precious few of his fellows are: "'If there's a Chepyzhin in Berlin, *he* won't refuse to do research on neutrons. What then?'" (693).

Here, it should be noted, Viktor sounds uncannily like Levinas:

> But the development of science and technology which are supposed to make possible the actual respect for the enlarged rights of man may, in turn, bring with it inhuman requirements that make up a new determinism, threatening the free movements that it was to make possible. For example, in a totally industrialized society or in a totalitarian society—which are precisely the results of supposedly perfected social techniques—the rights of man are compromised by the very practices for which they supplied the motivation.[102]

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[102] "The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other." In *Outside the Subject*, 116-125 (121).

Viktor muses at one point during his conversation with Chepyzhin: "We think we're so wise—to us Hercules seems like a child with rickets" (692). Ironically, this betrays the depths to which even so admirable a figure as Viktor has fallen under the spell of the Western world's obsession with ontology. He equates wisdom with power and thereby falls into the trap Levinas decries in "The Temptation of Temptation": If the ultimate temptation is that of endless disengagement with the world whereby the ego *apprehends* the world without being changed or compromised in any fashion, which in turn risks assimilating the other into a Whole—"From this stems the inability to recognize the other person as other person, as outside of all calculation, as neighbor, as first come" (*Nine Talmudic Readings*, 34-35)—then the only viable alternative, morally speaking, is to *invert* this order. Namely, by emulating the Israelites' response to God at Mount Sinai: "'We will do and we will hear.'" Goodness is neither a question of ontology or epistemology nor a rational consideration of the alternatives of good and evil; the good, rather, speaks to the ego anarchically, prior to rational consideration. This "'We will do and we will hear,'" then, bespeaks a "prior fidelity," which, as Levinas explains, amounts to "an absolute uprightness which is also absolute self-criticism, read in the eyes of the one who is the goal of my uprightness and calls me into question….All the suffering of the world weighs upon the point where a separation is occurring, a reversal of the essence of being. A point substitutes itself for the whole" (48-49).—And this, in turn, points to the ideas of holy folly and kenosis, which are inversions of the "natural order of things" apropos of the world of *esse* and *natura*. But more of this last idea anon…

Chepyzhin himself might be said to represent the older, more optimistic science of the preceding century, a science that acknowledged the existence of a Creator or Designer, deducing

his existence from the fine-tuning of the cosmos. Writes Carl Becker, "'Nature was regarded as a delicately adjusted machine, a stationary engine whose mechanism implied the existence of a purposeful engineer, a beneficent first cause or Author of the Universe.'"[103] Even amidst such an optimistic account, however, the seeds of the future crisis may be discerned. Even if Chepyzhin's optimism were somehow justified—if, that is, man were indeed capable of evolving morally, becoming more sensitive to the needs and sufferings of his fellows—it seems, nonetheless, that for him "man is yoked into an inescapable process that he cannot resist, though he may be deluded enough to try," as Buber has it; and even if this process has more in common with beatification than daemonization, it is still, qua inescapable, a kind of doom. "Every event that is either perceivable by the senses and 'physical' or discovered or found in introspection and 'psychological' is considered to be of necessity caused and a caused," he explains in *I and Thou*—the epitome of the It-world (100). Chepyzhin's view, in short, embodies key characteristics of Levinas'—and Grossman's—concept of totality. Focused as it is on the all-important questions of ontology and epistemology, this view lusts after "[a] knowledge which takes its distance, [a] knowledge without faith," and, insofar as it is "logically tortuous; examining prior to adherence—excluding adherence, indulging in temptation—[it] is, above all a degeneration of reason, and only as a result of this, the corruption of morality."[104] For all his noble talk and good intentions, Chepyzhin is a devotee of thematization, which leads inexorably to totality. Assuming Chepyzhin actually believes in the Biblical God, what he worships is in fact a *theological model* of this God—which might explain his eagerness to *transcend* this God.

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[103] Cited in Pearcey and Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Naturalistic Philosophy,* 116.

[104] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (48).

Thematization is, after all, simply a manifestation of idolatry. (At this point, we can perhaps begin to understand some of Levinas' iconoclasm, i.e., his fears regarding the thematizable God of classical theism.)

In point of fact, the aforementioned seeds of crisis quickly germinated, ushering in a totality sans God. "By the end of the nineteenth century, mechanistic philosophy had become radically materialistic and reductionistic," observe Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton in *The Soul of Science*. "It pictured living things as automata in a world governed by rigidly deterministic laws—with no purpose, no God, no significance to human life" (116). "When a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relation process," Buber continues on in this same vein, teasing out the deeper implications, "it freezes into the It-world which is broken only intermittently by the eruptive, glowing deeds of solitary spirits."[105] Gone is the former optimism of the preceding century, replaced by what Buber calls a "dogma of running down" resulting from "[the] biologistic and historiosophical orientations" of the new age. Hence the despair, Levinas and Grossman would surely concur, which underlies such philosophies as Fascism and Communism. Hence, too, the rise of figures like Hitler and Stalin—the "solitary spirits" whose "eruptive, glowing deeds" did indeed interrupt the reign of the It-world even as they exemplified its monstrousness. In fact, Grossman—who, it should not be forgotten, worked not only as a chemist and an engineer before his turn to journalism—implies such a connection during one of Viktor's solitary musings:

> The century of Einstein and Planck was also the century of Hitler. The Gestapo and the scientific renaissance were children of the same age. How

[105] *I and Thou*, 103.

> humane the nineteenth century seemed, that century of naïve physics, when compared with the twentieth century, the century that had killed his mother. There is a terrible similarity between the principles of Fascism and those of contemporary physics. (94)

In a cosmos reductionistically conceived, there is only the pragmatic *How?* and *What?* of causality, to which everything, man included, is subject. In other words, there is no escaping the system. "Man disappears, to be viewed as some form of determined or behavioristic machine," writes Francis Schaeffer.[106]

Grossman's "The Hell of Treblinka," published in November 1944 in *Znamya*, is among the very earliest accounts of a death camp and was later referenced at the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal.[107] It employs logos, pathos and ethos to devastating effect and in so doing transcends genres, "being at once a work of "investigative journalism, a historical and philosophical essay, and a requiem to the victims," as Alexandra Popoff puts it in *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century* (173). His description of the horrors is accentuated by his emphasis on the camp's obvious technological and industrial sophistication, in particular its "[t]hrift, precision, calculation and pedantic cleanliness."[108] The essay is permeated by Grossman's sense of the complete and utter domination, as Levinas would say, of hundreds of thousands of existents for the "greater Good" of a totality—in this case, Hitler's Germany. As we will see in our discussion of the holy fool Ikonnikov later in this chapter, Grossman is all-too

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[106] *How Should We Then Live*, 146-47.

[107] *Vasily Grossman: A Writer at War*, 281.

[108] "The Hell of Treblinka." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 126-79 (128).

aware that Treblinka is a world wherein Existence has trumped existents—a world, i.e., wherein an abstract Good has trumped the simple, even stupid goodness of holy folly and kenosis: "Even at the most terrible times, through all the mad acts carried out in the name of Universal Good and the glory of States, times when people were tossed about like branches in the wind, filling ditches and gullies like stones in an avalanche—even then this senseless, pathetic kindness remained scattered throughout life like atoms," Grossman proclaims through this "cow-eyed" holy fool (*Life and Fate*, 407-08, 531).

Grossman begins by noting the consideration of the death camp's location—"it was possible to bring transports from all four points of the compass: north, south, east and west" (133). Likewise the camp's layout, which at each step effectually concealed the horrors that lay ahead of its victims. He remarks on the efficiency of the *Wachmanner* and S.S. *Unteroffiziere*, whose mentality he compares to professional "cattle drivers at the entrance to a slaughterhouse."[109] Even the sadism of its more notorious workers—Stumpfe, the "Laughing Death"; Svidersky, "Master Hammer"; and Preifi, "The Old One," who gleefully shot in the mouth any prisoners rooting for food in the rubbish dump—was harnessed to serve the ends of the death camp: namely, by instilling an annihilating fear in the victims, thereby allowing the machine to run at peak efficiency.[110] Nightmarish as the behaviors of such individuals may be, more disturbing still is the government's pragmatism in harnessing their individual pathologies to its own ends. Grossman later singles out a S.S. officer named Sepp, who displayed a flare for dispatching children with particularly efficient brutality, and his remarks are apropos of all of the various and

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[109] Ibid, 139.

[110] "The Hell of Treblinka." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 126-79 (130).

sundry cogs in the machine of Treblinka: "Sepp's actions were necessary. They helped reduce people to a state of psychic shock. They were an expression of the senseless cruelty that crushed both will and consciousness. He was a useful, necessary screw in the vast machine of the Fascist State."[111] One cannot help but be reminded of Primo Levi's insights regarding the Lager's "geometrical madness," its express purpose "to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly afterwards."[112]

Grossman goes on to describe how the overseers determined that contact between the victims must be cut short, in particular in the moments prior to gassing: "The psychiatrists of death knew the simple laws that operate in slaughterhouses all over the world, laws which, in Treblinka, were exploited by brute beasts in order to deal with human beings."[113] Ironically, these selfsame "psychiatrists of death" were well aware of the potentially damaging effects of such endless brutalization on the perpetrators; Grossman relates that "Several times a year they went on leave to Germany, since their bosses considered work in this 'factory' detrimental to health and were determined to look after their workers."[114] Treblinka was no mere orgy of xenophobia or racist violence; the amount of forethought and prudent planning—*sensitivity*, one may very nearly say—that went into this place cannot be stressed too urgently. But *how*? *How* did this monstrous place come to be?

In the last analysis, such violence and dehumanization cannot be understood in terms of biology or sociology or economics; they are in fact rooted in *philosophy*: "Western philosophy

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[111] Ibid, 149.

[112] *Survival in Auschwitz*, 51.

[113] "The Hell of Treblinka." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 126-79 (144).

[114] Ibid, 168.

has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being," as Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity* (43-44); and comprehension, as we have stressed, entails assimilating the other, if only as a node in mental map of the cosmos. More often, though, such thematization is but the prelude to a more literal violence to follow, "where power, by essence murderous of the other" (47), is given free reign: "…everything is com-prehended. The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the Same" (37-38). Philosophy is, in short, solipsism, which is tantamount to *monism*—the antithesis, as we will see, of kenosis.

Grossman also relates in "The Hell of Treblinka" that the shaving of the women's hair served to somehow calm them by confirming the illusion that their lives were to be prolonged, though in fact the real purpose was more banal: "It was raw material…Every witness said that the vast heaps of hair…were first disinfected, then packed into sacks and sent off to Germany."[115] This reduction of humans to materiel he returns to several more times, as in his account of the confiscation of jewelry prior to the gassing and the harvest of false teeth and fillings afterwards. Again, one cannot help but recall Levinas' talk of thematization and comprehension: "'Com-PREHENSION," explains David Patterson, is literally "a seizing, a laying hold, an arrest" of the other—i.e., appropriation, consumption, absorption."[116] One cannot but be reminded of Levi's account in *Survival in Auschwitz* of Nazis referring to (Jewish) inmates of the Lager as "pieces" (16) or "'Kazett', a singular neuter word" (121); of the nurse who employs him in a

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[115] Ibid, 145.

[116] Class notes from HUHI 7134: Advanced Topics in European Thought, Culture, and Society (spring 2016).

"demonstration" "as if [he] was a corpse in an anatomy class" (49); of Doktor Pannwitz regarding him "as if across a glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds" (105); of Alex's cleaning his hand by rubbing it on Levi's shoulder, "without hatred and without sneering" (107-08). Despite the comparative innocuousness of these behaviors, they reveal the essentially *metaphysical* process underlying the Shoah: namely, thematization, appropriation, domination.—Which, at the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, contrasts so very beautifully with the simple, even stupid goodness—or holy folly—of Naum Rozenberg in *Life and Fate*. Forced to work in the crematoria under the supervision of one Scharfuhrer Elf, who demands that the corpses be referred to as "items," Rozenberg risks his life, however obliquely, by steadfastly addressing them as *people*: "He used these words only to himself—otherwise the Scharfuhrer would have emptied nine grams of metal into him—but he continued obstinately muttering: 'So now you're coming out of the grave, old chap…There's no need to clutch your mother like that, my child, you won't be separated from her now…' 'What are you muttering about over there? Me? Nothing. You must have imagined it.' And he carried on muttering; that was his little struggle…" (200-01).

Grossman describes, too, the various deceptions employed in Treblinka as "an essential feature of the conveyor-belt executioner's block" and records the use of terror as the process neared its end: "At this point a new principle had to be implemented if the conveyor-belt executioner's block was to continue to function smoothly. The word "*Achtung!*" was replaced by the hissing sounds of "*Schneller! Schneller! Schneller!* Faster! Faster! Faster! Faster into non-

existence!"[117] At one point he observes how the German "r" sounds at once "hard and guttural…like the crack of a whip,"[118] which calls to mind Levi's description of "that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to a millennial anger."[119] Even the most fundamental elements of speech, it seems, are subject to weaponization. Should this surprise, though? If, as Levinas says, "saying to the Other" "precedes all ontology" and is "the ultimate relation in Being"[120]—i.e., ethics as first philosophy—it is no wonder that the Nazis went to such lengths to undermine speech, even their own, by brutalizing and weaponizing it in various and sundry ways. Grossman himself remarks on the "never-ending sequence of abrupt commands—bellowed out in a manner in which the German army takes pride, a manner that is proof in itself of the Germans being a master race."[121] This lasts suggests a measure of deliberation on the Nazis' part, a calculated weaponizing of their own tongue in order to undermine the possibility of "saying to the Other"—which Levinas elsewhere describes in terms of the possibility of "apology," i.e., the self calling itself into question as it speaks to the other in conversation. "Rather than constituting a totality with this other as with an object, thought consists in speaking."[122]

In fine, Grossman is hardly unaware of the presence of logic, reason, empirical observation, and psychological analysis underlying every aspect of Treblinka's operation. "It was a

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[117] "The Hell of Treblinka." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 126-79 (147).

[118] Ibid, 143.

[119] *Survival in Auschwitz,* 19.

[120] *Totality and Infinity*, 47-48.

[121] "The Hell of Treblinka." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 126-79 (143).

[122] *Totality and Infinity*, 40.

conveyor-belt executioner's block; it was run according to the same principles as any other large-scale modern industrial enterprise."[123] He describes at some length the evolution of the place, its ongoing improvements as the Shoah progressed, including, among many other things, the efforts to remedy the initial complications surrounding the administration of the gas. He likewise describes the efforts that went into its demolition at war's end, discussing in particular the difficulties faced by the Nazis in incinerating the corpses, which would not burn even when doused in gasoline.

> There seemed to be no way around this problem, but then a thickset man of about fifty arrived from Germany, a member of the S.S. and a master of his trade. Hitler's regime, after all, had the capacity to produce experts of all kinds: experts in the use of a hammer to murder small children, expert stranglers, expert designers of gas chambers, experts in the scientifically planned destruction of large cities in the course of a single day. The regime was also able to find an expert in the exhumation and cremation of millions of corpses.[124]

Again, the sheer amount of intellectual energy involved in the construction—and, later, demolition—of the death camps staggers the mind.

"A particular kind of State does not appear out of nowhere," Grossman reflects, and in a manner very nearly Levinasian, phenomenologically as well as ethically. "What engenders a particular regime is the material and ideological relations existing among a country's citizens. It is to these material and ideological relations that we need to devote serious thought; the nature of

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[123] "The Hell of Treblinka." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 126-79 (155).

[124] Ibid, 163.

these relations is what should appal [sic] us."[125] Despite the intense enmity between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, his remarks are equally apropos of both regimes. In point of fact, Grossman would be loath to draw a significant distinction between the two systems. Indeed, *Life and Fate* was arrested by the Soviet authorities and the carbon paper in the typists' offices seized[126] precisely insofar as it depicts their uncanny *similarities*.

This idea is expressed throughout the text of *Life and Fate*, sometimes subtly, sometimes not. Perhaps the most insightful exploration of the regimes' kinship is to be found in a curious dialogue between Obersturmbannfuhrer Liss, an S.S. representative serving in an unnamed concentration camp, and Mikhail Sidorovich Mostovskoy, an inmate and an Old Bolshevik. After three weeks in the camp, Mostovskoy is summoned by Liss in the middle of the night—for interrogation, Mostovskoy naturally assumes. "'There's nothing for us to talk about,'" he declares. "'All you see is my uniform,'" Liss' replies. "'I was always a theoretician. I'm a Party member, but my real interest lies in questions of history and Philosophy. Surely not all the officers in your NKVD love the Lubyanka?'" (394). Liss proceeds to remark on the regimes' shared respect for Hegel (a fact Michael Mack, for one, would not find surprising), adding that each, likewise, must at times set him aside for the sake of work. Sensing Mostovskoy's animosity, he presents his hands and remarks that "'Our hands are like yours. They love great work and they're not afraid of dirt.'" Mostovskoy is appalled to recognize in Liss' words sentiments so very like his own. Liss, sensing an opportunity, becomes more enthused, proclaiming that each regime should recognize itself in the other. "'Do you really not recognize

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[125] Ibid, 150.

[126] Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 258.

yourselves in us—yourselves and the strength of your will? Isn't it true that for you too the world *is* your will? Is there anything that can make *you* waver?....You may think you hate us, but what you really hate is yourselves—yourselves in us'" (395). Liss' sentiments are of a piece with Levinas' assertion in *Totality and Infinity* that the origin of tyranny "lies back in the pagan 'moods,' in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved men can devote to their masters." Is it misguided, then, to detect in this talk of dirt and earth allusions to the great Nationalisms of the day and their endless refrains about blood and soil? Surely there is a profound connection between Grossman and Levinas, particularly in terms of the latter's assertion that in the One State "*Being* before the *existent,* ontology before metaphysics, is freedom (be it the freedom of theory) before justice. It is a movement within the same before obligation to the other" (47). As Liss' discourse on the regimes' similarity unfolds, this idea of the freedom of the One State to reduce justice to a mere value system will recur again and again.

Mostovskoy, recognizing the sincerity in Liss' words, is increasingly unnerved and remains silent. Liss, however, is overcome by his ardor. "'Do you understand me?...When we strike a blow against your army, it's ourselves that we hit…It's terrible. It's like committing suicide in one's sleep.'" Liss goes so far as to argue that neither can truly survive without the other, if only because the world regards each regime as equally loathsome.

For his part, Mostovskoy finds himself wishing for the sheer brutality of an interrogation rather the discomfiting intimacy of the discourse he fights in vain to resist. Interestingly, he reflects that his situation is like that of a man forced into a conversation about an illness he wishes with all his being to ignore.—And, as if reading his mind, Liss observes not long after,

"'I'm tormented by the same anxieties as you are…My word of honour [sic] as a Gestapo Officer. And I don't say that lightly'" (397).

Both States, as we see throughout this discourse, are at war with otherness; specifically, with the separation and interiority which are the *sine qua non* of otherness. Both States are borne out of monism, shot through—like much Western philosophy—with the same pathologies characteristic of Parmenidean, Spinozistic, and Hegelian philosophy. Both States, accordingly, desire a return to the totality of the One. "Metaphysics would endeavor to suppress this separation, to unite; the metaphysical being should absorb the being of the metaphysician," as Levinas observes in *Totality and Infinity*—the reason, perhaps, for the "illness" and angst afflicting Liss and Mostovskoy. Each has been subsumed by a totality—the *same* totality, as it turns out; and this realization is as catastrophic to the one as it is to the other. For in the end, all totalities, whether States or Philosophies, seek to thematize and appropriate all others; otherness represents "illusion and fall." The encounter between Liss and Mostovskoy has driven home to each man not merely the fact of his respective regime's shared roots; at an even deeper level, it has roused a formerly quiescent suspicion that the lost Oneness for which each State has committed such endlessly savage acts is *itself* the illusion: "But the philosophy of unity has never been able to say whence came this accidental illusion and fall, inconceivable in the Infinite, the Absolute, the Perfect" (102). Is the Good equivalent to the One, or does the very goodness of creation consist in separation and otherness? Grossman, like Levinas, answers the latter query in the affirmative.

By now Liss seems no longer able to help himself. He continues to pour out his soul to Mostovskoy:

> ‘Two poles of one magnet! Of course! If that wasn’t the case, then this terrible war wouldn’t be happening. We’re your deadly enemies. Yes, yes…But our victory will be your victory. Do you understand? And if you should conquer, then we shall perish only to live in your victory. It’s paradoxical: through losing the war we shall win the war—and continue our development in a different form.’ (397)

The realization that Liss is assuming a position of such profound vulnerability serves only to exacerbate Mostovskoy’s anxieties: “What a horrible thought! They were both ill, both worn out by the same illness, but one of them hadn’t been able to bear it and was speaking out, while the other remained silent, giving nothing away, just listening, listening…” (397).

At this point Liss brings forth a small mass of papers—a “manifesto” of sorts written by the holy fool Ikonnikov, a prisoner in the same camp. “‘You and I can feel only disgust at what’s written here. We two stand shoulder to shoulder against trash like this!’” Mostovskoy tries to provoke Liss to violence, but in vain. Instead Liss adopts a tone of almost jocular camaraderie: “‘The German Communists we’ve sent to camps are the same ones you sent to camps in 1937. Yezhov imprisoned them: Reichsfuhrer Himmler imprisoned them….Be more of a Hegelian, teacher’” (398). He proceeds to observe that both regimes have sent millions to their deaths, adding that the Germans, for their part, understand perfectly the rightness of the Soviets’ use of terror. This last brings Mostovskoy almost to the point of collapse:

> “Mostovskoy was struck by a new thought…What if his doubts were not just a sign of weakness, tiredness, impotence, lack of faith, contemptible shillyshallying? What if

these doubts represented what was most pure and honourable [sic] in him…? What if they contained the seed of revolutionary truth? The dynamite of freedom!" (399).

It is as if Mostovskoy is on the verge of an epiphany of Levinasian dimensions—for to my ear, at least, Mostovskoy is intuiting the true foundations of I-saying: responsibility not to a system, an –ism or –asm, a Good or a Nation, but to the neighbor, for whom one is "incessantly responsible.":

> "It is to be unique, as if I were elected to this responsibility, which gives me as well the possibility of recognizing myself as unique and irreplaceable, of saying 'I,'" writes Levinas. "Conscious that in each of my human endeavors—from which the other is never absent—I respond to his existence as a unique being."[127]

Recognizing that he is but a step removed from losing his faith in the One State, however, Mostovskoy draws upon his rage to slough off his asphyxiating doubts. "'The best advice I can offer you is to stop wasting your time on me,'" he informs Liss. "'You can do me in however you like!'" (401).

Liss makes one last appeal, maintaining that for all the superficial differences between the Nazis and the Soviets, they are, in essence, the same:

> 'There is no divide…In essence we are the same—both one-party States….We too call people to National Achievement, to Unity and Labour [sic]. We say, ''The Party expresses the dream of the German worker''; you say, ''Nationalism! Labour! [sic]'' You know as well as we do that nationalism is the

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[127] "On the Usefulness of Insomnia." In *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 234-236 (236).

> most powerful force of our century. Nationalism is the soul of our epoch. And ''Socialism in One Country'' is the supreme expression of nationalism. (401-02)

Liss continues on despite Mostovskoy's contempt, fervently explaining that for all its claims to internationalism, the Soviet Union is, like Nazi Germany, the embodiment of "'the great nationalism of the twentieth century.'" "'To build Socialism in One Country, one must destroy the peasants' freedom to sow what they like and sell what they like. Stalin didn't shilly-shally—he liquidated millions of peasants. Our Hitler saw that the Jews were the enemy hindering the German National Socialist movement. And he liquidated millions of Jews'" (402).

"'It was the Roehm purge that gave Stalin the idea for the purge of the Party in 1937…You must believe me. You've kept silent while I've been talking, but I know that I'm like a mirror for you—a surgical mirror,'" Liss concludes (403).

The conversation is brought to an end, and for a second time "the poisoned needle entered Mostovskoy's heart'" (403). It is as if, to say again, Mostovskoy's world has been turned on its head; as if he has been gripped by the realization that the "'what ought to be' of ethics" must not be collapsed into "the 'what is' of ontology."[128]

That Liss' arguments are no mere sophistry is borne out in the lives of many of the novel's main characters. Nikolay Grigorevich Krymov, for instance, is a friend of Mostovskoy's and a devoted communist. Owing to an offhanded remark made to an opportunistic comrade and his innocent relationships with several individuals who by the time of the novel have fallen into disfavor with the authorities, Krymov finds himself in the Lubyanka. He refuses, however, to make a false confession even under torture. The ridiculous ease with which the government

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[128] Richard A. Cohen, Introduction to Levinas' *Ethics and Infinity*, 8.

turns even on its most loyal followers, to say nothing of the perversely slapdash methods employed to garner "evidence" of their guilt, recalls the Lager and its selections: *There is no why here*. Krymov realizes as much based on the investigator's prodigious file on him, which seeks culpability even in the most banal aspects of his life: "Even if Krymov had been a very great man, whose every word was important to history, it would still not have been worth gathering so many trifles, so much junk, into this great file" (773-74).

There is also the case of Viktor Shtrum, who, as we have indicated previously, falls afoul of the government when his theories fail to gel with Stalinism. When, however, Stalin approves his work owing to its usefulness to the State, Viktor finds himself virtually beatified. He is accorded countless perks and honors. But then he is asked to sign an accusation he knows to be patently false: Professor Pletnyov, together with the "gentle and sensitive" Doctor Levin, are accused of murdering Aleksey Maximovich Gorky. Viktor knows this to be mere "calumny," yet he is undone by the kindness shown him: "He felt paralyzed by their trust and their kindness. He had no strength. If only they had shouted at him, kicked him, beaten him…Then he would have got angry and recovered his strength….The great State was breathing on him tenderly; he didn't have the strength to cast himself out into the freezing darkness…He was paralysed [sic], not by fear, but by…a strange, agonizing sense of his own passivity" (835).[129] Levinas, one suspects, would have discerned in Viktor's plight the deeper perniciousness of totality: "But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity,

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[129] It is worth noting that Grossman himself, like countless others in this "time of profound moral humiliation," signed such a document: "He had little alternative but to sign when presented with a declaration of support for the show trials of old Bolsheviks and others accused of 'Trotskyist-fascist' treason. But he never forgot the horrors of that time, and recreated them with powerful effect in a number of important passages in *Life and Fate*." So relates the Introduction of *A Writer at War: A Soviet Journalist With the Red Army, 1941-1945* (xi).

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….Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknownst to themselves."[130] Grossman and Levinas, it may be seen, are united in their outcry against totalizing systems.

Viktor's nobility and bravery in the face of his former adversity is all-too real; yet the State conquers, in the end, by its *beneficence*. Viktor feels himself undone after signing the document, as if everything in which he had found joy or taken pride had vanished.

> Why had he committed this terrible sin? Everything in the world was insignificant compared to what he had lost. Everything in the world is insignificant compared to the truth and purity of one small man—even the empire stretching from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean, even science itself….Every hour, every day, year in, year out, he must struggle to be a man, struggle for his right to be pure and kind. He must do this with humility. And if it came to it, he mustn't be afraid even of death; even then he must remain a man. 'Well then, we'll see,' he said to himself. 'Maybe I do have enough strength. Your strength, Mother…' (841)

This allusion to Viktor's mother is of inestimable importance to the overall argument of *Life and Fate*, which might be summarized in an almost offhanded remark appearing relatively early on in the novel: "…the greatest enemy of Fascism is man" (195).—And indeed not only Fascism but any of the myriad –isms and –asms in which totality disguises itself. For Grossman, like Levinas, has a very high regard for maternity and for maternal love; each, as we will see,

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[130] *Totality and Infinity*, 21.

discerns in the mother an embodiment, if not *the* embodiment, of the selfless, stupid love that is holy folly. Such is their answer, as we will now see, to the evil of the world.

We have already remarked on "The Hell of Treblinka" and its revelation of the uncanny efficiency of its machinery. "It is possible to demonstrate with nothing more than a pencil," Grossman writes, "that any large construction company with experience in the use of reinforced concrete can, in the course of six months and with a properly organized labour [sic] force, construct more than enough chambers to gas the entire population of the earth."[131] Despite the apparent hopelessness of this pronouncement, it is not, for Grossman, the final word. The editors-cum-translators of the anthology containing "The Hell of Treblinka," Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, must have recognized this, inasmuch as the following essay is "The Sistine Madonna," which was probably written in 1955.[132] Its inspiration is a Raphael Madonna confiscated from Dresden and relocated to Moscow by the Soviet authorities in 1945. Grossman stresses the universal, "democratic" beauty of the Madonna. Hers is a beauty "closely tied to earthly life," encompassing every woman, irrespective of race or appearance. Beyond that, she is the incarnation of the beauty of human life itself: "This Madonna is the soul and mirror of all human beings, and everyone who looks at her can see her humanity. She is the image of the maternal soul. That is why her beauty is forever interwoven and fused with the beauty that lies hidden, deep down, indestructible, wherever life is born—be it in cellars, attics, pits or

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[131] "The Hell of Treblinka." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 126-79 (179).

[132] "Grossman wrote 'The Sistine Madonna" in the second half of 1955—probably, given the number of times he mentions the hydrogen bomb, in November or December…", as the Introduction to Part Two of *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles* (65-80), relates (80).

palaces."[133] He remarks, too, on the complete absence of fear on her face, the lack of any suggestion of possessiveness; instead of clinging to her babe, "she holds him forward to meet his fate."[134] For that matter, her son is likewise untroubled or fearful. He seems ready to step free of her embrace and go forth into the world to face his destiny. And then, in an observation uncannily apropos of Levinas' remarks on maternity in *Otherwise than Being*, Grossman writes that "They are one—and they are separate. They see, feel and think together. They are fused, yet everything says that they will separate from each other, that they cannot but separate, that the essence of their communion, of their fusion, lies in their coming separation."[135] "Maternity in the complete being 'for the other' which characterizes it, which is the very signifyingness of signification, is the ultimate sense of this vulnerability," Levinas maintains in *Otherwise than Being*. He goes on to describe "the anguish of contraction and breakup" (108), suggesting that maternity—like ethics—entails an embrace of absolute vulnerability for the other, a contraction and pouring out of the self for the other. Such vulnerability, in turn, operates on several levels; including, as here, the agony of allowing the other to be and to grow and to come in his or her own time. It is the loss of intimacy enjoyed by the mother and her unborn child—but no less the loss of control on the mother's part, not necessarily qua selfishness, but rather the ability to protect, to shelter, to spare from harm her child. This, too, is a painful part of genuine love, which Levinas describes as a radical orientation towards the other—the eschewing of power even for noble ends. In this sense, responsibility for the other entails a *letting be* on some level,

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[133] In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 180-92 (183).

[134] Ibid, 184.

[135] Ibid, 184-85.

though this does not mean indifference or inaction. What is sacrificed is power, *dunamis*—i.e., *control*. The very God who speaks in the face of the other and says to the self, "Thou shalt do everything that the other might live!" also denies the self the right to force the other, in whatever manner, subtle or overt, to be wise or good. But we are getting ahead of ourselves…

Grossman goes on to imagine the young Hitler standing before the Madonna in the art gallery in Dresden. Hitler cannot meet her gaze; apparently she represents what cannot be "com-prehended," as Levinas would say; as an expression of infinity, she defies appropriation. The "human strength" of mother and child cannot be overcome. Their selfless love, for one another and for their fellow human beings, cannot be killed. "She…has travelled for six weeks in a screeching train, picking lice out of her son's soft, unwashed hair….She is a contemporary of the collectivization of agriculture….Here she is, barefoot, carrying her little son, boarding a transport train. What a long path lies ahead of her—from Oboyan near Kursk, from the black-earth region of Voronezh, to the taiga, to marshy forests beyond the Urals, to the sands of Kazakhstan."[136] Despite the annihilating power of totality—whether Fascism or Communism—it is powerless to kill what is human in human life. "The power of life, the power of what is human in man"—which is, essentially, the foolish, senseless love that eschews power over the other, even in its subtlest forms—"is very great, and even the mightiest and most perfect violence cannot enslave this power; it can only kill it."[137]

It is surely significant is that Grossman sees in maternal love what may be the closest incarnation of holy folly or kenotic love. Barring talk of "selfish genes" and the like, pregnancy

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[136] Ibid, 189.

[137] Ibid, 191.

and birth are about what is truly separate, truly other, truly *not*-self. It entails inconvenience, pain, and passivity *solely* on behalf of the other. It is a responsibility for the other, but one that eschews control. Given that such love is what makes human life fully human, Grossman can aver that "Life's destruction, even in our iron age, is not its defeat."[138] Hitler slaughtered twenty-odd million Russians, six million Jews, and untold numbers of other peoples; but despite this unprecedented destruction of human life, he could not destroy what makes human life *human*. Levinas draws a similar conclusion, and for comparable reasons: What is most essentially human, he argues, is tied irrevocably to what is Otherwise than Being. "It is not because among beings there exists an ego, a being pursuing ends, that being takes on signification and becomes a universe," he writes. It is, rather, because the order of being can be inverted by such "maternal" or kenotic love, which in turn makes it possible for the self to be a self. "The non-interchangeable par excellence, the I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others. Nothing is a game. Thus being is transcended."[139] "Games," or ontological projects like knowledge, power and control, are tantamount to a *how* and a *what* without a *why*. There is only the *is*, but no *who*—save, that is, for the possibility of love, specifically maternal or kenotic love.

That this focus on the maternal and its connection to ethics is neither coincidental nor superficial is borne out in an early short story of Grossman's, "In the Town of Berdichev," which was published in 1934 with the assistance of Grossman's friends and fellow writers, Ivan Kataev (1902-1937) and Nikolay Zarudin (1899-1937).[140] It relates the story of Klavdia Vavilova, a

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[138] In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 180-92 (191).

[139] *Otherwise than Being*, 116-17.

[140] Introduction to Part One (2-12) in *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 6.

commissar in the Red Cavalry during the Russian Civil War. She has become pregnant by a colleague who was killed in combat shortly thereafter and wishes nothing more than to be rid of her unwanted burden. "She had jumped down heavily from her horse…heaved huge pine logs about with silent fury…drunk every kind of herbal potion and infusion…[and] demanded so much iodine from the regimental chemist that the medical assistant had been on the point of penning a complaint to the brigade medical department"—but all in vain. The life inside her refuses to be snuffed out. She suffers all the inconveniences and hardships of pregnancy, from morning sickness to stiffness to the loss of her ability to ride. "She had felt dragged down, dragged towards the earth," Grossman summarizes.[141] Here and elsewhere, we see Grossman interweaving the themes of earthiness, incarnation, birth and motherhood, and ethics. In this he is united with Levinas: "But it is not in the said that the psyche signifies, even though it is manifested there. Signification is the-one-for-the-other which characterizes an identity that does not coincide with itself. This is in fact all the gravity of an animate body, that is, one offered to another, expressed or opened up! This opening up, like a reverse *conatus*, an inversion of essence, is a relationship across an absolute difference." Is this description not apropos of motherhood? As if there could be any doubt, Levinas goes on to tie incarnation, as in bodily existence and sensibility, to the signification of the self's non-indifference towards the other—"the passivity of the for-the-other in vulnerability, which refers to maternity, which sensibility signifies" (*Otherwise than Being*, 70-71).

Interestingly, when Vavilova is given leave and is accommodated with a Jewish family, among her initial impressions is the intensely earthy, *human* smell of the place: "…there came

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[141] "The Town of Berdichev." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 13-33 (16).

such an overpowering smell of human life that Vavilova found herself taking a deep breath, as if about to dive into a deep pond."[142] The head of the household, Haim-Abram Leibovich-Magazanik, is quite close to his wife Beila and their seven children, and Grossman stresses the intense physicality of this love, which is to say, its inextricable engagement in the visual, the audible, and the olfactory: "It was as though he were bathing in the sunlit pillars of dust, in all the smells and sounds—the cries of the children, the mewing of the cat, the muttering of the samovar. He had no wish to go off to the workshop. He loved his wife, his children and his old mother; he loved his home."[143] "The signification of the gustatory and the olfactory, of eating and enjoying," Levinas writes in this selfsame vein, "has to be sought on the basis of the signifyingness of signification, the one-for-the-other." Ethics—sacrifice and responsibility for the other—is impossible without incarnation, and on a number of levels. For one, only a bodily being, a being at home in its own skin, can sacrifice for the other in a meaningful way. One must be grounded in the corporeal, the sensible, in order to be uprooted, as it were, from the comfort of one's body and its pleasures—for therein lies the essence of ethics. Taking the bread from one's own mouth in order to offer it to another has no meaning if one is not fully, unrelentingly immersed in the sensible realm. "For we have shown that the one-for-the-other characteristic of the psyche, signification, is not an ordinary formal relation," Levinas explains, "but the whole gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus*."[144] Again, the idea of maternity as an essential expression of ethics is key: Birth is, after all, a supremely physical process, one that entails an

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[142] Ibid, 15.

[143] Ibid, 17.

[144] *Otherwise than Being*, 72.

opening tantamount to a *pouring out of oneself*, or kenosis, unlike any other. It is a breaking up of essence, a shattering of the conatus—not only in the act of birth itself but even prior to birth, when the mother makes space within herself, suffers the weight of the fetus on her bladder and other organs, feels herself stretched and put-upon. Only an incarnate being can experience that. It is not for nothing, David Patterson notes, that the Hebrew word for "compassion," *rachamim*, is a cognate of the word *rechem*, "womb."[145] And Levinas himself remarks that "Signification signifies, consequently, its nourishing, clothing, lodging, in maternal relations, in which matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality."[146]

Beila, for her part, takes the hapless Vavilova under her wing, instructing her about everything from diaper rash to teething troubles to the runs. "'Children are such a grief, such a calamity, such never-ending trouble,'" she complains. "'And every one of my lot is still living. Not one of them's going to die.'"[147] Beneath the homey banality of her complaint lies a profound truth—the "passivity more passive than all passivity"[148] that is the essence of motherhood extends beyond pregnancy and birth. Birth itself is an incredible act, embodying as it does the essential kenosis of the for-the-other; but it is a beginning rather than an end in itself: The mother (and hopefully the father as well) is assuming a responsibility to the point of identification with her child. This responsibility includes her intimacy with her child, her sacrifices for her child, her willingness to die on behalf of her child. The intimacy of pregnancy is sacrificed in the radically kenotic act of releasing the child, and yet in another sense it is not

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[145] Class notes from HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016).

[146] *Otherwise than Being*, 77.

[147] "The Town of Berdichev." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 13-33 (19).

[148] *Otherwise than Being*, 14.

lost but deepened. In caring for her infant, she gives of herself—*literally*, as when she breastfeeds her child. She sacrifices self-regard, giving up time, energy, and most of all her ability to control. She releases her child into the world and invests in her or him afterwards having no guarantee whatsoever that her child will feel gratitude or love for her in turn. In this sense, motherhood is a senseless, even stupid goodness. Despite all her best efforts, there are no guarantees; it is not an investment or a calculation. Instead it bespeaks a radical orientation towards the Other.—The ultimate madness, surely, in our world of *esse* and *natura*, wherein *Cui bono?* is the overarching question.

When Vavilova goes into labor, Grossman remarks that "[her] tan no seemed separate from her, like a mask; underneath it her face had gone white."[149] Inevitably one's mind is drawn to Levinas, to *Otherwise than Being*, wherein he writes that ethics, like maternity, "…is a pre-original not resting on oneself, the restlessness of being persecuted—Where to be? How to be? It is a writhing in the tight dimensions of pain, the unsuspected dimensions of the hither side. It is being torn up from oneself, being less than nothing, a rejection into the negative, beyond nothingness; it is maternity, gestation of the other in the same" (75). Birth and ethics are both about the arrival of the other and one's helplessness before that other, in whose face echoes the Divine command "Thou shalt not kill"—which is to say, "Thou shalt do everything that the other might live!"—resulting in a tearing of the self from its natural, comfortable solipsism.

Grossman continues to describe the birth, noting how "Now and then [Vavilova's] mind clouded. The walls and ceiling lost their outlines; they were breaking up and moving in her like waves…Her mind was empty of thoughts. She wanted to howl like a wolf; she wanted to bite

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[149] "The Town of Berdichev." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 13-33 (22).

the pillow. Her bones were cracking and breaking apart. Her forehead was covered by a sticky, sickly sweat."[150] Once again, Levinas seems to have Grossman in mind when in *Otherwise than Being* he inquires, "Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne? In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks" (75).

"When the child, desperate for life, once again began fighting its way out, [Vavilova] felt not only terror of the pain to come but also an uncertain joy: there was no getting away from this, so let it be quick."[151] And here I think not of Levinas but rather of Buber, who in a related vein in *I and Thou* has the following to say: "In the beginning is the relation—as the category of being, as readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul; the *a priori* of relation; *the innate you*" (78). David Patterson notes that Buber's talk of "the *a priori* of relation" corresponds to Levinas' talk of the *anarchic*, or God's voice, which emanates from beyond the realm of time and space, ontology and epistemology. Is it too much to argue that Vavilova's joy amidst all this fear and blood bespeaks an awareness of God's voice? That the child, though not yet born, is already speaking to her? Previously she was a child of Adam the First, as Joseph Soloveitchik would say—utilitarian man, for whom all relations are functionalized and *enjoyment* is the best he can hope for; now, however, the anarchic has touched her through her almost-born child. Now she is poised to become a daughter of Adam the Second, or spiritual

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[150] Ibid, 23.

[151] "The Town of Berdichev." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 13-33 (23).

man, for whom love, which connotes "responsibility of an I for a You," leads not to enjoyment but beyond that to *rejoicing*.[152]

When at last her son is born, she is undone by this new life she once yearned with all her being to extinguish. Confounding her expectations, he is "puny as an oat stalk that had grown in a cellar": "If you opened the door too quickly, he might be extinguished." Despite the oppressive heat of the room, she immediately shelters him at her breast, watching him as if in utter disbelief. "'Eat, eat, my little son,' she said…'My son, my little son,' she murmured—and the tears welled up in her eyes…"[153] Her relation with this new life is transformative; she reflects on the child's father and is overcome with "a sharp maternal ache—a deep pity for both father and son." Her stony façade has broken; maternity has transformed her, opened her literally and metaphorically, made her vulnerable to "persecution" by others. "For the first time, she wept for the man who had died in combat near Korosten: never would this man see his own son." She has forgiven her son as she has his father—the former for all the inconvenience, frustration and pain attendant to her pregnancy, the latter for unwittingly abandoning her and their child in his untimely death. Although some might be inclined to dismiss this as a kind of catharsis or hormonal imbalance—"'Let her cry, let her cry. It calms the nerves better than any bromide. All mothers cry after giving birth,'" Rosalia Samoilovna, the midwife, remarks[154]—Grossman does not seem to think so; hence the qualifying "maybe" preceding Samoilovna's assessment. Levinas' own thoughts on maternity would tend to suggest a deeper significance to

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[152] *I and Thou*, 66, 50. Also, notes from David Patterson's HUHI 7134 class on Advanced Topics in European Thought, Culture and Society (spring 2016).

[153] "The Town of Berdichev." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 13-33 (25).

[154] Ibid, 26.

Vavilovna's uncharacteristic behavior: "Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor" (*Otherwise than Being*, 75).

Not long after, a contingent of Bolshevik cadets marches through the town en route to battle with the Poles. At first Vavilovna seems confused by their revolutionary song, as if she has forgotten the war, her past, everything owing to her love for her new son. Abruptly, she remembers: "Red Square, vast as ever, and several thousand workers who had volunteered for the front….Just what had happened to her on that square, beneath the dark walls, she did not know…she had wanted to talk about it to *him*, to her taciturn one [the baby's father, i.e.]…But she had been unable to get the words out…And as the men made their way from the square to the Bryansk Station, *this* was the song they had been singing."[155]

Vavilovna recalls her revolutionary ardor and promptly abandons her son, running after the cadets, Mauser in hand. "Not taking her eyes off her, Magazanik said, 'Once there were people like that in the Bund. Real human beings, Beila. Call us human beings? No, we're just manure."—And at this moment the baby wakes, prompting Beila to inform her husband that he should light the fire to heat up some milk.[156]

This unlooked-for denouement can be understood in a number of different ways. For instance, one might suppose that Vavilovna has been so profoundly extirpated from her *conatus* that she sacrifices the pleasures of motherhood for the greater good; perhaps she feels that her own sacrifice will save countless other mothers from having to do likewise. Or it may be that she feels Beila and Magazanik can do more for her small son than she ever could; that she is less

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[155] "The Town of Berdichev." In *The Road: Short Fiction and Articles*, 13-33 (32-33).

[156] Ibid, 33.

suited to being a mother or that her child shouldn't be forced to grow up sans father and (presumably) siblings. It may well be, however, that the exemplary embodiment of motherhood and the maternal ethos is Beila, who accepts Vavilovna's son without murmur or protest. She is, after all, a mother seven times over; perhaps she has been so thoroughly freed from her own *conatus* that she is willing to treat this child as if he were her own, gladly embracing the attendant "persecution" and/or "substitution." Levinas, writing along these same lines in *Otherwise than Being*, would likely agree: "On the hither side of or beyond essence, signification is the breathlessness of the spirit expiring without inspiring, disinterestedness and gratuity of gratitude; the breakup of essence is ethics…This breakup of identity, this changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution, is the subject's subjectivity, or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility" (14).

The theme of maternity and the maternal ethos also appears in *Life and Fate*, and in the stories of several different characters. The story of Viktor Shtrum's mother, to whom we have already referred, is among the most profound. She is based on Grossman's own mother, Ekaterina Saveliana Grossman, who perished in the Berdichev ghetto.

Not unlike Ikonnikov, to whom we will turn in the final section of this chapter, Viktor's mother's presence makes itself felt through a letter—her final letter, as it turns out, to her beloved Vitya. She is a doctor of some kind and, one gathers, an assimilated Jew, as were Grossman's parents. The letter recounts her relocation to the ghetto, including the behaviors of her non-Jewish neighbors. Two women argue over which of them will take her chairs, whereas a patient she'd considered "callous" arrives and carries her belongings to the ghetto, presenting her with 300 rubles and promising to come to the fence once a week to give her bread. Afterwards,

she relates, "I began to feel once more that I was a human being—it wasn't only the yard-dog that still treated me as though I were" (83). And once behind the barbed wire, she relates, she begins to feel a deeper sense of kinship for her fellow prisoners. "Now I'm no longer a beast deprived of rights—simply an unfortunate human being. And that's easier to bear" (85).

More significantly, she goes on to explain that prior to this time she had never truly regarded herself as a Jew. It was rather *Russian* culture, history, and society with which she identified. Within the confines of the ghetto, however, her heart is filled with "maternal tenderness towards the Jewish people. I never knew this love before. It reminds me of my love for you, my dearest son" (87). That there is a connection between her own status as a mother, her incarceration in the ghetto, and her newfound affection for the Jews should not be missed. Prior to the Nazis and the ghetto, it was easy enough for her to distance herself from her fellow Jews, to regard them with the theoretical detachment more apropos of what Levinas calls totality. Now that she lives in such intensely close proximity to them, it is as though her maternal affection has grown beyond its immediate object. As when she birthed and nurtured Viktor, she has (again) been torn from herself and thereby opened, "poured out," allowing a comparable maternal behavior towards those she had previously regarded as alien. It is as though they have become "incarnate" to her and she to them; they are no longer an unpalatable abstraction but intensely vulnerable, flesh-and-blood creatures with whom she shares not only a physical bond but an ethical one. "Incarnation is not a transcendental operation of a subject that is situated in the midst of the world it represents to itself; the sensible experience of the body is already and from the first incarnate," Levinas maintains. "The sensible—maternity, vulnerability, apprehension—binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to

others before being tied to my body" (*Otherwise than Being*, 76). Something like this, it would seem, is at work here.

As a doctor, Viktor's mother explains, she has been trained to carefully note the physiognomy of the human eye for signs of disease or pathology.—Which is to say, to see them as neuter things, mere component parts of a greater whole. Now, however, she can no longer perceive them thus: "…what I see now is the reflection of the soul. A good soul, Vityenka! A sad, good-natured soul, defeated by violence, but at the same time triumphant over violence. A strong soul, Vitya!" (*Life and Fate*, 87). How can this not call to mind Levinas' remark that "The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!"-? For, as he goes on to point out, "When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in a social relationship with the Other."[157] In other words, Viktor's mother has at last seen beyond the "biologistic and the historiosophical"[158] to encounter the *face*, in all its pathetic[159] exposedness before the threat of domination and violence—and thereby heard the voice of God: "Thou shalt do everything that the other might live!" She tells her son that she feels it is her patients who are "healing" her own soul rather than the reverse, recalling Levinas' assertion that "All my inwardness is invested in the form of a despite-me, for-another. Despite me, for another, is signification par excellence. And it is the sense of the 'oneself,' that accusative that derives from no nominative; it is the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself"[160]—for it is clear that Viktor's mother has lost her sense of self, becoming unaware of all that she does for her patients. Instead she seems

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[157] *Ethics and Infinity*, 85.

[158] Buber, *I and Thou*, 105.

[159] Here I mean the original meaning of the term, "evoking pathos" or "poignant."

[160] *Otherwise than Being*, 11.

conscious only of a deepening debt to them—another key Levinasian idea: namely, that of an obligation which exists prior to any conscious act on the part of the self, which Levinas describes in terms of a *trace*. "That trace lights up as the face of a neighbor, ambiguously him *before whom* (or *to whom*, without any paternalism) and him *for whom* I answer. For such is the enigma or exception of a face, judge and accused."[161] Interestingly, this trace ties back to God; and God, qua Otherwise, qua kenotic, is so concerned lest He inadvertently thematize the objects of His love and/or cause the self to lose sight of the other that He erases His own trace in the trace! "The infinite wipes out its traces not in order to trick him who obeys, but because it transcends the present in which it commands me, and because I cannot deduce it from this command," Levinas explains. "The infinite who orders me is neither a cause acting straight on, nor a theme, already dominated, if only retrospectively, by freedom. This detour at a face and this detour from this detour in the enigma of a face we have called illeity."[162] David Patterson, in this light, contrasts the God described by Levinas with the "unmoved mover" of Aristotle, noting that the God of Levinas is no mere mechanistic cause or force that acts upon humans as if they were but objects.[163] And in "Judaism and Kenosis," Levinas relates that the Tanakh itself repeatedly connects God's glory—His essential "nonthematizableness," for want of a better term—with His "bending down to look at human misery or *inhabiting* that misery."[164]

Viktor's mother seems to intuit this selfsame idea and struggles to convey the experience to her son: "Tears come to my eyes when some middle-aged workman shakes me by the hand, puts

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[161] Ibid, 12.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Class notes from HUHI 6395: Advanced Topics in European Thought and Culture (fall 2016).

[164] In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (101-02).

two or three potatoes in a little bag and says, 'There, Doctor, I beg you.' There's something about it which is pure, kind, fatherly—but I can't find the right words" (*Life and Fate*, 87).

The letter relates various and sundry details of the daily life in the ghetto, the surprising sense of community and friendship and countless acts of kindness. Towards the conclusion, Viktor's mother offers up a sort of confession: "Sometimes I've thought that I ought not to live far away from you, that I love you too much, that love gives me the right to be with you in my old age. And at other times I've thought that I ought not to live together with you, that I love you too much" (*Life and Fate*, 93). We are reminded not only of the extirpation of the conatus that maternity entails and the sacrifice involved in the loss of intimacy and control when the mother allows her child to go forth to be and to grow and to come (or not) in its own time. On a still deeper level, we are likewise reminded of Levinas' God, who eschews *dunamis* in favor of kenosis, erasing even the trace of His own trace lest He undermine the ability of His creation to be and to grow and to come in its own time—or not. Levinas' remarkable insight in *Totality and Infinity* springs immediately to mind:

> The marvel of creation does not only consist in being a creation *ex nihilo*, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself in question. The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being. And this implies precisely atheism, but at the same time, beyond atheism, shame for the arbitrariness of the freedom that constitutes it. (89)

Atheism, the radical separation from God necessary for man to be a relational and, more crucial, *ethical* being, is a crucial aspect of Divine kenosis. This is why God's erasure of His own trace in the trace is so profound. It is like Viktor's mother's assertion that "And at other

times I've thought that I ought not to live together with you, that I love you too much" (93). If the temptation of totality—the "temptation of philosophy," one might as well say—is the source of the world's evils, then the remedy is the kenotic love of maternity—and of God. Ironically, in the light of our world of ontology and epistemology, of *natura* and *esse*—so vital to man's freedom or "atheism," vastly more so than the I-It mode is to the I-Thou—such talk seems like utter folly. At best, maternal/kenotic love is a necessary evil; at worst, maternity and the kenosis inherent to it is but a mask for utility—exactly as per Richard Dawkins' talk of "selfish genes," for instance.

Before we may proceed to our discussion of holy folly in Grossman and Levinas, however, we must pause to examine one more example of maternal love in Grossman's *Life and Fate*. The truth it will reveal is as apropos of Viktor's mother's fate, yet in this case the connection is more pronounced, and therefore obvious. The connection I speak of is the link in Grossman between maternity and maternal love and antisemitism; the example I have in mind is the story of Sofya Osipovna Levinton, an army doctor, and the orphan boy David, who perish in the gas chamber in an unnamed death camp.

Like Viktor's mother, Sofya is a doctor. She has evolved from a fearful, "snotty little girl" to a "stout, hot-tempered" major in the medical service to a "mangy, lice-ridden creature" en route to the gas chamber. "'Who am I? In the end, who am I?'" she asks herself. Sofya witnesses many horrors, "[learning] that there were many things in human beings that were far from human" (196, 199). Amidst the horror, however, she cannot help but notice the curious beauty of a companion, Deborah Samuelovna, who is holding her baby. Despite "the hideousness of her dirty face and pale crumpled lips," Sofya sees Deborah transfigured: "'A Madonna!'"

About this same time, she makes the acquaintance of David, now orphaned. Sofya finds herself rendered strangely helpless before the small boy. She shares her bread with him and calls him "my son," yet softly, so that none may hear: "…some strange shame made her want to hide the maternal feelings welling up inside of her." Perhaps it is the vulnerability and lack of self-regard she wishes to conceal; confronted by the face of the other, the self is undone, subjected to a "passivity more passive than passivity"[165] uncannily like childbirth. It is for this reason, surely, that when given the opportunity to save herself during a call for surgeons and doctors she remains silent, all the while "seized…by a feeling of exaltation" (*Life and Fate*, 545). Her growing love for David swells, spilling over onto the masses of filthy human beings all about her. Grossman reflects that a man stripped naked cannot help but become closer to himself. "'Yes, here I am. This is me!' He recognizes himself and identifies his 'I', an 'I' that remains always the same." Sofya, by contrast, is driven out of herself, extirpated from her conatus, as Levinas might say, and made painfully aware of the others to the point of identifying with them. They are separate, as Grossman says of Raphael's Madonna and her child, and yet one. "It was as though the body of a whole people, previously covered over by layers of rags, was laid bare in these naked bodies of all ages…It was as though she felt, not just about herself, but about her whole people: 'Yes, here I am'" (547). What the reader is witnessing, it may hardly be doubted, is Sofya's awareness of her own subjectivity as an ethical being, her identification to the point of substitution for her fellows: "Subjectivity, locus and null-site of [the breakup of essence], comes to pass as a passivity more passive than all passivity," as Levinas writes in *Otherwise than Being* (14).

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[165] *Otherwise than Being*, 14.

"Then with a feeling of meekness, she looked at David," Grossman relates. Why meekness? Perhaps, on some level, this signifies her awareness that David, puny and weak though he is, occupies a place of height with respect to herself. Perhaps this signifies a pouring-out of self regard, as if she were a nobody. "No longer ashamed of the maternal feelings that had been aroused in her—virgin though she was—she bent down and took David's narrow little face in her large hands. It was as though she had taken his warm eyes into her hands and kissed them."[166] Rather than taking note of his features, Sofya recognizes the nakedness and destitution his face signifies—its "essential poverty," as Levinas says[167]—and cannot but seek to shelter him somehow, to protect him with her own body.

Again, however, her love spills over to include her fellow victims. Despite the ease with which she might have pulled inwards, enclosing herself and David in a little bubble of consciousness, their own private, tender world, Sofya feels herself pulled outwards, outside of herself: "Again, Sofya Levinton hugged David's shoulders. Never before had she felt such tenderness for people."[168]

Even in death, however, Sofya's essential humanity—her maternity, her for-the-other, her subjectivity as a signifier—remains, stronger than ever:

> Sofya Levinton felt the boy's body subsist in her arms. Once again she had fallen behind him. In mine-shafts where the air becomes poisoned, it is always the little creatures, the birds and mice, that die first. This boy, with his slight,

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[166] *Life and Fate*, 547.

[167] *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

[168] *Life and Fate, 550.*

> bird-like body, had left before her. 'I've become a mother,' she thought. That was her last thought. Her heart, however, still had life in it: it contracted, ached and felt pity for all of you, both living and dead; Sofya Osipovna felt a wave of nausea. She pressed David, now a doll, to herself; she became dead, a doll.[169]

One cannot help but compare Sofya's experience with Sara Nomberg-Prytyk's in *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*. Specifically, the chapter entitled "A Living Torch," which recounts the night hundreds of "living children [were] burned like corpses" (82). "If the distinguishing feature of the Shoah is assault on the word," David Patterson reflects, "that word is 'mama'…Which, in turn, correlates with Rabbi Greenberg's pronouncement that the only philosophy or theology that can be articulated is that which can be uttered in the presence of burning children."[170] For the death of the mother, the assault on motherhood, is in fact an assault on God as Mother; God as Creator, who, prior to creating, contracts, withdraws into herself, in order to make a womb-like space wherein she might create something—some*one*—that is truly separate, and therefore *other*, than Godself. Although Levinas never makes this connection overtly, I will argue elsewhere that this contraction or *tsimtsum* is a vital component in Levinas' God-talk and ethics.—That his "ethics as first philosophy" presupposes a Divine contraction, a *tsimtsum* or kenosis, the two ideas being different ways of describing the same thing: namely, the radical orientation towards the other.

Sofya's final thought—"'I've become a mother'"—reveals something utterly essential about Grossman's—and Levinas'—understanding of goodness. Namely, the idea of stupid, senseless

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[169] *Life and Fate*, 554.

[170] Class notes from David Patterson's Shoah course at the University of Memphis, date and course number unknown.

goodness; goodness as holy folly. For motherhood, as in the maternal ethos, as in the outpouring of the self for the other and the self's attendant "passivity more passive than passivity," is not about anatomy of physiognomy. It is not incumbent upon the capacity for pregnancy and childbirth; these are but the instantiation of the good, and are in fact a *mode of living*—an *ethos*. A mode of living as apropos of male as female, of human as Divine:

> For we have shown that the one-for-the-other characteristic of the psyche, signification, is not an ordinary formal relation, but the whole gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus*. It is a passivity more passive still than any passivity that is antithetical to an act, a nudity more naked than all "academic" nudity, exposed to the point of outpouring, effusion and prayer. It is a passivity that is not reducible to exposure to another's gaze. It is a vulnerability and a paining exhausting themselves like a hemorrhage, denuding even the nudity that its aspect takes on, exposing its very exposedness, expressing itself, speaking, uncovering even the projection that the very form of identity confers upon it. It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. (*Otherwise than Being*, 72)

Levinas' talk of goodness entailing a nudity "exposed to the point of outpouring, effusion and prayer" and "a vulnerability and a paining exhausting themselves like a hemorrhage" cannot but recall Jesus' passion in the Garden of Gethsemane. Levinas' talk of the presence of the other as a kind of persecution, a sense of summons, an extirpation from the conatus, likewise, is suggestive of Jesus' experience in Gethsemane: "'Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done.'... / And being in agony He was praying very

fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:42, 44, NASV). Jesus' kenosis and incarnation is crucial to understanding Levinas' belief in "ethics as first philosophy," but for now we are discussing Grossman, for whom the idea of kenosis is more muted, so to say. Nevertheless, we should point out that the Soviets' distaste for Dostoevsky and subsequent efforts to "rehabilitate" him stem directly from his emphasis on the ideas of incarnation and kenosis, which are, as for Levinas, vital to both his belief in the possibility of an ethical life and his answer to the problem of evil.(—And please note that we did not say *theodicy*, which Dostoevsky would likely reject for the same reasons as Levinas.) Alexandra Popoff relates in *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century* that Grossman's desire to produce a serious study of Dostoevsky was turned down by the Soviet authorities:

> During the Soviet era Dostoevsky remained the least recognized classic author: his work was excluded from school curriculums. The writer's preaching of Christianity and his absolute rejection of human sacrifice for the sake of building paradise on earth made him unacceptable to the Soviet regime. As Grossman would write in *Life and Fate*, "Dostoevsky simply doesn't fit into our ideology." While Tolstoy's teaching of nonviolence was "explained" by Lenin in the article "Lev Tolstoy as Mirror of the Russian Revolution," Dostoevsky was "rehabilitated" by Soviet critics only in 1956. (189).

Perhaps Grossman, like Levinas, sensed in Dostoevsky an answer for the growing obsession with totality. Though Grossman focuses more on Tolstoy in *Life and Fate*—due, as we have seen, to the Soviets' hostility to Dostoevsky—the idea of the holy fool is, we have stressed, tied inextricably to the notion of Christ's kenosis. If the West has tended to focus more on the

theologia gloriae, the East, at least in theory, is oriented more towards the *theologia crucis*. Even in a "non-Christian" writer like Tolstoy, then, there are nonetheless powerful echoes of the notion of a holy folly, which is, in turn, grounded in Christ's act of pouring out his power and self-regard to embrace "a passivity more passive than passivity" and become, essentially, a nothing and a no-one for the sake of humanity. Let us bear this in mind, then, as we proceed to the final section of the chapter, which centers on a "manifesto" left behind by the holy fool Ikonnikov.

Ikonnikov is almost a contradiction in terms. His direct appearances in the novel are so few that he is easily forgotten. Yet his *influence* is prodigious. One might go so far as to say that if Viktor Shtrum's experiences mirrors those of Vasily Grossman, Grossman the historical, flesh-and-blood man, Ikonnikov represents Grossman the philosopher, even the "believer," serving as the voice for Grossman's moral and philosophical (dare we say *religious*?) beliefs. For his part, Levinas describes Grossman's tome as "a complete spectacle of desolation and dehumanization," though he sees in the writings of Ikonnikov a glimmer of very real hope:

> Yet within that decomposition of human relations, within that sociological misery, goodness persists. In the relation of one man to an other, goodness is possible. There is a long monologue where Ikonnikov—the character who expresses the idea of the author—casts doubts upon all social sermonizing, that is, upon all reasonable organization with an ideology, with plans. The only thing that

remains undying is the goodness of everyday, ongoing life. Ikonnikov calls that the "little act of goodness."[171]

One might, indeed, go still farther, argue that Ikonnikov is God.—Specifically, Levinas' God, the God of Torah; who, as we have seen, erases the trace of His trace so as to vouchsafe the atheism—the otherness and capacity for genuinely ethical action—of humankind. One might also speak of Grossman's focus on the feminine aspect of God, as in his fascination with the theme of maternity and the maternal ethos, as displayed, as we have seen, in the Raphael Madonna—who, like the Shekhinah in Judaism, accompanies man in all his crises, from the death camps to the Gulags and beyond.

Ikonnikov also calls to mind the Book of Esther, the only text in the canon of the Tanakh in which God neither appears nor speaks directly. Israel is saved, Haman is undone and executed, and all, it seems, without the intervention of God. But is it really so simple as that?

If *Life and Fate* has an argument, it is the impotence of Fascism (as well as any other –ism or –asm setting itself as the One Truth) in the face of the simple, senseless goodness of everyday human beings. Yet this idea of a stupid goodness that has no practical ends, existing only for its own sake—or, better, the sake of the other—is not so shallow or simplistic as it might first appear. There is more at work here than an exhortation to "Do no harm, nor cause to be harmed." As we have stressed, it is quite close kin to the idea of holy folly, and therefore kenosis, which permeates Russian culture even in the Soviet era. Tolstoy, we have seen, owes no small debt to the idea of kenosis despite his rejection of Christian orthodoxy. And was it only owing to some fluke of biology that *Life and Fate*, which draws heavily on the endless notes

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[171] "The Proximity of the Other." In *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 211-218 (217).

made by Grossman during his days as a war correspondent, abounds with stories of victimized peoples displaying such senseless kindness to their oppressors and murderers? Would not Grossman have been exposed in countless stories to the influence of the *Acta Martyrum*? "These stories of the lives of the saints were steeped in the special spirit of Russian kenoticism—the glorification of passive, completely nonheroic and nonresisting suffering, the suffering of the despised and humiliated Christ—this is so remarkable a feature of the Russian religious tradition."[172] For that matter, would Grossman the Jew—though assimilated—be unaware of Judaism's analogous talk of a God who limits or contracts Himself for the sake of the creation?

We first meet Ikonnikov-Morzh quite early on in the novel, through an encounter with Mostovskoy. He is, Grossman tells us, "a strange man who could have been any age at all." We learn, too, that he made his bed by the door, exposed to the bitter cold and not far from the former location of the large latrine-pail, or *parasha*. That he chose this location intentionally is implied by his fellow inmates' regard for him, a mix of pity and disgust. They refer to him as "'the old parachutist" and a "holy fool." "He was endowed with the extraordinary powers of endurance characteristic of madmen and simpletons," Grossman goes on to relate, and possessed a madman's clear, ringing voice, recalling the prophets of the Bible[173]: "The voice of the prophet interrupts the self-assured voices of the powerful, of the arche, the princes of this world, bringing them up short, calling them to account for themselves. That is why the prophets had a habit of getting themselves killed, a most serious occupational hazard."[174] Indeed, Mostovskoy's first

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[172] Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, 27.

[173] *Life and Fate*, 26-27.

[174] Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, 201.

words to Ikonnikov are "'What's the good news then?'"—to which Ikonnikov replies, "'Good? But what is good?'" Mostovskoy bemusedly retorts that many peoples, from the ancient Buddhists to the earliest Christians, have been wrestling with that question. "'And we Marxists have pondered it too.'" Ikonnikov identifies himself as an erstwhile Tolstoyan and goes on to declare that the Bolsheviks' war against Christianity had been good for the (Orthodox) Church, shaking it from its complacency and self-satisfaction. "'You're a true dialectician!' said Mostovskoy. 'I too in my old age have been allowed to witness the miracle of the Gospel!'" Ikonnikov, however, disagrees, contending that the Soviets are mere utilitarians, their ends justifying their "inhuman" means.[175]

As their conversation unfolds, we learn that Ikonnikov began as a student at the Petersburg Institute of Technology but abandoned his studies after encountering the teachings of Tolstoy. After traveling the world for several years, he returned to post-Revolutionary Russia, where he became involved with a peasant commune. It was his cherished belief, he explains to Mostovskoy, "that communist agricultural labour [sic] would bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.'"[176] After witnessing the savageries of collectivization, however—including a mother so crazed with hunger that she devoured her own children—he began preaching the Gospel to his fellows in the commune, for which he was sent to prison. Ultimately he was interred in the prison's psychiatric hospital. Upon release, he found temporary employment in a library; but with the German invasion he witnessed new horrors, in particular the mass murder of

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[175] *Life and Fate*, 27.

[176] Ibid, 28.

Jews. He implored people to help save Jews and even made attempts to do so on his own, which in the end led to his arrest and imprisonment in the camp.

Ikonnikov claims to have lost his faith in God in the face of such monstrous evils as collectivization and the massacre of the Jews, all of which was carried out in the name of Good. Accordingly, it is not only God in whom he has lost faith; likewise has he abandoned the abstract Good of States, Peoples, and universalizing –isms and -asms. "'I don't believe in your ''Good.'' I believe in human kindness,'" he avers to the flabbergasted Mostovskoy. "'You ask Hitler and he'll tell you that even this camp was set up in the name of Good.'" Mostovskoy's impotence in the face of Ikonnikov's arguments, as Grossman puts it, makes him feel "like a man fighting off a jellyfish with a knife.'"[177] Grossman further relates that Mostovskoy is troubled by their talks and that "he would call [Ikonnikov] a wet rag, a half wit. But if they didn't meet for some time, he missed him." What is more, Mostovskoy begins to discern similarities in belief with his enemies even as he "discover[s] something strangely alien in the thoughts of his friends."[178]

Ikonnikov's next—and last—direct appearance in the novel, though brief, is no less profound. He is smeared with clay, as are the pages of his "manifesto," if so it can be called. Is the clay merely a touch of added realism, or is Grossman referencing God's creation of man out of the dirt of the ground and His shaping of man as a potter shapes his clay?[179] Whatever the case, Ikonnikov entrusts his papers to Mostovskoy for safekeeping. "'Tomorrow I might be dead,'" he explains, then proceeds to relate that he has just learned that the prisoners have been tasked with

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[177] Ibid, 29.

[178] Ibid, 31-32.

[179] Cf. Genesis 2:7, Jeremiah 18:6.

laying the foundations of a gas oven. "'But how can people carry on working?'" he inquires of his fellow inmates, who seem largely apathetic in the face of his news. "'How can we help to prepare such a horror?'"[180] While Mostovskoy talks with Chernetsov, a former Menshevik, Ikonnikov engages Gardi, an Italian priest, who informs him that God will forgive their collaboration inasmuch as they are slaves, forced against their will. Ikonnikov, however rejects Gardi's answer. "'I *am* free! I'm building a Vernichtungslager; I have to answer to the people who'll be gassed here. I can say ''No.'' There's nothing can stop me—as long as I can find the strength to face my destruction. I will say ''No!'"' "'Now the shepherd's going to admonish the lost sheep for his pride,'" Chernetsov remarks, and Mostovskoy nods in agreement. "But, rather than admonishing Ikonnikov, Gardi lifted his dirty hand to his lips and kissed it."[181] One cannot but be reminded of Levinas' assertion in "The Temptation of Temptation" that the tyranny of Being—of *natura* and *esse*, of the world wherein it is prudent to eat not only one's own bread but one's neighbor's as well—can be overthrown by the sort of holy folly prescribed by the Torah. "Being receives a challenge from Torah, which jeopardizes its pretension of keeping itself above or beyond good and evil. In challenging the absurd 'that's the way it is' claimed by the Power of the powerful, the man of the Torah transforms being into human history. Meaningful movement jolts the Real."[182] True enough—Ikonnikov purports to have lost his faith in God. As we have argued regarding Levinas' reticence to talk about God in more personalistic terms, however, Ikonnikov's "atheism" may well attest to the *Otherwise* than

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[180] *Life and Fate*, 303.

[181] *Life and Fate*, 304-05.

[182] In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

being—to God qua *Otherwise*, qua infinity. Whence his outrage otherwise? He is a madman, a prophet; his very grief and outrage in the face of evil *presupposes* a relationship with God. In a very real sense, Ikonnikov, like Levinas, represents or "embodies" the kenotic God whose glory, as we have seen, obtains in his willingness to "descend" so as to identify with and even inhabit the sufferings of mankind: "Terms evoking Divine Majesty and loftiness are often followed or preceded by those describing a God bending down to look at human misery or *inhabiting* human misery, as Levinas argues in "Judaism and Kenosis." The God of Judaism is a God both mighty and terrible *as well as* a father to the fatherless, a husband to the widow, and a friend to the stranger.[183]

Ikonnikov, we learn much later, is true to his word: He is shot for refusing to assist in the construction of the gas chambers. The papers he entrusts to Mostovskoy, we learn, were confiscated by Liss and then returned after their aforementioned discussion. Following his encounter with Liss, Mostovskoy sets himself to reading Ikonnikov's papers. It is to the contents of this "manifesto" that we now turn.

Ikonnikov's "manifesto," as I have called it, represents at once a sort of *apologia* for his beliefs and a testimony of his spiritual evolution. It begins with the same question that initiated his relationship with Mostovskoy: *What is the good?* In essence, he traces the devolution of goodness into The Good. Although he ranges across cultures and eras, at the core of his argument lays the failures of Christianity and the Church. He remarks how the first Christians extended the good to all humanity, whereas later Christians confined goodness to those of the Christian faith. As time passed and the various denominations emerged, the good was repeatedly

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[183] In *In the Time of the Nations* (101-118), 101-02.

divided. It was perhaps for this reason, he speculates, that individuals and groups began to feel the need to return to some lost, quasi-mystical Oneness. Despite its roots in Jesus' teachings of love and forgiveness, then, the good was gradually transformed into the Good—what Levinas would call a thematized goodness, rendered into a totality, which of course left no room for individual human beings, for difference or *otherness*.

Ikonnikov goes on to explain how this abstraction of goodness into The Good, originally intended to raise it above life in order that life might be exalted, resulted only in its degradation and abuse by opportunistic, power-hungry individuals and groups:

> And what did this doctrine of peace and love bring to humanity? Byzantine iconoclasm; the tortures of the Inquisition; the struggles against heresy in France, Italy, Flanders and Germany; the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism; the intrigues of the monastic orders; the conflict between Nikon and Avvakum; the crushing yoke that lay for centuries over science and freedom; the Christians who wiped out the heathen population of Tasmania; the scoundrels who burnt whole Negro villages in Africa. This doctrine caused more suffering than all the crimes of the people who did evil for its own sake. (405)

Those who seek to obliterate evil in the name of the Good, Ikonnikov pronounces, deceive themselves, inasmuch as people will do anything in the name of this abstract Good. Being an abstraction, it is separated from human life, and thereby becomes the *enemy* of life: "…whenever we see the dawn of an eternal good that will never be overcome by evil…the blood of old people and children is always shed. Not only men, but even God himself is powerless to lessen this evil" (407).

For in fact the Christian Good gave rise to idea of a Goodness which, transmogrified from the spiritual to the secular, opens the door to yet greater evils:

> I have seen the unshakable strength of the idea of social good that was born in my own country. I saw this struggle during the period of general collectivization and again in 1937. I saw people being annihilated in the name of an idea of good as fine and humane as the ideal of Christianity. I saw whole villages die of hunger; I saw peasant children dying in the snows of Siberia; I saw trains bound for Siberia with hundreds and thousands of men and women from Moscow, Leningrad and every city in Russia—men and women who had been declared enemies of a great and bright idea of a social good. This idea was something fine and noble—yet it killed some without mercy, crippled the lives of others, and separated wives from husbands and children from fathers. Now the horror of German fascism has arisen. The air is full of the groans and cries of the condemned. The sky has turned black; the sun has been extinguished by the smoke of the gas ovens. And even these crimes, crimes never before seen in the Universe—even by Man on Earth—have been committed in the name of good. (406)

Ikonnikov turns his attention to Romanticism and its search for the Good in the "biologistic and the historiosophic," i.e., in such ideas as pantheism or naturism. Here, too, he finds little reason for hope. Considering the forests where he once lived, he writes of how:

> …billions of seeds fly through the air and begin to sprout, destroying the grass and bushes. Then millions of victorious shoots wage war against one another. And it is only

> the survivors who enter into an alliance of equals to form the seamless canopy of the young deciduous forest. Beneath this canopy the spruces and beeches freeze to death in the twilight of penal servitude….This is the life of the forest—a constant struggle of everything against everything. (408)

Only a fool, he concludes, would like to nature as our moral teacher. Is life itself, he wonders, evil? At this, the lowest point, he offers up a reason for hope:

> Yes, as well as this terrible Good with a capital 'G', there is everyday human kindness. The kindness of an old woman carrying a piece of bread to a prisoner, the kindness of a soldier allowing a wounded enemy to drink from his water-flask, the kindness of youth towards age, the kindness of a peasant hiding an old Jew in his loft….The private kindness of one individual towards another; a petty, thoughtless kindness; an unwitnessed kindness. Something we could call senseless kindness. A kindness outside any system of social or religious good. (411)

Despite the endless horrors of the atrocities committed in the name of the Good, he continues, these "private, incidental" acts of kindness are eternal, unconquerable by the forces of evil. Whether it is a man straightening a bent branch or a Russian woman giving water to a wounded Nazi, such "senseless, pathetic kindness is scattered throughout life" in its entirety, "like atoms of radium":

> This kindness is both senseless and wordless. It is instinctive, blind. When Christianity clothed it in the teachings of the Church Fathers, it began to fade; its kernel became a husk. It remains potent only while it is dumb and senseless,

> hidden in the living darkness of the human heart—before it becomes a tool or commodity in the hands of preachers, before its crude ore is forged into the gilt coins of holiness. It is as simple as life itself. Even the teachings of Jesus deprived it of its strength. (407)

Ikonnikov confesses that as he lost faith in God, he likewise lost faith in goodness and even kindness. "What use was [goodness] if it was not contagious?" Ultimately, however, he realized that "Kindness is powerful only while it is powerless. If Man tries to give it power, it dims, fades away, loses itself, vanishes." The conclusion of this "manifesto," then, is hopeful, however guardedly so: "Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer."

The fact that Ikonnikov (like Shtrum, another "stand-in" for Grossman) looks to holy folly, to the kenosis of God the Son, places him in closer alignment to a Levinas than to a systematic theologian in that both men are concerned not with *ideas* of God or the Good but of *living* a good life—a *stupid* goodness, as Ikonnikov says, exactly as per the kenotic tradition in Russian Orthodoxy: Jesus the fool, the "idiotic" Myshkin, the "foolish" Dmitri, and so on. For Levinas and Grossman alike, to be good is to be at widdershins with the world, to move against the current of Being. At the least, this implies the possibility of an *Otherwise* than Being and suggests that neither individual is so thoroughly wedded to "atheism" per se as some scholars and critics might like to think. Belief is more complex than simple affirmation of a creed, after all. It is more accurate to speak of Levinas' and Grossman's rejection of belief systems centered

on *dunamis*. Judaism, as we have seen, is a faith that rejects such thinking; and to judge from Levinas' teachings on kenosis (to say nothing of his respect for Grossman), it would seem that Christianity at the least holds out the *possibility* of being or becoming a faith capable of resisting the totalizing tendencies of classical theism.

We will now address the matter of Levinas' critique of Christianity and his reasons for rejecting aspects of Christianity qua classical theism. In the process, we will highlight Levinas' grounding in the Torah and his commitment to the God of Judaism. It will be seen that throughout his harshest criticisms, Levinas never advocates unbelief or a rejection of the Torah; in point of fact, his criticisms tend to arise from Torah, if sometimes indirectly.

CHAPTER 6

LEVINAS AND ONTOTHEOLOGY

We began this work by stressing the faith of Levinas, his devotion as an Orthodox Jew and his prophetic character and aspect, pointing particularly to Levinas' kinship with Elie Wiesel in *The Trial of God*. We then offered a necessarily brief discussion of key Levinasian terms and motifs and emphasized their connection to the idea of kenosis. From there we moved on to consider another vital influence, namely, Fyodor Dostoevsky, perhaps the kenotic writer *par excellence*, as best exemplified by (though not limited to) *The Brothers Karamazov*. We then proceeded to Mikhail Bakhtin, whose focus on the bodily and the grotesque and whose view of Dostoevsky as a kenotic creator provided an important backdrop whereby to better understand the reasons underlying Levinas' admiration for Dostoevsky. Finally, we proceeded to discuss the influences of Vasily Grossman, another prophetic writer whose emphasis on holy folly (kenosis) and the inestimable value of flesh-and-blood individuals (incarnation) exerted a marked influence on the young Levinas, one that seemed only to intensify with time. Now we will examine Levinas' thoughts on Christianity and its shortcomings. In the process, we will drive home the facts that Levinas' critique emerges from his faith as a Jew and that despite his criticisms he nevertheless recognizes Christians as fellow theists, however confused (or "immature," per his comments in texts like "A Religion for Adults" and "The Man-God?") they might be in certain regards.

Dostoevsky and Bakhtin—and even the atheistic Grossman, whose talk of holy fools and the importance of incarnate, flesh-and-blood individuals and concrete acts of goodness—are perhaps the key that opens the door to this dialogue of Levinas and Christianity. As I have already

intimated, there is a profound resonance between Levinas and Christianity—or, perhaps better, between Levinas and the teachings of Jesus. The teachings of Levinas and Jesus seem to cry out to and for one another. Christianity, as we have previously intimated and will now bring to the fore, is in need of Levinasian philosophy as a corrective for the damage wrought by its ontotheological projects, in particular its thematization of God and concomitant obsession with perfection. *En bref*, there is much Levinas has to say that will benefit the Church's understandings of Creation, Revelation, Redemption, and the Messianic Age.

This chapter, accordingly, will present a Levinasian critique of Christian theology—specifically, classical theism, or as it also known, the Biblical-Classical synthesis. For his part, Levinas refers to the project of this synthesis as "ontotheology"—which is to say, the thematization of God by virtue of an obsessive focus on His attributes, His ontology. And the keystone that unites these ontological attributes is of course *perfection*, which includes timelessness, immutability, and necessity—and, by extension, *omnicontrol*.

Before discussing classical theism's understanding of the Divine attributes, we will provide a sort of backdrop by discussing Christianity's doctrine of Creation. Everything, after all, flows from the doctrine of Creation. How one understands the God-world relation will determine all else. Redemption and Revelation flow inexorably from Creation. Indeed, one might go still further, argue that Creation, Revelation and Redemption are inextricably intertwined. As one envisions the Creator's relation to the cosmos and to man, so, too, will one draw necessary conclusions and inferences about Revelation and Redemption. What does it mean to describe God as the Creator? What does creation reveal about His character?—For it is not the *How?* of creation but the *Who?* of creation that is of ultimate import. That is to say, the *How?* of creation

is determined by the *Who?* of creation. How God creates, the nature of the *relation* He establishes between Himself and the cosmos, man in particular, is of a piece with the *Who?* of creation.—And, as we have reiterated ad nauseam throughout this work, the *Who?* of creation has not to do with the nature or ontology of God but the *character* or *personhood* of God.

Christian theology, as we have argued throughout this work, begins with the abstract nature of God (i.e., the being of God, the ontology of God). Specifically, with the *perfection* of God. Perfection, that is, in the Hellenistic sense of the term (the legacy, as it were, of the Classical aspect of the Biblical-Classical synthesis): God as timeless, immutable, and necessary—and, by extension, omnicontrolling. A timeless, immutable, and necessary God cannot help but control all things; the will of such a God cannot but be monergistic. For perfection precludes the possibility of freedom—and therefore relationality. Free will opens the door to the possibility that God's will might be thwarted, that He might (dare we say it?) be *defeated*. In a way, it harks back to the question of whether God can create a rock so heavy that He cannot lift it. Yet the implications here are more far-reaching and frankly dire: Perfection means the elimination of *any and all* limitations on God. Concomitantly, however, it means the *ultimate* limitation on God.

The only way to preserve God's perfection, or the *Dignum Deo*, is to render Him into the Almighty Author and the cosmos His "novel," as it were. God creates, in one timeless instant, the cosmos from beginning to end; its every detail is worked out as intricately as the most minutely planned novel. The characters of said novel seem to the reader entirely, organically "free," and so they are; they do as they *choose*—the qualifier being that their choices are somehow (via secondary or tertiary causality or some other mechanism) determined *a priori* per the Author's immutable, impassible will. Inasmuch as God is immutable, He cannot *respond* to

the creation. Inasmuch as He is impassible, He cannot be *changed* or *affected by* the creation. Even to say that God merely foreknows the free actions of His creation and responds accordingly is problematic, inasmuch as His knowledge is thereby conditioned by the actions of His creatures—which contradicts the ideas of immutability and impassibility. (And even if it were not, if God merely foresaw His creatures' responses in advance and reacted accordingly, such knowledge would nevertheless separate God from His creatures empathically; He could not suffer with them, as His foreknowledge would preclude one of the most vital aspects of suffering: the not-knowing when or how the suffering will end. As we will see in our discussion of Levinas' "Judaism and Kenosis," this contradicts the Biblical portrait of a God who inhabits the suffering of His creatures and suffers with and for them.)

The difficulties inherent to the Biblical-Classical synthesis, or classical theism, are perhaps best evidenced, ironically enough, by the thought of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). Far from representing a radical departure from the perfect God of classical theism, his pantheism is in fact its logical conclusion. In his *God, Power and Evil*, David Ray Griffin sums up the classical theist roots of Spinozistic pantheism as follows:

> If God's nature is eternal and necessary, and God's will is identical with God's essence, then God's will must be equally eternal and necessary. This, plus the doctrine that nothing can prevent God's will from being perfectly fulfilled, leads to Spinoza's conclusion: all things flow necessarily from God's nature. Accordingly, the world is not a free creation, but is as fully necessary as God. And from this it is difficult to see how one can resist the further conclusion that all things are parts or "modes" of God. If God's necessary existence does not

> distinguish God from all worldly beings, what basis is there for insisting upon a distinction? It seems that Spinoza is right—one can say "God or Nature." Hence, if God be simple, then all of reality must be included in the simple divinity. (97-98)

Spinoza's rejection of Hebraic "perfections" such as freedom and moral goodness, Griffin argues, stems from his affirmation of Hellenistic conceptions of perfection, which is to say, timelessness, immutability, and necessity—attributes likewise affirmed by classical theists like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. To be sure, there is a tension here between the Bible and theology, and attempts have been made by various and sundry classical theists to resolve the tension, but without success.[184] "A solution that does not involve an at least implicit denial of [freedom and moral goodness]," Griffin maintains, "will have to involve a rejection of some of the notions inspired by Greek thought" (105). Most classical theists, in the end, are more concerned to preserve God's perfection, even at the cost of His relationality. However "merciful" and "compassionate" He might be portrayed in their hymnody, there is a profound disconnect between their prayers and hymns on the one hand and their theology on the other. The God to whom they pray, in other words, is not the God Whom they describe and exalt in their theology—a sure signal that something is egregiously amiss.

Let us now turn to classical theism's account of the Divine attributes, beginning with timelessness.

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[184] Francis Schaeffer is one such classical theist (see, e.g., Chapter Three of Scott Burson's and Jerry Walls' *C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer*). Norman Geisler, for another, concludes that man is *both* free *and* predestined. However interesting such an idea may be within the confines of academia, its sheer inadequacy is made manifest when considered from the vantage of Auschwitz or Treblinka.

An absolutely essential thought to bear in mind regarding timelessness is that one Divine action cannot truly be said to precede another. God's decree "Let there be light…" does not precede the other decrees of the Creation account. There is no "before" and "after" in a temporal sense. Creation is, to say again, like a novel conceived from beginning to end, in all its details, in one timeless instant. Explains Keith Ward in *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*:

> The whole of time, from beginning to end, is created by God. Because of that, it is just as true to say that God creates at the end of time as it is to say that God creates at the beginning. If we imagine the whole of time as a line from A to Z, then the whole line is made by God in one and the same act….In fact God makes every time at the same time—or, technically, in the same non-temporal act… (134)

Creation, then, is not the result of a process of deliberation on God's part; it is, rather, an act of *necessity*; it cannot be but what it is—much the same as for God. But what room, if any, is left for *relationality* in such a view?—Or, for that matter, *ethics*? For time is essential to ethics, as per Levinas' thesis in *Time and the Other*; for the time that concerns the self is the moment of death—albeit the death of the *other* as opposed to that of the self. If time is illusory, undermined and negated by the divine timelessness, can there be ethics? *No*. If processual time has no meaning, is not death likewise robbed of meaning?

Herein obtains the *anti-* of the anti-world of Auschwitz, wherein time is rendered meaningless because each individual is "ferociously alone" and "grey and identical" and no-one "can seriously think about tomorrow" or entertain thoughts of resistance to evil. "To destroy a man is difficult…but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze…no acts of

violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment."[185] Hence, too, Viktor Frankl's concept of "futurelessness," an affliction with which many if not all camp inmates struggled to varying degrees: "When he loses 'his future' a person must drift through a presentist, vegetative existence—something like that described by Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*....The Latin word *finis* means both end and goal. The moment a person cannot foresee the end of a provisional stage in his life, he is unable to set himself any further goals, is unable to assign himself a task."[186] David Patterson makes essentially the same point when he describes the anti-world in terms of Levinas' *there is* and concludes that death itself dies in the anti-world: "In the 'there is' that descends upon the concentrationary universe, death is not a rite of passage, neither rite nor passage, it simply is. Which amounts to saying: It simply is *nothing*. Hence death dies."[187]

Closely bound up with the idea of Divine timelessness is that of God's immutability, which in turn is in keeping with God as *Actus Purus* or Being Itself. God dwells in the eternal Now, immune to becoming. More to the point, it clarifies a crucial misunderstanding regarding the nature of predestination, which is *not*, as many think, simply a matter of God foreknowing His creature's behaviors and responding accordingly. By virtue of the Divine simplicity, God's will is essentially the same as His knowledge. God knows, but not passively, as is the case for humans. For His timeless, impassible knowledge is in no wise dependent on the behaviors or responses of His creature. Rather, the creature's behaviors and responses are determined by His

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[185] Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 88, 62, 133, 150. Also noteworthy is the Levi's rhetorical question to his reader in the chapter entitled "Kraus": "Do you know how one says 'never' in camp slang? '*Morgen früh*', tomorrow morning" (133).

[186] *The Doctor and the Soul*, 99-100.

[187] *Wrestling with the Angel*, 147.

knowledge, which is timeless and impassible. God's knowing and God's willing are inextricably bound, to the point that the creature's behaviors are necessary, fixed—in a word, *predetermined*. God's relation to the creature is therefore of a piece with Buber's I-It mode or Levinas' totality, which is theoretical as opposed to ethical, assimilating as opposed to kenotic.

In the following passage from *I and Thou*, Buber teases out the implications of knowing in this fashion. Although he is describing human knowing and using, his insights are, seen through a Levinasian lens, as apropos of God as they are of man: "Insofar as a human being makes do with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no presence. He has nothing but objects; but objects consist in having been" (63-64). David Patterson very helpfully expounds upon this passage and deepens its insight via Levinas, remarking that the I-It mode "removes the object from the flow of time." He goes on to relate that "Time is a *flowing*, an *approach to the other*, that never really ends. And this movement, this flowing, is necessary for presence," which of course pertains to the I-Thou mode. "To *use* something, then, is to remove it from the flow of time and thereby render it timeless."[188] Per Spinoza, per classical theism, God's time*less* knowledge is also a *totalizing* knowledge, reducing the creature to an *It*, an extension of the Divine in much the same manner as a tool is but an extension of its wielder. God's simple, timeless, impassible nature cannot but appropriate the creature unto the Same—i.e., God.

And this brings us to the idea of Divine necessity. Griffin and others point to the contradiction between necessity and personhood: Can a person exist in a mode that is truly,

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[188] Class notes, HUHI 6395: Advanced Topics in European Thought and Culture (fall 2016).

unrelentingly *necessary*, i.e., such that his actions cannot be otherwise than they are without him ceasing to be?

God Himself—or, rather, the *Who* of God—is subsumed by His own necessary being, by the *What* of God. He cannot will but what is necessary. And it is not just God's *will* that is necessary; as God's willing and God's knowing, as we have seen, are by virtue of the Divine simplicity synonymous, God becomes synonymous with Necessity itself. Whatever *is* is willed by God—that is to say, willed perfectly, timelessly, immutably. Were any other *is* possible, God would not be God, as Spinoza says.

And with this last point a further conundrum presents itself: What is the place of prayer vis-à-vis the God of classical theism? And by *prayer* I mean the broadest, most inclusive sense of the word: *discourse* with God, which entails petition, praise, lament, challenge, and candor. If such discourse is undermined, Walter Brueggemann avers, there is no "genuine covenantal interaction." In particular, the absence of lament means that "the second party to the covenant…has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology."[189]—Which is, of course, exactly what happens with classical theism and its obsession with perfection. For the only true and proper attitude towards history, whether natural or human, universal or personal, is one of *resignation*. Hence, the truest "prayer" one may utter to the God of Augustine, Calvin et al is, *Whatever* is *is right*. (One has but to think of hymns such as Horatio Spafford's [1828-1888] *It Is Well With My Soul* to see my point.) Moral outrage, horror, even empathy or compassion for the sufferer—these suggest the dangerous (or at any rate confusing) possibility that whatever is *is* ***not*** *right*—in which case God would not be God. For

[189] *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 102.

the sake of this God—or, more accurately, for the sake of the *Dignum Deo*—there can be no moral outrage. One can only look on and rejoice in the knowledge that whatever *is* is part of some Higher Plan, some revelation of the Divine.

—*Rejoicing* in the face of the Shoah?? Or even, as Ivan Karamazov might say, in the suffering and degradation of one small child? This author, at least, cannot but regard Primo Levi's "atheistic" response to such an idea as the truer, more biblical piety: "Today I think that if for no other reason than that an Auschwitz existed, no one in our age should speak of Providence. But without doubt in that hour the memory of biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity passed like a wind through all our minds."[190]

Let us be entirely clear on this point: The consistent classical theist will necessarily look askance at Levi's outcry. However much some part of him might wish to empathize with Levi's sufferings, his only *consistent* response is predetermined by his commitment to perfection: At best he will condescend to Levi, observing pityingly that we should excuse his "blindness" owing to his experiences in Auschwitz; at worst he will outright condemn Levi's "impiety" or "lack of faith." Whatever one might say of either reply, one cannot fault the underlying *logic*. For in a certain sense, the classical theist cannot but say to Levi, '*Hier ist kein warum*': "There is no why here."[191] As Ward explains in *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, "There is simply no point in blaming or questioning God…To see God would be to see that what is must be…In that vision freedom and necessity coincide. Our truest freedom, as the philosopher Spinoza said, lies in the acceptance of necessity" (135).

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[190] *Survival in Auschwitz*, 157-58.

[191] *Survival in Auschwitz*, 29.

Lest the reader think me guilty of hyperbole, misrepresentation, or simple ignorance, consider Erwin Lutzer's *Hitler and the Shoah*:

> John Calvin's words would have given comfort to the Christians who withstood the Nazi regime. "Let them recall that the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked are completely restrained by God's hand as by a bridle, so that they are unable either to hatch any plot against us or, having hatched it, to make preparations or, if they have fully planned it, to stir a finger towards carrying it out, except so far as he has permitted, indeed commanded them." The atrocities of Nazism only gave unbelievers more reasons to disbelieve; the faith of believers who clung to God's promises was sustained. (52, 56-57)

What, it may well be asked, is the difference between Good and Evil in any *ultimate* sense for a Jean Calvin, the classical theist *par excellence*? Morally speaking, is there not an undeniable monergism at work? And if so, might we go a step farther and suggest that there are intimations of monism inherent to Calvin's view? Monism, it hardly needs be pointed out, is far removed from the *Biblical* God, whom Levinas describes as Infinity or the *Otherwise* than Being. For in fact it is precisely to the realm of *being* that perfection and all its attendant attributes like simplicity, immutability and impassibility pertain! Is monism not, in fact, of a piece with Levinas' conception of totality?

And this brings us to what may be the most disturbing corollary of Divine perfection: omnicontrol. Classical theists, Calvinists in particular, are wont to point to the potter metaphor (cf. Is. 29:16, Jer. 18:1-6, Rom. 9:21), which, interpreted through the lens of perfection, affirms the idea of Divine omnicontrol. As John Sanders explains in *The God Who Risks*: "Many

theologians have developed a risk-free view of providence…The metaphors of king and potter…have been extremely influential in shaping the theological understanding of providence toward an emphasis on divine control with the resulting loss of any reciprocal relations between Creator and creature" (39). As Gregory Boyd is quick to emphasize, however, whereas in actuality the aforementioned scriptures comprise a complex portrait stressing Divine *responsiveness*—i.e., the degree to which the Creator will, unlike the potter, change His will depending on the responses of His creatures—the presupposition of perfection leads the devotees of the Biblical-Classical synthesis to affirm Divine omnicontrol. How could it be otherwise? As we have stressed, a perfect being cannot respond to His creatures, as that would necessarily entail change, and therefore a loss of perfection. Scriptures representing Divine responsiveness are therefore deemed anthropomorphic—recalling, i.e., Calvin's "lisping"—and reinterpreted accordingly.[192]

So what, then, is the logical ramification of timelessness, immutability, necessity, and omnicontrol?

In a word, *pantheism*.

Is the God we have thus far described relational or even *personal*? No. God's knowledge, God's love, God's purpose (etc. ad nauseam)—these have nothing whatsoever to do with the creature per se, i.e., *are in no wise dependent on the creature's behaviors*. To speak of God *deciding* or *responding* or *repenting*, like talk of God's grief or anger or jealousy, is mere "lisping" or baby-talk for the sake of the unsophisticated. The ideal metaphor for God, we have

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[192] Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*, 130.

stressed, is that of the Almighty Author. The cosmos and its history, accordingly, is essentially a novel He creates in its absolute entirety in one timeless instant.

Yet even this metaphor is limited and fails to convey the entire picture. Insofar as the cosmos could not be otherwise without *God* being otherwise, one might as well say that God and His creation are inextricably bound together. However much the classical theist might insist that God has no "need" for the created order, insofar as His acts are *necessary*, one cannot imagine God *without* the creation—thereby undermining their separateness, however obliquely. One begins to perceive a sense in which, per Spinoza, God and world are "one." Perhaps not in a strict ontological sense, true enough. But definitely *relationally*—if indeed this term is here appropriate and applicable! In point of fact, it is precisely because there *is* no relationality between God and creation, *no reciprocity of the I-Thou*, that we may say that God and world are "one": "In the It-world causality holds unlimited sway….It is considered foolish to imagine any freedom; one is supposed to have nothing but the choice between resolute and hopelessly rebellious slavery."[193] And let us be clear: what we are describing goes far beyond mere predestination. The Divine perfection complicates things by blurring the distinction between the Creator and His creation. Insofar as *(a.)* God is simple; *(b.)* creation and redemption are, qua timeless, *faits accomplis*; and, finally, *(c.)* the created order is the perfect, necessary revelation of God's perfect, necessary will, it seems difficult, to say the least, to establish a wholly unambiguous demarcation between the Creator and His creation. If it is indeed the case that *Whatever* is *is right*, what moral or meaningful difference is there between God and world? Indeed, is not the best analogy for the relationship between Creator and created that of *mind and*

[193] Buber, *I and Thou*, 100, 105-06.

body? The latter wills, and the former cannot but comply—not, as we have stressed, if the Creator is the God of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther et al.

Levinas would likely concur with Griffin's argument that Spinozistic pantheism is the ineluctable product of the Biblical-Classical synthesis. In *Totality and Infinity*, after all, he speaks of the "ancient privilege of unity…affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza to Hegel." Western thought—theology included, it need hardly be added—therefore views oneness as sublime or divine and "separation and interiority" as "incomprehensible and irrational." "As a stage the separated being traverses on the way of its return to its metaphysical source, a moment of a history that will be concluded by union, metaphysics would be an Odyssey, and its disquietude nostalgia" (102). Ontotheology, which obsesses over perfection and its corollaries (timelessness, immutability, etc.), is by no means immune to the Parmenidean monism that informs Plato; and Western history, as it has been said, is essentially "footnotes on Plato."

It is to the subject of Levinas' corrective of this underlying monism that we now turn.

We will begin our Levinasian corrective of classical theism with timelessness. From there we will proceed to Levinas' rebuttal of immutability, then move on to necessity. We will then address the issue of omnicontrol and conclude with the subject of pantheism. The logic of this plan will, it is hoped, become apparent as it unfolds. Needless to say, as entangled as the Divine attributes of timelessness, immutability, necessity, and omnicontrol are (owing, as Griffin stresses in *God, Power, and Evil*, to the Divine *simplicity*), it is difficult to talk about one without touching on one or more of the others as well. Ergo, despite our best efforts, we can anticipate some repetition.

In our discussion of timelessness, we saw that God does not "foreknow" the future insofar as He cannot be said to respond to His creatures' actions. Rather, God creates timelessly—which means, Keith Ward explains, that "God actually knows [the future] in every detail, since God makes it at the same time as the past….'God did not alter His eternal resolution in creating the world,' writes Augustine…God's decision to create is eternal, fixed, and it exists changelessly in God."[194] Even our prayers, Augustine would say, are predetermined. The created order, like God, cannot be other than it is. If God is necessary, does it not follow that His works are necessary? And if God is timeless and so creates timelessly, is not time thereby rendered meaningless? What becomes of evil, specifically, the suffering and death of the Other? Is death *death* in a world created necessarily and timelessly?—That is, does death have *ethical* ramifications, or is it merely ontological? And even there, is death an ending even in a purely ontological sense, or merely a continuation of Existence?

Levinas, it seems obvious, would have none of this talk. He would dismiss the God of classical theism as the antithesis of the *Otherwise* than Being. He would view the idea of timelessness, Divine or otherwise, with profound suspicion. Time for Levinas is too precious to allow it to be overshadowed or swallowed up by timelessness, inasmuch as "time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but…the very relationship of the subject with the Other," as he explains in the opening of *Time and the Other* (10). And the very essence of this relationship, as we know, is for Levinas an *ethical* one. The death that concerns me, he avers, is not *my* death but that of the Other. Ethics, time, and alterity are thereby linked. Can there be an *Other* without time? Can there be *ethics* without time?

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[194] *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 101.

Herein lies the key to a Levinasian critique of classical theism's obsession with timelessness. It begins with the question of the relationship between beings and Being, existents and Existence. How does the existent escape the tyranny of Existence and its inevitable reification?—Which is to say, how does one escape the timelessness of the *there is*?

Levinas draws a parallel between insomnia and Existence, on the one hand, and sleep and the individual existent on the other. Insomnia he connects to the tyranny of the *there is*, the inability to escape the eternal reification of Existence. "The impossibility of escaping wakefulness is something 'objective,' independent of my initiative…consciousness is depersonalized. I do not stay awake: 'it' stays awake."[195] Sleep, by contrast, dispels this reification because of its need for grounding in a specific place: "The summoning of sleep occurs in the act of lying down," he writes in *Existence and Existents*. "To lie down is precisely to limit existence to a place, to position…A place is not an indifferent 'somewhere,' but a base, a *condition*" (66-67). This idea, in turn, is of a piece with Levinas' appreciation for Grossman, their shared concern lest incarnate, flesh- and-blood humans be reified into The Human and simple "everyday" acts of loving-kindness into The Good. Only an incarnate being can take the bread from his own mouth and offer it to the Other. Only a flesh-and-blood human, grounded in the "unreliable, unsolid, unlasting, unpredictable, dangerous world of relation [*as opposed*, i.e., to the security of a timelessness, perfect world],"[196] has "a base, a *condition*." But this base or condition is more than physical; it is, of necessity, *temporal* as well. "The present is pure beginning…The freedom of the present finds a limit in the responsibility for which it is the condition. This is the most

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[195] *Ethics and Infinity*, 49.

[196] Buber, *I and Thou*, 126.

profound paradox in the concept of freedom: its synthetic bond with its own negation. A free being alone is responsible, that is, already not free," declares Levinas in *Existence and Existents* (78-79). Selfhood, then, is bound up with the idea of time. Yet time is made possible, is given meaning, by responsibility; which, paradoxically, imposes a limitation on freedom. Hence Levinas' concept of hypostasis—the "liberation," if you will, of the existent from the anonymity of Existence through the self-limitation imposed by responsibility.

> On the ground of the *there is* a being arises. The ontological signification of an *entity* in the general economy of Being, which Heidegger simply posits alongside of Being by a distinction, will thus be deduced. By hypostasis anonymous being loses its *there is* character. An entity—that which is—is a subject of the verb *to be*, and thus exercises its mastery over the fatality of Being, which has become its attribute. Someone exists who assumes Being, which henceforth is *his* being. (83)

David Patterson explains that the entity's passage from the abstract to the concrete—from the status of a *what* to a *who*—entails responsibility; responsibility *initially*, and *fleetingly,* for the self, but ultimately—and more crucially—for an Other. "To be good, one must be a name [a noun] *and* a response [a verb]." Goodness is not an abstraction; it is a movement towards the other.[197]

Yet hypostasis, like the goodness to which it is ultimately linked, is never guaranteed; the tyranny of the *there is* remains an ongoing possibility insofar as the individual can once more

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[197] Class notes from HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016).

lapse into the solipsism of the ontological mode: *my* knowledge, *my* mastery, *my* virility, *my* power, *my* goodness (etc. ad nauseam).[198] Knowledge is of particular interest to Levinas, and not only in this text but elsewhere in his corpus. However noble the pursuit of knowledge may be, however important it is to vouchsafing one's individuality, it is not a sufficient "curative" in and of itself. In point of fact, one might say that it constitutes but a first, faltering step. "Knowing is a relation with what above all remains exterior, it is a relationship with what remains outside of all relationships, an action which maintains the agent outside of the events he brings about," explains Levinas. "The concept of knowing—a relationship and an action of a unique kind—makes it possible to fix the identity of the 'I,' to keep it enclosed in its secrecy. It maintains itself under the variations of the history which affects it as an object, without affecting its being."[199] In much the same manner that Buber avers that the I-Thou cannot exist apart from the I-It, then, knowledge is necessary for selfhood in the Levinasian schema. However, sans alterity—or, better, a genuine *openness* to alterity—knowledge gives rise to the I-It mode. Writes Buber in *I and Thou*: "…the ego occupies himself with his My….He sets himself apart from everything else and tries to possess as much as possible by means of experience and use" (114). Likewise, in "The Temptation of Temptation" Levinas warns against the temptation of knowledge. "Its starting point is an ego which, in the midst of engagement, assures itself a continual disengagement….It will no longer leave the other in its otherness but will always

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[198] *Existence and Existents*, 84.

[199] Ibid, 88.

include it in the whole, approaching it, as they say today, in historical perspective, at the horizon of the All."[200]

To tie this back to the idea of timelessness, we have elsewhere explained that knowledge entails plucking its object from the flow of time and reducing it to a timeless mode of being, to the status of an It.(—Not unlike the relationship of the timeless, impassible God of classical theism to His creatures, one is tempted to add.) In addition to alterity, then, the pursuit of knowledge must therefore be preceded by ethics, the "first philosophy," as Levinas calls it. Or perhaps it is better to say that in order for knowledge to avoid degenerating into including the other in at the horizon of the All, there must, Levinas insists, be *anarchy*.[201]

"Knowledge is a deadly friend / If no one sets the rules / The fate of all mankind, I see / Is in the hands of fools"—Or so the King Crimson rock group prophesies in "Epitaph," which appeared in its 1969 album *In the Court of the Crimson King.* Levinas shares the question implicit to these lyrics, as we have seen, and his answer can be summed up in a single word: the *anarchic*. In a way, it is his alternative to the theological notion of "timelessness," as it bespeaks something at once beyond Being and yet operative within it. It is an idea that, far from overshadowing or rendering meaningless time and the temporal, *enriches* both, so to say, establishing a relation with the Otherwise than Being—namely, God. Indeed, as we will go on to argue, the anarchic can be described as an aspect of God's kenosis, bespeaking a relation that does not coerce or overwhelm (or *thematize*) but instead "persuades"—or, to use Levinas' term,

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[200] In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, (33, 34-35).

[201] "Anarchy" and the "anarchic" in Levinas has nothing to do with politics; the anarchic has to do with God, who from beyond being summons me to *be* my love for my fellow human beings. It bespeaks an obligation to the Other that predates my birth, originating from the *Otherwise* than being.

"obsesses": "…the subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation. We have called this relationship irreducible to consciousness obsession" (*Otherwise than Being*, 101). The anarchic, simply stated, is of a piece with Levinas' assertion that "the divinity of God is played out in the human. God descends in the 'face' of the other. To recognize God is to hear his commandment 'thou shalt not kill,' which is not only a prohibition against murder, but a call to incessant responsibility with regard to the other."[202]

The anarchic, we should clarify, has little to do with the modern, political connotations of anarchy, as in anarchism; this conception is, however ironic it might seem, nevertheless tied to order, representing as it does a new order, a new mode of being—in short, a new totality. As such, it both thematizes and is thematized. By contrast, the anarchic "troubles being over and beyond these alternatives. It brings to a halt the ontological play which, precisely qua play, is consciousness, where being is lost and found again, and thus illuminated."[203] One does not apprehend the anarchic; one does not contemplate it or answer its call pragmatically or dispassionately. One is not bound by some preexisting commitment or obligation. Rather, one is obsessed with the Other, with the asymmetry of one's relationship to the Other. "Obsession is a persecution where the persecution does not make up the content of a consciousness gone mad; it designates the form in which the ego is affected, a form which is a defecting from consciousness. This inversion of consciousness is no doubt a passivity—but it is a passivity beneath all

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[202] *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 236. The essential Jewishness of Levinas' worldview is aptly demonstrated by Abraham Joshua Heschel's own thoughts regarding the image of the human: "The second commandment implies more than the prohibition of images; it implies rejection of all visible symbols for God; not only images fashioned by man but also of 'any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.' . . . And yet there is something in the world that the Bible does regard as a symbol of God. It is not a temple or a tree, it is not a statue or a star. The symbol of God is man, every man. God created man in His image, in His likeness" (*Man's Quest for God*, 200).

[203] *Otherwise than Being*, 101.

passivity. It cannot be defined in terms of intentionality, where undergoing is always also an assuming…"[204]

Moment by moment, one must be reborn. "Each instant is a beginning, a birth," Levinas writes.[205] One drags oneself from one instant to the next, tearing oneself momentarily from Being. One thinks of Michelangelo's statues of figures tearing themselves from the very marble of which they are comprised. This seems particularly true of "The Atlas" (circa 1530-34). His efforts, however titanic, seem doomed. There is a sense of the crushing, irresistible weight of Being about this statue, at least to this author. His labors are as timeless as they are solitary. Hence the tragic aura of this figure: For without alterity—without the Other's summons (more accurately, one's *response* thereunto)—one falls back into mere Existence. Like Michelangelo's "Atlas," one never manages to rend oneself from Being. Alterity, in turn, presupposes the anarchic. Without the anarchic, the self would not perceive the asymmetry in the relationship with the Other, would not experience obsession and persecution—nor the freedom from the "there is."

To reverse the matter, what becomes of time without alterity and the anarchic? In a word, it becomes desacralized and therefore meaningless. Without the God who descends to the face of the Other and speaks to the self (saying *thou shalt not kill*, with all that that implies), there is no escape from the timelessness and anonymity of the *there is*. Time and relationality are of a piece. There is no responsibility where there is no Other with needs, and there are no needs outside of time. "Is not sociality something more than the source of our representation of time: is

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[204] *Otherwise than Being*, 101.

[205] Ibid, 75.

it not time itself?...The dialectic of time is the very dialectic of the relationship with the other, that is, a dialogue which in turn has to be studied in terms other than those of the dialectic of the solitary subject."[206] Classical philosophy—as in the Biblical-Classical synthesis—is at heart monistic. Hence the pathos of Greek tragedy, wherein the individual struggles (in vain) for autonomy through skill, mastery, and great heroic deeds. Like Odysseus, the hero may persevere for a time, even gathering about himself a circle that augments his powers and glory. In the end, however, he cannot maintain himself against the caprice of Fate, and he returns to the anonymity of Being.

In this same vein, it is worth nothing that for the classical hero like Odysseus, there is no sense of calling himself into question for the sake of another; hence, it troubles him not that his entire crew perishes while he alone survives. Joseph Soloveitchik's "Adam the First" seems every bit the Greek hero: "aggressive, bold, and victory minded. His motto is success, triumph over the cosmic forces." Accordingly, "he is impelled to take joint action"; for him, community is primarily about utility, extending the power of the heroic autonomous self."[207] In this selfsame vein, is this not the essence of Greek myth, including *The Odyssey*?—To demonstrate, that is, the ultimate futility of eschewing the anonymity of Being, or as Levinas would say, the *there is*? Hence its ultimately tragic character: Even the very greatest of men must return to mere Existence. This *inescapability* is precisely what Levinas has in mind when he writes that "…the transcendence of thought remains closed in itself despite all its adventures—which in the last

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[206] *Existence and Existents*, 96.

[207] *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 18, 29. It is worth noting that Soloveitchik does not stop with Adam the First, or utilitarian man; he posits an Adam the Second, or spiritual man, as well. The two are not separate figures but represent two poles that exist within mankind; or, to borrow from Buber, two modes of being, which correspond with Buber's I-It mode and I-Thou mode, respectively.

analysis are purely imaginary, or are adventures traversed as by [Odysseus]: on the way home."[208]

"Classical philosophy left aside the freedom which consists not in negating oneself, but in having one's being pardoned by the very alterity of the other," observes Levinas. Classical philosophy recognizes no need for an Other to call the self into question—which, ironically, makes possible genuine autonomy. Only a being called into question can answer a summons. Or, to turn it around, only alterity can open the possibility of vindicating the selfhood of the self by answering a summons—if "vindicate" is quite the right term, for in truth one can never do enough; one can never *satisfactorily* answer the summons of the Other. Always there is *more* to do. (And this "more," it needs hardly be pointed out, has an undeniably *temporal* character.) For the Other isn't a shadow or a double for the self; the relation that obtains between the Other and the self is one of profound *asymmetry*, inasmuch as the Other "is the weak one whereas I am the strong one; he is the poor one, 'the widow and the orphan.' There is no greater hypocrisy than that which invented well tempered charity."[209] For Levinas, kenosis is key—one must pour out one's self regard, one's power, one's mastery (and, come to that, one's *time*) for the sake of the Other. Only in this way does the self pass from the anonymity of Existence to the "autonomy" of the existent. One "gains" oneself by pouring oneself out—an endless process, as one can never do enough. "Is it righteous for me to be? Is my place in the sun, which necessitates that others remain in shadow, ever justifiable?" *No*. Always there is more to do, more to be sacrificed or poured out. "The more I answer the more I am responsible; the more I

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[208] *Totality and Infinity*, 27.

[209] *Existence and Existents*, 98-99.

approach the neighbor with which I am encharged the further away I am."[210] It is difficult in the extreme, however, to understand how this cannot necessarily entail time. Only a being grounded in the temporal, in other words, can bear a name:

> The true substantiality of a subject consists in its *substantivity*: in the fact that there is not only, anonymously, being in general, but there are beings capable of bearing names…A subject is not free like the wind, but already has a destiny which it does not get from a past or a future, but from its present. If commitment in being thereby escapes the weight of the past (the only weight that was seen in existence), it involves a weight of its own which its evanescence does not lighten, and against which a solitary subject, who is constituted by the instant, is powerless. Time and the other are necessary for the liberation from it. (*Existence and Existents*, 103-04)

Here one cannot but think of Primo Levi's "The Story of Ten Days" in *Survival in Auschwitz*—specifically, his ministrations to the patients in the dysentery ward: "The floor was covered by a layer of frozen excrement," he relates. "None of the patients had strength enough to climb out of their blankets to search for food…" When two of these patients, fellow Italians, hear his name, they cry his name and implore his aid unendingly. Levi overcomes his revulsion and risks the filth to carry water and soup to the patients at the end of the day. "The result from was that from then on…the whole diarrhoea [sic] ward shouted my name day and night...without my being able to do anything about it. I felt like crying. I could have cursed them" (166). Small wonder, then, that Levinas cautions in *Time and the Other* that "The relationship with the other is

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[210] *Otherwise than Being*, 93.

not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place…[It is, rather,] "a relationship with Mystery" (75). Hence, as we have seen, the close association of Levinasian motifs like the anarchic, obsession, and persecution.

David Patterson asks rhetorically, "'Who am I?' The one responsible. Hypostasis, then, is the birth of the responsible one. I am summoned from the anonymity of the *there is* to act on behalf of another. Hypostasis entails awakening to a calling, a destiny." Patterson goes on to supplement Levinas' insight by noting the etymological connection of the Hebrew word for "destiny," *yiud*, to that for "testimony," *edah*.[211] By responding to the summons, Levi is reborn, reaffirming his identity as an existent; no longer is he defined by anonymous, impersonal Existence—a fate to which Auschwitz subjected its every inmate, "annihilat[ing them] first as men in order to kill [them] more slowly afterwards."[212] The *muselmann*—bereft of a story, without a face, devoid of color, his death not *truly* death—is the true *raison d'etre* of the so-called death camps. Levi, however, is freed of that fate and survives; he now has an account that is more than merely factual or historical: by answering the summons, he has reaffirmed his name and acquired a *testimony*.

To say that Auschwitz and the other death camps are the epitome of totality, a collapse of hypostasis and a return to the *there is*, is borne out by Levi's own thoughts regarding the "death" of Auschwitz as he recounts various acts of compassion and selflessness in "The Story of Ten Days" (which includes the preceding account of Levi's ministrations to the dysentery patients):

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[211] In David Patterson's HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016) course.

[212] *Survival in Auschwitz*, 51.

"Only a day before a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the Lager said: 'eat your bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour [sic]', and left no room for gratitude. It really meant that the Lager was dead." (160)

The futurelessness of Auschwitz—the death of temporality and the nigh-impossibility of hypostasis—has come to an end. The miracle isn't that Levi and his companions have survived; the miracle obtains in the fact that they regained their names, acquired a testimony (to the Otherwise than being), and thereby resisted the anonymity and silence of the *there is*.

Related to but not strictly synonymous with timelessness (save perhaps in terms of ontotheology and its obsession with Divine simplicity) is the concept of immutability. The two terms are sufficiently intertwined that it will be difficult to discuss one without referring in some fashion to the other. Ergo, there will doubtless be some repetition of motifs and arguments relating to the preceding section on Divine timelessness. Moreover, on occasion the idea of Divine impassibility will be addressed as well. Subsuming it under the category of immutability is not theologically accurate, as it is an attribute unto itself (Divine simplicity notwithstanding), but after due consideration it was deemed necessary so as to maintain the structure of Griffin's five-point analysis of the profound connection between classical theism and Spinozistic pantheism. The goal, nevertheless, is to produce a truly Levinasian critique of all of the aforementioned[213] without becoming lost in what is a deeply labyrinthine, nigh-impenetrable, topic.

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[213] It should be clarified that while Levinas doesn't critique classical theism per se at any one point in his corpus, many of his remarks about the underlying monism of Western thought could be extended to include the Biblical-Classical synthesis, which is itself tied to Hellenistic philosophy and to Parmenides.

Immutability is distinct from timelessness in that the former term refers to the inability to experience change or development, whereas the latter refers to an existence outside of the flow of time. One way of understanding their relation is to say that God is timeless insofar as He created time and immutable in that He is unchanged by the passage of time—or by any other force or being. Partly He is unaffected because of the simple fact that He exists outside of time. Because time does not exist for Him—because there is, strictly speaking, no "before" or "after" for Him—He creates timelessly, i.e., such that the days of creation, for instance, do not proceed one after the other for Him but are conceived and *accomplished* in one and the same instant. This account for some measure of His immutability, as He cannot be surprised or defeated as a result of the timelessness not only of the act of creation but of His knowledge as well. Nevertheless, immutability goes beyond the question of time. Nothing can change God, in part, as we have seen, because any change would of necessity be for the worse, entailing a loss of perfection. The idea of becoming "more perfect still" is illogical, both semantically and ontologically. There is also the matter of the *Dignum Deo*. Change—including (emotional) responsiveness to His creatures or their experiences—is deemed unworthy of God. Passages of Scripture which speak of God *repenting*—perhaps most famously prior to the Flood, when He repents that He made man (Gen. 6:6), and after the sin of the Golden Calf, when He rejects all the Israelites save Moses, with whom He pledges to begin His plan again (Ex. 32:14)—are therefore deemed anthropomorphisms, God "lisping" to His less theologically astute children:

> Theologians from Philo to John Calvin have asserted that it is *impossible* for the divine mind to change…It is simply not appropriate for God to be described as repenting or being sorrowful, as that would imply "either that he is ignorant of

> what is going to happen, and cannot escape it, or hastily and rashly rushes to a decision." Any of these options make God look foolish and are not fitting ascriptions to a transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient and immutable deity.

So writes John Sanders in *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (67). For many classical theists, Sanders goes on to explain, there are passages to be understood in a straightforward and unequivocal manner and others to be read as anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. Those which seem in any way to compromise the *Dignum Deo* are of course placed within the latter category. Some classical theists are more open about acknowledging extrabiblical—read "classical philosophical," as in the *Biblical-Classical synthesis*—criteria to evaluate such passages. The Protestant Thomist Norman Geisler, for one, affirms that Divine immutability and impassibility, admittedly Greek philosophical notions, are valid hermeneutical guides.[214]

As with the idea of timelessness, Divine or no, Levinas would have little good to say. Doubtless he would roundly dismiss such talk as ontotheological, as thematizing God—and, by extension, man as well.

In a way, one can draw an analogy between immutability and magic. "Magic wants to be effective without entering into any relationship and performs its arts in the void," writes Buber, "while sacrifice and prayer step 'before the countenance,' into the perfection of the basic word that signifies reciprocity. They say You and listen" (*I and Thou*, 131). True enough: Buber is describing humanity's interaction with the Divine. Nor should we ignore Levinas' discomfort with Buber's talk of "reciprocity." Nevertheless, Buber's insight has important light to shed on

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[214] *The God Who Risks*, 67.

the idea of Divine immutability. In the end, is not the God of Calvin (and Spinoza) the God of magic? If humans employ magic so as to "be effective without entering into any relationship," is not the immutable, omnipotent will of God likewise antithetical to a genuine relationship? For this God cannot *lose*. He cannot suffer *defeat* or *failure*. He cannot *risk*, and risk means embracing the "unreliable, unsolid, unlasting, unpredictable, dangerous world of relation" (*I and Thou*, 126) and, concomitantly, eschewing the I-It mode, which reduces humanity and the cosmos to the status of an It.—And in the process, reduces God Himself to an It. "Whoever knows the world as something to be utilized knows God the same way" (156). Surely this is true of God as well? If God reduces the creation to the status of an It, is He not likewise rendering *Himself* into an It?

Insofar as classical theists deem God immutable, it is difficult indeed to see how they can affirm His personhood without resorting to anthropomorphism. Terence E. Fretheim observes in *The Suffering of God* that "A figurative interpretation buys abstraction at the cost of concreteness" (6). "To affirm the priority of Being over existents," Levinas declares in a similar vein in *Totality and Infinity*, "is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom" (45-46). To effectually reduce God to His attributes for the sake of the *Dignum Deo* is to thematize God; just as stressing God's perfection, such as His immutability, inevitably thematizes man. One can just as easily say that God has appropriated man unto the Same as the reverse!

On both counts, relationality is fatally undermined. However reluctant Levinas is to speak affirmatively of God for fear of thematizing Him, I believe that this concern for thematization is a two-way street, as it were: Levinas is as concerned to protect man as he is God. His "iconoclasm," as we have stressed, is wedded to a Biblical humanism. And given the interrelationship between God and man in Judaism (who is, after all, the bearer of the *Imago Dei*), Levinas would seek to *protect* this relationship, his reticence to *define* it notwithstanding. At the least, I think it safe to say that Levinas would concur that immutability precludes relationality. And without relationality, can there be personhood? Is such a God personal, or is He more akin to Necessity or Fate or Aristotle's Unmoved Mover? Can such a God "say You and listen," as Buber says? To what or to whom *could* He listen, if indeed the creation, qua necessary, qua timeless, is known by God from start to finish, predetermined to the last flood, fire, famine, and fart lest it undermine His immutability and, beyond that, His perfection? As we have seen, even the prayers of His people are predetermined in this view. Is not prayer, then, merely God talking to Himself?

At this juncture, let us tighten our focus by concentrating on the question of God's immutability and His knowledge—or perhaps it is better to say, "man's knowledge of Divine knowledge." For knowledge itself, as Levinas asserts repeatedly throughout his corpus, is indeed "a deadly friend," essential to human existence yet potentially murderous.

Ideas (our culture's affinities for Hermann Hesse's "Age of Feuilleton" [*The Glass Bead Game*] notwithstanding) are powerful things, influencing billions even without their direct consciousness and across millennia, even after their authors have lapsed into anonymity. Though often we content ourselves with the most simplistic explanations, there is, inevitably, a

metaphysics underlying all historical events. The Shoah is no exception, as Viktor Frankl argues in the Introduction to *The Doctor and the Soul*:

> If we present man with a concept of man which is not true, we may well corrupt him….I became acquainted with the last stage of that corruption in Auschwitz. The gas chambers of Auschwitz were the ultimate consequence of the theory that man is nothing but the product of heredity and environment—or, as the Nazis liked to say, 'Blood and Soil.' I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek were ultimately prepared….at the desks and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers. (xxvii)

…..Levinas would doubtless find himself in agreement with Frankl's assessment, and on multiple counts. One suspects, though, that he would go beyond Frankl's indictment of nihilistic philosophy and science. These, he would urge, are but manifestations of a deeper "pathology," if you will: namely, humankind's impulse to totality; to philosophy, the "temptation of temptation." Philosophy itself is inherently violent apart from the anarchic, the *Otherwise* than Being. It is a violence that has less to do with bodily harm or murder and everything to do with "interrupting [the victims'] 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," as he argues in *Totality and Infinity*. So while he agrees with Frankl's thoughts on the perils of presenting mankind with an image of itself that is untrue, he goes beyond mere nihilism to include the very project of knowing itself. And, as we have seen, religion and theology are no less culpable than "irreligion" or

secularism. In this work we have argued almost to the point of bathos that the Biblical-Classical synthesis has resulted in tremendous evil throughout its history, from sexism and misogyny to racism and colonialism to the Judaeophobia and the Shoah itself. How one thinks about God, after all, is determinative of virtually everything else. *Who or what is God, and what is His or its relation to the world? That* is the key question. And an immutable God possessed of immutable knowledge has dire implications for anthropology, psychology, and ethics.

The history of Western philosophy—and theology—has been dominated by the I-It mode of thought rather than the I-Thou. This is because of the inherently *ontological* project that began with Classical thought and continued on into the Biblical-Classical synthesis. The result is a loss of alterity; individual existents are subsumed by Existence in the attempt to apprehend the All. Thusly reified, the Other ceases to be other and is appropriated unto the Same:

> This primacy of the same was Socrates' teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside—to receive nothing, or to be free….The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism. Philosophy is an egology.[215]

Freedom (like knowing) thereby becomes a matter of maintaining a perpetual disengagement in the very midst of engagement, experiencing and using without being essentially changed by the process.—"Changed," that is, as in provoked to self-questioning and summoned to kenosis.

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[215] *Totality and Infinity*, 43-44. Levinas' talk of "ipseity," it is worth noting, bespeaks man's essential separation from God and his fellows—without which, we have stressed, ethics would not be possible. In order to undertake a kenosis or self-emptying for the sake of the Other, the self must possess a "selfsameness," an autochthonous existence. (Hence, too, Levinas' rejection of pantheistic conceptions of the God-world relation or of human-to-human relations.)

God's knowledge, qua timeless, qua immutable, entails a disengagement still more radical than that which Levinas describes. However paradoxical it might seem, the West's ontological project is both cause and effect: our own yearning for such knowledge, eschewing as it does the finite, the fallible, the changeable, both feeds and is fed by our understanding of Divine perfection. We aspire to know as God knows; we aspire to a timeless, immutable knowledge. Hence our obsession with essences, with ontology. This lust after what is unchanging and unchangeable is understandable when one considers that some of its greatest adherents, such as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, lived in times of profound instability and unrest. It is no less tragic for that, as it is responsible for much evil. Christianity's alleged war with science, for instance, stems not from some obscurantistic literalism but rather from an *a priori* commitment to a spurious idea of perfection. A timeless, immutable God, surely, would not and could not create a world so messy, so random; a world that seems to exist *outside* His direct control. The same may be said for evils such as racism. Given that God's willing and God's knowing are of a piece—simple, timeless, immutable—how can one escape the notion that *whatever* is *is right*? This is an idea we will return to in our discussion of Divine necessity, so we will say but little here beyond the posing of a question: Is evil *evil* in such a conception of the world? Does the believer dare fight against what is the will of God? Inasmuch as it serves some higher purpose, some higher harmony, who am I to challenge God? Is not the message of the Book of Job precisely that?[216]—That to cry against evil (let alone actively *combat* it!) is tantamount to unbelief, even rebellion? As Keith Ward observes, "God's decision is without beginning,

[216] As read, that is, through the lens of ontotheology. In a later section we will discuss a more *Jewish* understanding of Job.

eternal, changeless. Like God, it has to be what it is. There is simply no point in blaming or questioning God. In that sense, Job was right after all."[217]

The West's obsession with ontology lends itself to still greater violence, for in thematizing the Other, not only is his otherness nullified; as a neuter, anonymous *It*, all manner of violence is theoretically possible:

> "I think" comes down to "I can"—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State. Truth, which should reconcile persons, here exists anonymously. Universality presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity.[218]

Levinas' talk of the appropriation of the Other unto the Same and the violence to which the ontological mode inevitably leads is borne home with particular force in the conversation in Grossman's *Life and Fate* between Liss the Nazi and Mostovskoy the Bolshevik:

> Liss went on talking. Once again he seemed to have forgotten about Mostovskoy. 'Two poles of one magnet! Of course! If that wasn't the case, then this terrible war wouldn't be happening. We're your deadly enemies. Yes, yes…But our victory will be your victory. Do you understand? And if you should conquer, then we shall perish only to live in your victory. It's

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[217] *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 135.

[218] *Totality and Infinity*, 45-46.

> paradoxical: through losing the war we shall win the war—and continue our development in a different form. (397)

Not only does Liss' remark reveal something about the similarities between Fascism and Communism; it likewise unmasks the two philosophies' ultimate goals—namely, appropriation of the Other without any change to itself. For in the end, the ontological mode turns on itself and renders its "wielder" likewise anonymous, and therefore assimilable. And, in fact, Mostovskoy is so unnerved by Liss' talk that he tries frantically to distance himself from his own regime. He is more afraid by far of Liss' sincerity than he is by the thought of death. "What a horrible thought! They were both ill, both worn out by the same illness, but one of them hadn't been able to bear it and was speaking out, while the other remained silent, giving nothing away, just listening, listening…" It then occurs to him that his doubts aren't the result of physical or moral torpor but the possibility of new, truer mode of being. "What if they contained the seed of revolutionary truth? The dynamite of freedom!....He had to renounce everything he had stood for; he had to condemn what he had always lived by." Yet even *that*, he recognizes, is not enough. "With all the strength of his soul, with all his revolutionary passion, he would have to hate the camps, the Lubyanka, bloodstained Yezhov, Yagoda, Beria! More than that…! He would have to hate Stalin and his dictatorship!" And then he has a truly crushing moment of clarity: "More than that! He would have to condemn Lenin…! This was the edge of the abyss."[219]

In the end, however, Mostovskoy sloughs his "weakness" and reaffirms his commitment to the Soviet Union. If, as Levinas insists, the self is awakened from its solipsism by the face of the

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[219] *Life and Fate*, 399-400.

Other and summoned to responsibility for that Other, perhaps one might argue that in Mostovskoy's case the summons fails because of the sheer similarity between the men and, more crucially, their systems. The alterity, then, is only superficial. Communist and Fascist are *already* proponents, and victims, of the reification of the Same. Soviets and Nazis alike, are, after all, in some sense bound by a "blood and soil" mentality (the Soviet "Motherland" corresponding to the Nazi "Fatherland"). "Paganism," Levinas would call it: "*Being* before the *existent,* ontology before metaphysics, is freedom (be it the freedom of theory) before justice. It is a movement within the same before obligation to the other."[220]

Need we remark that classical theism, like Communism and Fascism, is a totalizing philosophy? Need we reflect on the similarities between these systems, prioritizing as they do Existence over individual existents, Power over freedom? Church, Party, and Reich—is not each monistic, devoted to The One?—One Church, one Class, one Volk? Each wishes to bring about a universal utopian History. Hence their mutual salvationary impulse. Yet Levinas would be quick to point out that Torah saves the individual from the inevitable reification of "biologistic and historiosophical" accounts of history (as Buber would say[221]) by returning her or him to the concrete, flesh-and-blood domain of the existent: "If you do not accept the Torah," he avers in "The Temptation of Temptation," you "will not be able to begin history, to break the block of being stupidly sufficient unto itself…You will not be able to exorcise fatality, the coherence of determined events. Only the Torah, a seemingly utopian knowledge, assures man of a place."[222]

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[220] *Totality and Infinity*, 47.

[221] *I and Thou*, 105.

[222] In *Nine Talmudic Readings* (30-50), 39.

Hence, as we will see presently, Levinas' commitment to the discipline of Talmud, which is itself predicated on a "permanent revision and updating of the content of the Revelation where every situation within the human adventure can be judged."[223] Needless to say, this talk of "permanent revision" implies both the necessity of time and the centrality of dialogue, both of which, as we have seen, imply alterity.

This too-brief exploration on totality leads of course to the subject of Infinity, qua *Otherwise*—the "essence" of which, if you will, is kenosis. If totality, as we have elsewhere seen, is epistemological, entailing a knowledge that is in some sense God-like, immutable, timeless, and necessary, then infinity is ethical, bound up as it is by the idea of the anarchic. It challenges the self and awakens within it a sense of its own murderousness, causes it to confront the question *Is it righteous* [for me] *to be?*[224]

As Levinas puts it in an absolutely essential passage (and therefore worth quoting *in toto*) in *Totality and Infinity*:

> Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being. Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a space for a separated being exists divinely. Over and beyond the totality it inaugurates a society. The relations that are established between the separated being and Infinity redeem what diminution there was in the contraction creative of Infinity.

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[223] "Judaism in the Present." In *Difficult Freedom*, 208-15 (213-14).

[224] *Totality and Infinity*, 83-84.

> Man redeems creation. Society with God is not an addition to God nor a disappearance of the interval that separates God from the creature. By contrast with totalization we have called it religion. Multiplicity and the limitation of the creative Infinite are compatible with the perfection of the Infinite; they articulate the meaning of this perfection. (104)

An Infinity that contracts, makes a space for the Other, the "separated being," is the very *antithesis* of a God immutable, impassible, and omnipotent. It is the God of the Hebrews rather than the god of the philosophers. Whereas the latter is little more than Actus Purus, Being Itself, the Unmoved Mover, the God of Israel who, prior to creating, contracts, withdrawing into Himself for the sake of the creation, which is completely separate, uncontrolled, undetermined--simply put, free to be and to grow and to come in its own time. And a God who needs human help to redeem creation—that in itself is unthinkable in classical theism. Indeed, Calvinism is so focused on the idea of man's total depravity that predestination is inescapable if anyone is to be redeemed.

This idea of a God who needs human help is, it needs hardly be said, of a piece with the idea of kenosis; which, in turn, has tremendous implications for the God of classical theism, who, qua immutable, qua timeless, cannot but will as He does in order to be who He is. This is, as we have seen, *essentially to render God into Necessity*. Whatever *is* is willed by God—that is to say, willed perfectly, timelessly, immutably. Were any other *is* possible, God would not be God, as Spinoza says. Hence, every individual flood, fire, famine and fart is a necessary act brought about by God's monergistic will, as His willing and His being are inextricably bound. God cannot but will in a manner that does not contradict His attributes; which is to say, He cannot but

will timelessly, immutably, and necessarily. In a word, *omnicontrollingly.* This is a God *enslaved by His attributes*; a God incapable of limiting Himself in any sense. *A God incapable of undertaking a genuine kenosis for the sake of an Other*. Indeed, as we have stressed, the possibility of there being a genuine Other for God is questionable. Classical theism's devotion to perfection leads it to a form of monism, and therefore a kind of pantheism, collapsing the *effectual* difference between the Creator and the created. At best, the world is God's hand-puppet. What is the point in differentiating the two, at least morally and relationally?

A God who wills necessarily—a God who cannot but will as He does lest it violate His Being, which is perfect (timeless, immutable, and so on)—cannot undergo self-limitation for an Other. This God is the God of totality rather than infinity; Being Itself as opposed to the *Otherwise* than Being. Simply put: this is a God *antithetical* to the idea of kenosis described, as Levinas reminds us, in Judaism as well as Christianity.

We have already touched upon Levinas' idea of infinity as ethical as opposed to theoretical, as a "contraction that leaves a place for the separated being," thereby making possible relationship that eschews the totalizing effects of Being." That Levinas is describing God—specifically, God's relation with creation—is evidenced when he goes on to argue that "infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a space for a separated being exists divinely."[225] As we have elsewhere stressed, this recalls the kabbalistic idea of *tsimtsum*, the "contraction" of God prior to creation. Jürgen Moltmann, in "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World," connects the ideas of *tsimtsum* and kenosis. Citing another theologian, Hans Jonas, Moltmann explains that

[225] *Totality and Infinity*, 104.

"God's creative power…includes a 'self-renunciation of unlimited power' for the sake of created beings."[226] Elsewhere in this same essay Moltmann writes of God's creation as an act of "self-humiliation and self-emptying" insofar as it is an act of love: "A love that gives the beloved space, allows them time, and expects and demands of them freedom is the power of lovers who can withdraw in order to grow and to come."[227] For his part, Levinas openly embraces the idea of Divine kenosis, as when he writes in "Judaism and Christianity" that whereas "the realist theology surrounding [Jesus]" was "incomprehensible" to him, "concepts such as God's kenosis, the humility of his presence on earth, are very close to Jewish sensibility in all the vigor of their spiritual meaning."[228]

This stress on the *relationality* of God—on the personhood and self-giving love of God—as opposed to the ontological attributes of God, such as immutability and necessity—cannot be more different. In Levinasian terms, whereas the former are apropos of God as infinity, the latter are inescapably totalitarian in nature (i.e., apropos of totality). Here it might be objected that Levinas identified with the so-called "Litvak" Jews, who were known (or perhaps *caricatured*) for their committed rationalism) and therefore had little time or use for kabbalistic ideas. "'If you had set [Levinas] down in a Hassidic community for five minutes,' says [Father Bernard] Dupuy, 'you would have seen him tremble with fury,'" Salomon Malka relates in *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy* (213). (According to a website created by the International Council for Christians and Jews, Father Bernard Dupuy [1925-2014] helped create the Episcopal

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[226] In Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 137-151 (147).

[227] In Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 137-151 (147).

[228] In *In the Time of the Nations*, 145-150 (146).

Council for Relations with Judaism and translated works by Jewish thinkers like Emil Fackenheim.[i] Irrespective of his attitudes regarding Hassidic piety, this does not mean that Levinas disparaged individual Hassidic thinkers. Richard Cohen bears this out when he writes in the Translator's Introduction to *Time and the Other* that Levinas was profoundly influenced by the *Nefesh Hahayyim* (*The Soul of Life*), the magnum opus of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn (1749-1821), himself a close disciple of the Vilna Gaon, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797), a Talmudist, halakhist and kabbalist of prodigious knowledge and insight. "Thus Levinas' works become 'consecrated,' as he says of Rabbi Hayyim's great work, 'to a God who claims to be dependent on humans, on the persons who, since they are infinitely responsible, support the universe.'" (23-24). David Patterson adds that, as a student of Rabbi Hayyim, "Levinas keeps kabalistic teachings 'close to his chest,' as it were." He goes on to relate that *relationality* is very important to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn and the tradition to which he belongs. "God needs us; all souls are vital to creation. Creation is at stake in every act of lovingkindness."[229]

"Judaism and Kenosis" is Levinas' prolonged meditation on the essence of kenosis and its resonance with Jewish understandings of the Divine. Referring directly to Philippians 2:6-8, the premier scriptural groundwork for the idea of kenosis, Levinas points to the plethora of passages in the Hebrew Scriptures wherein images of "Divine Majesty and loftiness" are oftentimes bound up with imagery depicting "a God bending down to look at human misery or *inhabiting* that

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[229] Class notes, HUHI 7314: Advanced Topics in European Thought, Culture, and Society (spring 2016). In addition to Cohen and Patterson, Elliot R. Wolfson writes of Levinas' use of kabbalistic ideas in "Secrecy, Modesty, and the Feminine: Kabbalistic Traces in the Thought of Levinas" (in Hart and Signer, eds., *The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians*, 52-73): [For all her failings, I am] persuaded by [Oona Ajzenstat's] surmise that Levinas was guided by the esoteric nature of kabbalah "to occult the kabbalistic images in his own text and to protect them under a layer of antimystical argument." In my judgment, this is a keen insight, and my own engagement with Levinas has led me to a similar conclusion regarding the need to posit an esoteric use of Jewish esotericism on his part... (52-53)

misery."[230] Levinas confirms that the Talmud, too, remains consonant with this portrait of Divine humility:

> The treatise *Sotah* (*24a*) teaches: 'The Torah begins and ends with acts of charity, since it is written at the beginning: "And the Eternal God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them" (*Genesis 3:21*); and at the end it is written: "And he buried him in the valley"' (*Deuteronomy 34:6*). The Alpha and the Omega of the Divine, in the performance of the functions of tailor, clothier and gravedigger! (102)

Yet again, we must note the unbridgeable disparity between the God portrayed by classical theists, which is hopelessly bound up with ontology, with classical metaphysical assumptions about perfection and the *Dignum Deo*, and the kenotic God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, which stress the relationality of God, His self-effacing love. The *What* of God eclipses the *Who* of God, in other words, in classical theism.

Levinas proceeds to expound upon the parable of "'The Moon that makes itself little,'" which explores not only "the theme of the greatness of humility" but "the ontological or logical 'upsets' latent in the kenosis" described in the parable (103). As we have already discussed the parable of the Moon at some length in an earlier chapter, we will simply summarize Levinas' interpretation: Rather than chastising the Moon for her intransigence, God takes her guilt upon Himself. Playing on the ambiguity of Numbers 28:15, which can be read both as a call for a sacrifice *for* God as well as a sacrifice *to* God, Levinas cites the interpretation of Rabbi Simeon Ben Laqish, according to which "'the Holy One, Blessed be He, says, in effect: The goat must

[230] In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (101).

serve for me to be forgiven for having reduced the size of the Moon.'" Levinas describes God's action as the "sublime kenosis," not only for allowing Himself to be questioned and challenged but the responsibility for the moral "ambiguity" of the Moon's protest (105).

Levinas' conception of God's kenosis goes still farther, however. God not only permits Himself to be questioned and assumes responsibility for any guilt on the part of the questioner; beyond that, God restricts His own power in order that humanity might be His partner in the act of creation, which, unlike the timeless, necessary creation of classical theism entails a *creatio continua*, an ongoing work to be shared by God and man.

As we have already noted, a key Jewish text for Levinas' understanding of kenosis, or the self-humiliation of God (beyond, of course, the Tanakh and the Talmud) is Hayyim of Volozhin's *The Soul of Life* (1824). "And so it is that, in the cosmology of *Nefesh Haim* (if one may call its ordering of the world a cosmos), the power of the master of all powers is subordinate, to a certain extent, to the Human, as if omnipotence were not yet the privilege of the Divine!" (109). In this view, Levinas explains, man's adherence to the letter and the spirit of the Torah constitutes God's "food." And though he is careful to stress the metaphorical nature of such talk, its essence is that God subordinates His will to man's by making Himself dependent on human cooperation. "There is kenosis in this 'sub-,'" as he concludes (109).

Kenosis, like *tsimtsum*, isn't an ontological assertion about God, an analysis of His power or His attributes. It is, rather, an assertion about His relation to the creation and the self-limiting love implicit to that relation. Were God truly limited in an ontological sense, it would divest kenosis of its real significance. If He needed mankind or the cosmos—as in process theism, wherein God and matter are co-eternal and God needs the cosmos to act upon in order to fulfill

Himself or His capacity as Creator—His actions could not be described as gracious or kenotic. It would no longer be a sacrifice on His part, a matter of self-limitation and humiliation in order that man might be able to and to grow and to come in his own time. What makes it truly incredible is that God should set aside His power for the sake of the relationship. "Love is responsibility of an I for a You," as Buber writes, but God's love goes beyond mere reciprocity. God assumes responsibility by preventing His own majesty from overpowering His creation, which would, as in classical theism, render man and cosmos alike into some kind of automaton or puppet. God is not His Being; He is the *Otherwise* than Being, the God of kenotic, self-giving and -limiting love. Indeed, one might say that God accords man of sort of equality with Himself, implying a sort of dualism far more momentous, and therefore scandalous, than Manichaeism: a *free-will dualism*. In a sense this returns us to Buber's talk of love as responsibility, for he goes on to speak of love implying "the equality of all lovers, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blissfully secure whose life is circumscribed by the life of one beloved human being to him that is nailed his long to the cross of the world, capable of what is immense and bold enough to risk it: to love *man*" (*I and Thou*, 66-67). For the Christian—the Christian, that is, not hobbled by classical theism and its presuppositions regarding perfection!—Christ crucified signifies God's willingness to risk *all* precisely insofar as His sacrifice isn't forced upon humanity. God loves the world not only so much that He sent His only begotten Son to die for it but that He risks the gift being in vain insofar as He allows for the possibility of its rejection.[231] In loving man kenotically, God vouchsafes man's freedom, and thereby allows man the possibility to

[231] In a related vein, it is worth noting that the Crucifixion represents death for both God the Father and God the Son: Just as the Son suffers literal death, which includes the loss of the relationship to the Father, so too, does God the Father experiences the "death" of His fatherhood in the death of the Son. (Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*).

choose to live kenotically, which harkens back to the idea of a sort of free-will dualism. Whatever qualms Levinas might have about the "theological realism" surrounding the person of Jesus, I do not think he would balk too much at this last idea. Kenosis is not about "feelings" per se—"feelings everyone *has*," Buber would argue[232]—but about an action, a radical orientation towards the Other. And this *being-for-the-other*, in turn, opens the possibility of *dying* for the Other: "I welcome the parallel drawn, today, between [Judaism and Christianity] in the doctrine of kenosis: the universality of the common element in all human beings, and the universality of what is *for* human beings. This is how I understand Christianity: to live and die for everyone."[233]

Kenosis, then, is *command*.[234]

In a closely related vein, Levinas points out that kenosis is not merely a question of a descent of the higher to the lower; equally it is about elevating the lower to the higher. This of course complicates the idea of a hierarchy in Being (which Levinas does not deny), as the creature is more than its place within the great chain of Being. Man, who occupies the highest position in Being, is yet the lowest insofar as he is the youngest of the created beings and is, despite being made in God's image, still bound up in matter and all its limitations and weaknesses. In embodying the highest *and* the lowest, man becomes the means by which all creation might be

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[232] *I and Thou*, 66.

[233] "Judaism and Christianity After Franz Rosenzweig." In *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 255-267 (257).

[234] But perhaps this is too strong. It seems to imply reciprocity: I did it for you, so you must do likewise for others. One feels the *weight* of it when one experiences it. In a sense, it is more akin to Levinas' talk of "persecution": The self knows it is not worthy of this love, that the best one can do is to undertake one's own kenosis for others—not owing to reciprocity but to the realization that God loves *all* humans kenotically. And if He does, how can I not? But this requires further thought. We have not the space to explore questions such as to the degree to which God's kenosis includes the non-human creation, for example.

elevated. In a manner strangely reminiscent of the old idea of "ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny," man "carries within his being a residuum of all the levels of the creature." As an incarnate being, he is bound to the cosmos, created in the image of both the animals and God. "But his soul, which *Genesis 2:7* calls divine breath, remains near the Throne of God, around which are gathered all the souls of Israel, i.e., (we must accept this terminology!) all the souls of the authentically human humanity, which is conceived in Haim of Volozhin as being subsumed beneath the category of Israel" (110).

Eschewing the use of coercive power, God has chosen to relate to the cosmos in such a fashion that He is dependent on man's obedience to Torah. If the "essence" of Torah it to love God with all one's being and to *be* one's love for one's fellow man, it becomes obvious that rejecting Torah leads to the solipsism of the self, to the temptation of knowledge, to the "absurd 'that's the way it is' claimed by the Power of the powerful"[235] and thence to war. In a word, *totality*. It is to leave the cosmos entombed, as it were, within Being (which Buber, for his part, describes as "the eclipse of God"). God is, ontologically speaking, superior to man; He could, per the claims of classical theists, have embraced the path of almightiness and coercion (oblique or no); instead, He chose to make His relation to the world incumbent upon human obedience. He created man "naturally atheist" in order that man might be free, separate from Himself; and yet He breathed man's soul into him in order that man, if he so chose, might escape the tyranny of Existence. In this manner, God vouchsafes man's freedom. This is, it cannot be overemphasized, a radical departure from the God of classical theism and the *Dignum Deo*. It constitutes what cannot but be described as a *scandal* for God and for those who believe in Him!

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[235] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

This is a God who *risks*. A God who risks His relationship with the cosmos by allowing for the possibility that He might *fail* owing to the disobedience of his "proxy," man. This is a God who shows faith in man and risks the possibility of being disappointed and in a very real sense *defeated* by man. "Man, by acts in agreement with the Torah, *nourishes* the association of God with the world; or, by his transgression, he exhausts the powers of that divine association," explains Levinas. "The growth of holiness, the elevation and the being of the worlds depend on man, as does their return to nothingness (see *Nefesh Hahaim*, book 2, chapter 17)" (111).

The depth of the divergence from classical theism and its perfect, invincible God is not lost on Levinas:

> What a remarkable ontology there is in this cosmology!..Man is answerable for the universe! Man is answerable for others…As if through that responsibility, which constitutes man's very identity, each one of us were similar to *Elohim*….And so God reigns only by the intermediary of an ethical order, an order in which one being is answerable for another…The world is justified in its being by human dis-interestment, which concretely signifies consent to the Torah, and therefore surely already study of the Torah. More important than God's omnipotence is the subordination of that power to man's ethical consent. And that, too, is one of the primordial meanings of kenosis. (111-13)

That, one might say, is the key to the *Imago Dei* for Levinas: the capacity for kenosis. Man is not a rational being, a tool-making being, a social being; as Levinas explains, the real meaning of Genesis 2:7 is that "man is the soul of all 'the worlds,' of all beings, all life, like the Creator

himself. And this…by the will of God himself, who did not recoil from that equality with the human, or even from a certain kind of subordination to the human" (111-12).

Walter Brueggemann, in *Theology of the Old Testament*, writes affirmatively of Levinas' views on Divine dependence on human fidelity to the Torah—which, as he takes pains to point out, extends beyond mere tribalism or nationalism. In the Tanakh, he writes, "human persons are understood as situated in the same transactional processes with the holiness of Yahweh as is Israel, so that in a very general way the character and destiny of human persons replicates and reiterates the character and destiny of Israel" (451). Jewish "tribalism," then, is nothing of the sort, embracing a universalism neither epistemological nor ontological but moral: To be a *mensch* is to be a being responsible for the Other, irrespective of their origins. (And in a further gloss, *mensch* in Hebrew means *ben Adam* or "child of Adam," implying that mankind is indeed one, though in the sense of a family as opposed to a collective or abstract category.[236])

To conclude our Levinasian critique of necessity and creation and to prepare the way for what follows, let us consider once again Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*. In this same chapter—"The Human Person as Yahweh's Partner"—Brueggemann writes of Job as a very profound, and scandalous (to the classical theist, at least), example of human partnership with God. He compares Job with Abraham and opines that both men are equally men of faith. While Abraham is perceived by classical theists as the exemplar of covenantal faith in God, Job is deemed the exemplary *human* in all his rebelliousness and temerity in challenging God—so much so, as Brueggemann remarks, "that we are not fully at ease in situating him in Israel's covenantal narrative of faith" (490). Classical theists, accordingly, tend to minimize, reinterpret,

[236] Class notes, David Patterson's HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016) course.

or pass over altogether Abraham's dispute with God in Genesis 18 concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, whereas the rabbis see in Abraham's argument with God a still deeper proof of his faith, equaling or perhaps surpassing the faith implicit in his acts of obedience. To argue with God implies not only intimacy with God; it further suggests a trust in His kenotic character as a God who makes space for the other to be and to grow and to come in his own time. A God who chooses not to rule autocratically, a God who eschews power and the possibility of control but instead allows for ambiguity, imperfection, and risk. A God, in another words, who chooses to partner with man in the struggle for justice. Can we forget that the very name *Israel* means "one who strives with God" and that the Torah is replete with individuals who contend with God, from Abraham to Jacob (Israel) to Jeremiah, to name a very few?[237]

> Thus the disputatious Job is a man of faith; and Abraham, the man of faith, is capable of extreme dispute with Yahweh. I submit that popular [Christian] interpretation has cast both figures too simplistically. A closer study evidences that both persons of faith are able to submit in obedience. And both, on occasion and when appropriate, enact faith as counterinsistence in the face of Yahweh. Abraham, it turns out, is not only a good Israelite but a profoundly human person. Job, as is clear, is in the end not only a man but a man of faith. Both live fully toward Yahweh. But without any awkwardness, both know what to do in extremis. (490-91)

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[237] And what, it may be asked as a sort of aside, does this imply for the Church, which does not replace Israel but is grafted on to the vine of Israel? Does it not imply that Christians, too, should be people who contend with God for the sake of others?

A "perfect" God who wills timelessly, immutably, impassably, and necessarily has no need for discourse with humans, let alone the kind of faith evinced by Abraham and Job and prophets like Moses, Jeremiah and Habakkuk. For a "perfect" God, there is no need for faith or covenant whatsoever; all that is needed is *resignation*. For whatever *is* must be. Whatever *is* is right. Of what need, then, is there for an *Otherwise* than being?

Elsewhere we have argued that Levinas is indeed a man of faith in this precise sense. A man who will dispute with God, albeit in his case more indirectly than otherwise, through what is *not* said as much or more as what *is* said. We have argued that Levinas is not, per the classical theists, in search of a theodicy in order to comprehend evils like the Shoah. His is the cry of *Why? Why, God?*—the very *antithesis* of theodicy, as we will soon see. Though he does not "wear his heart on his sleeve" and in fact goes to great lengths to avoid direct discussion of the Shoah—in part, as we have stressed, lest he thematize the victims and turn their experiences into a matter of study and debate—it lies at the very heart of his being as a philosopher and Jew. "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism," Levinas writes in the Dedication for *Otherwise than Being*. That he links his life and work with that of the Prophets of Israel is borne out on the following page, in the first of the five epigraphs, two of which are from the Book of Ezekiel: "Or if a righteous man turn from his righteousness and do what is wrong, and I make the occasion for bringing about his downfall, he shall die; because you did not warn him, he shall die for his sin, and the righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood will I require at his hand" (3:20). Nor is this some merely ethnic sympathy or identification, as elsewhere he

identifies Israel's sufferings with all mankind: "'The injustice committed against Israel during the war, that one calls the *shoah*—the passion of Israel in the sense in which one speaks of the passion of Christ—is the moment when humanity began to bleed through the wounds of Israel.'"[238]

One might well argue that the question of evil lies at or near the heart of Levinas' thought. Why else would he begin his Preface to *Totality and Infinity* with the claim that "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (21)? Can there be morality without good and evil? (Can there be morality without *God*?) And whence the intensity of Levinas' aversion to theodicy in any form and his talk of "useless suffering," an idea with tremendous significance not only for ethics but for the very idea of God?

Beneath the question of evil, then, there is for Levinas another, more crucial question: *What is the relationship between the Creator and His creation*? This is especially evident in *Totality and Infinity*, but the question echoes and reechoes throughout much if not all of Levinas' corpus. It is perhaps less apparent that Levinas often contends against the God of Western thought—namely, the God of the Biblical-Classical synthesis. Let us now turn to one particularly egregious aspect of classical theism's God—*omnicontrol*—and examine it through a Levinasian lens. As we have previously cautioned, the various aspects of Divine perfection—simplicity, timelessness, immutability, impassibility, necessity, and omnicontrol—are so intertwined as to make repetition and overlap nigh-impossible. Nevertheless, every effort will be made to focus as tightly as possible on the idea of omnicontrol.

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[238] Cited in Hent de Vries' *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno & Levinas*, 353-54.

Theodicy, let us begin, is the inevitable result of the Biblical-Classical synthesis and its perfect God.—Or perhaps one might just as well reverse the claim and say that the God of the Biblical-Classical synthesis is the unavoidable result of the project of theodicy! Be that as it may, the two are bound inextricably together. God becomes a justification for what is, just as what is becomes a justification for God. For many throughout history, God has been synonymous with Power, with Almightiness, with "the absurd 'that's the way it is' of the Power of the powerful," as Levinas might say.[239] Richard A. Cohen concurs with this linkage; as he writes in *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, "the logic of a philosophical God," understood in terms of classical notions of perfection, leads to the conclusion that "God wills all things," including the Shoah. Ergo, the Shoah was *good*—and not only insofar as it (purportedly) entailed "repentance, sacrifice, purification, sign, redemption, punishment, perhaps all of these, but ultimately [because it was] good in itself" (267).

Let us now turn once more to Irwin Lutzer's *Hitler's Cross*:

> God hates the idolatry of the Antichrist, just as He hated the idolatry of the German people [in the Third Reich]. But God permits it nevertheless. Obviously He is directing the events of the world to an appointed end; He uses wars and persecution as a judgment against unbelievers and as chastisement of the church. In the end His purposes will be accomplished and His name glorified....John Calvin's words would have given comfort to the Christians who withstood the Nazi regime. "Let them recall that the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked are completely restrained by God's hand as by a bridle, so that they are unable

[239] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

> either to hatch any plot against us or, having hatched it, to make preparations or, if they have fully planned it, to stir a finger towards carrying it out, except so far as he has permitted, indeed commanded them." The atrocities of Nazism only gave unbelievers more reasons to disbelieve; the faith of believers who clung to God's promises was sustained. (52, 56-57)

Essentially, Satan is God's dog. Without even realizing it, he serves God's purpose—*to the letter*. Each and every individual act of evil is a component of God's sovereign plan. Whatever *is*, then, is *right*. "'Let them recall that the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked are completely restrained by God's hand as by a bridle, so that they are unable either to hatch any plot against us or, having hatched it, to make preparations or, if they have fully planned it, to stir a finger towards carrying it out, except so far as he has permitted, **indeed commanded them**'" (*boldface mine*). And let us be entirely clear: God does not command *E*vil.—That is, He does not command an abstract or generalized Evil. He commands, rather, the *specific acts of evil*—the countless individual acts of cruelty, sadism, and degradation:

> Out of Berel's eyes, Moni's own destiny stared at him. He was frightened. "How could you tell that the Block Chief was getting tired of you?" "I could see it in Franzl's eyes. A Piepel knows. The heart of a Piepel can tell right away. The Block Chief just waits until he can bring back a new Piepel from the platform. That night he takes the old Piepel into the cubicle, lays him on the floor, and puts a cane across his throat. Then he steps on the cane—one boot on each end—and he does a seesaw. And that's all—that's the end of the old Piepel. I saw Franzl do it to the Piepel before me, so I didn't wait. I got away first….When my mother

> fell out of the train dead, and my father was taken off the lorry, I didn't know that I should have been happy for them. I just didn't know how lucky they were not to be alive."[240]

The preceding passage is from *Moni*, a novel by Ka-tzetnik 135633, the pen name of Yehiel De-Nur (1909-2001). De-Nur's pen name, which means "camp inmate," was adopted as a kenotic act, a self-emptying whereby the dead might speak through him. In the case of *Moni*, De-Nur is recounting the fate of his own brother, who died as a *piepel* (or *pipil*), "a boy whom the block chiefs of Auschwitz would use for their sexual orgies."[241]

The murder of a child is unspeakable; the *degradation* of a child is an assault on the very soul of the child and on God Himself. If, to borrow an idea from Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, God the Father suffers the death of His fatherhood in the death of the Son (242-43), what becomes of God's fatherhood in the assault and degradation of a child, particularly insofar as He is described in Psalm 68:5 and elsewhere (as Levinas repeatedly reminds his readers) as a "Father to the fatherless"?

Of course, such talk is nonsensical from a Calvinistic perspective such as Lutzer's, and indeed from that of classical theism in general. God is perfect, unchanging, impassible, "in control." God commands such acts even as He condemns their perpetrators. But at once an impossible thought occurs: If God *commands* these acts, are they truly *evil* in any meaningful sense? Is it logical to say that the *perpetrator* is evil but the *action* for which he is judged is not? Indeed, is not his action somehow *good* in that it serves the purposes of God?

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[240] Ka-Tzetnik 135633, *Moni: A Novel of Auschwitz*, 22-23.

[241] Patterson et al, eds., *Encyclopedia of Shoah Literature*, 84-85.

Few indeed have the intellectual fortitude (or gall) to accept this claim at face value, make no mistake. To be sure, classical theists have all manner of theological tricks and contortions with which to evade this unpalatable conclusion: whether by talk of "secondary and tertiary causality" or by appeals to "antinomy" or by distinguishing between God's "volitional" and "moral" wills (and so on ad nauseam), many such theists try to downplay or minimize the ramifications of an omnicontrolling God. To put it differently: There is a radical *disconnect* between the God of their prayers and hymnody, on the one hand, and the God of their theologies and creeds on the other.[242]

One individual who *did* have the courage to confront the excruciating ambiguities of classical theist assumptions about God and its implications for evil is Fyodor Dostoevsky, whom we have discussed at length in a prior chapter. We have talked, too, about Ivan Karamazov and his own struggles with theodicy. Inasmuch as our angle of approach is slightly different here, some of Ivan's arguments are worth repeating. His talk of God creating the world (including the human brain) according to Euclidean principles and subsequent admission of the possibility of a non-Euclidean level of reality is of particular interest to our purposes here, as it relates to the efforts of classical theists to reconcile the idea of an omnicontrolling God and the existence of evils such as the Shoah. Such theologians are like the non-Euclidean geometers and philosophers, who "dare to dream that two parallel lines, which according to Euclid cannot possibly meet on earth, may perhaps meet somewhere in infinity."[243] What seems impossible, analogous to a violation of Euclidean reality—that an omnibenevolent God could command individual acts of evil,

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[242] Cf. Brueggemann's *The Psalms and the Life*, 111.

[243] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 235.

whether the degradation of a *piepel*, like De-Nur's brother, or that of the *muselman*, "who enclose[s] all the evil of our time in one image"[244]—will, in Eternity, be seen to be non-contradictory and sublime. This is of course the very definition of antinomy: "two opposing conclusions, each beginning from plausible premises, and issuing from valid steps of inference."[245]

Anticipating the arguments of those Christians who wish to affirm that, just as light is both a wave as well as a particle, man is fully free *and* completely predestined, Ivan remarks, "'I have a Euclidean mind, an earthly mind, and therefore it is not for us to resolve such questions…All such question are unsuitable to a mind created with a concept of only three dimensions.'" Ivan concedes that he *wants* to believe that all will, ultimately, be revealed as non-contradictory and sublime, that all will be made well in the end. Nevertheless, some part of him refuses. "'Let the parallel lines even meet before my own eyes: I shall look and say, yes, they meet, and still I will not accept it. That is my essence, Alyosha, that is my thesis.'"[246] Against those who would urge that man cannot know goodness without evil, Ivan avers that "'The whole world of knowledge is not worth the tears of that little child to ''dear God.'' I'm not talking about the suffering of grown-ups, they ate the apple and to hell with them, let the devil take them all, but these little ones!'" When he notices the effects of his words on Alyosha, he offers to stop, but Alyosha declines his offer. "'Never mind, I want to suffer, too.'"[247] Alyosha's reply, as we will see,

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[244] Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

[245] *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*, 19.

[246] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 235-36.

[247] Ibid, 242.

points the way to Dostoevsky's (and Levinas') answer to Ivan's argument.[248] And let us recall at this juncture that Dostoevsky not only took Ivan's arguments about the suffering of children with deadly seriousness; so intensely did he wish to allow to impart freedom to Ivan, to give him the space to be and to grow and to come rather than using him as a mouthpiece or a foil, that he was ever after concerned that he had never fully rebutted Ivan's argument.[249] Like his kenotic Creator, Dostoevsky chose not to micromanage but to allow for the possibility of ambiguity, imperfection, and risk.(—For the possibility, in short, of his own *defeat*, in this case by Ivan.)

In answer to those who, like and unlike Tertullian, choose to believe in the ultimate harmony despite the absurdity of simultaneously affirming omnibenevolence and omnicontrol, Ivan concedes that "'The world stands on absurdities, and without them perhaps nothing at all would happen. We know what we know!'"[250] Such crude fideism, seeming to recall Kierkegaard's distinction between the ethical and religious stages, is impossible for Ivan, with his "three-dimensional" mind. But let us be clear: It is not a question of epistemology; it is one of morality. It is the moral *implications* of these attempts to reconcile omnibenevolence and omnicontrol that Ivan cannot stomach. As if there were a Divine utility whereby the ends, irrespective of the degradation they entail, *always* justify the means, namely, this ultimate or higher harmony. Ivan never wavers, remaining focused on the children, whose sufferings (contra Augustine's claims of

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[248] Observes Val Vinokur in *The Trace of Judaism: Dostoevsky, Babel, Mandelstam, Levinas*, "…Levinas (at least in his notions of ethics and justice) evokes Alyosha. What I am proposing, then, is not only that Levinas is in some ways 'less Jewish' and 'more Russian' than many assume, but, perhaps more provocatively, that Dostoevsky may be 'less Christian' and 'more Jewish' than anyone has yet considered" (35-36). Why should this surprise, given Levinas' own remarks of the *Jewishness* of the idea of kenosis? For kenosis is about the character or *personhood* of God rather than the ontology of God.

[249] Cf. Joseph Franks' *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, 403.

[250] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 243.

the total depravity into which all humans are born) are so "incomprehensible": "'Why do they get thrown on the pile, to manure someone's future harmony with themselves?'"[251] It as if, Ivan is saying, each child is but an It to God's relentlessly sovereign I. Finally Ivan's argument reaches its infamous crescendo: "I don't want harmony, for love of mankind I don't want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket."[252]

The majority of classical theists, including individuals like R. C. Sproul and D. A. Carson, to name but three of the foremost contemporary Christian apologists, will have no patience for Ivan's arguments. Per Lutzer (and Calvin before him), they will say that evil merely affords unbelievers more fuel for their unbelief. To them, God's perfection is His overriding attribute, the keystone which unites and binds His other attributes. (We have seen how difficult it is to parse these attributes owing to the Divine simplicity, by virtue of which they are interchangeable.) Hence, insofar as they are concerned, ours is not to question why; we have only to affirm that our sinful, finite, fallible ("three-dimensional") minds are incapable of grasping the bigger picture and to trust in God's immutable, timeless, necessary will.

On multiple levels, as we have already seen, Levinas would unequivocally reject this view of God. For reasons *(a.)* religious/scriptural (Divine kenosis/human prayer), *(b.)* ethical (atheism/human kenosis), *(c.)* philosophical (totality/thematization/infinity), and *(d.)* historical

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[251] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 243.

[252] Ibid, 245.

(the Shoah), Levinas would have nothing whatsoever to do with this project, which he would condemn as "ontotheology. Insofar as there is a fair degree of overlap between points *b* and *c*, and for the sake of brevity, we will pass over *c* and confine ourselves to points *a, b* and *d*.

On a religious and scriptural level, to begin, Levinas would find serious issues with the idea of omnicontrol, and for reasons we have already touched upon—namely, the idea of Divine kenosis; specifically, as it relates to the issue of prayer.

Levinas reflects on attending a funeral service at the church of Saint-Augustin, where he found himself seated not far from a painting of Hannah bringing Samuel to the Temple. He is struck by a sense of homecoming on beholding Hannah, the Hebrew woman *par excellence* owing to her silent prayer, which prompted Eli to mistake her passion for drunkenness. Levinas recalls Hannah's reply—"'I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I poured out my soul before the Lord'"—and is deeply moved. "That woman was truly praying from her heart: the pouring out of the soul. The authentic relation, concreteness of the soul, the very personification of the relation. That is what I saw in the church. What closeness! That closeness remained with me."[253] The potential connection of Hannah's "drunkenness" with "folly" or "madness" is too close to ignore; one might well say that Hannah here plays the role of a holy fool, her passion for God being misunderstood and scandalizing the practitioners of a more respectable piety. Is it going too far, then, to hear in Hannah's prayerful muteness overtones of "Stinking" Lizavetta's own: "she went begging all over town as a holy fool of God…[and] could not even speak a word, and would only rarely move her tongue and mumble"?[254]

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[253] "Judaism and Christianity." In *In the Time of the Nations*, 145-150 (147).

[254] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 97-98.

In this selfsame vein, Levinas in "Judaism and Kenosis" cites Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn's *Nefesh Hahayyim* and its teachings on prayer: "'To pray,' the author adds, 'is to strip the soul of its clothing, of its body.' Or, better yet, it is 'to pour out one's very soul.'" This pouring out of the self in prayer, needless to say, recalls the very essence of *kenosis*, which denotes not merely a pouring out but also a making void, an emptying of power and utility. The essential ambiguity, even scandal, of such a Divine self-emptying is deepened when one recalls the kabalistic idea of *tsimtsum*, the contraction of God prior to the act of creation. God sets aside His power—renders His power "void," so to say—in creating a cosmos wherein His will is *not* supreme, wherein power and control are eschewed for the sake of the otherness of the creation. God's act in creation (which is a *creatio continua*, let us not forget, an ongoing work involving God *and* man, and therefore another aspect of Divine kenosis) is paralleled by a *human* kenosis, of which prayer is a prime example. Prayer, like ethics, involves an emptying of the self, of the *for-itself*, for the sake of the Other—which includes not only one's fellow humans but God Himself. The human kenosis parallels or echoes the Divine kenosis, which Levinas describes as "an abnegation which also expresses a God giving up his omnipotence and finding satisfaction only in the for-the-other…"[255]

Can it be any more obvious? The Levinasian, Hebraic understanding of prayer implies the *antithesis* of Divine omnicontrol. "The Hebrew word for 'prayer,'" David Patterson observes, "is *tefillah*, which is not a supplication (*tachanah*) but confrontation, wrestling, reckoning."[256] Prayer is not beseeching the omnipotent God to render aid; prayer renders the soul itself into a

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[255] "Judaism and Kenosis." In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (114).

[256] Class notes, HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016).

sacrifice for God, "dis-inter-esting itself in the etymological sense of the term," as Levinas explains.[257] Prayer is kenosis undertaken *on behalf of* God—and therefore for the creation, for the Other. Prayer is about *God*'s needs, including His need to deepen His relation to the cosmos. "The goal of all prayer," Levinas relates in his exposition of the *Nefesh Hahayyim*, "remains the need of the Most High for the prayer of the just, in order that he may make exist, sanctify and elevate the worlds." Beyond that, and still more scandalously (for the defenders of the *Dignum Deo* in particular), the purpose of prayer is to alleviate the suffering of God:

> But to the degree that the suffering of each person is already the great suffering of God who suffers for that person, for that suffering that, though 'mine,' is already his, already divine—the 'I' who suffers may pray, and, given God's participation, may pray for himself or herself. One prays for oneself with the intention of suspending the suffering of God, who suffers in my suffering…The suffering self prays to alleviate the 'great suffering' of God who suffers, to relieve the suffering of God, who suffers both for man's sin and for the suffering of his atonement…Man no longer feel his own pain, compared to a torment surpassing his own, in God.[258]

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, Levinas sums up, describes a God who, in an act analogous to the Christian idea of kenosis, is both "the One to whom all prayer is addressed" and "the One *for whom* all prayer is said."[259]

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[257] "Judaism and Kenosis." In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (115).

[258] Ibid, 116.

[259] Ibid.

Levinas' scriptural rejection of Divine omnicontrol is closely tied to his ethical reasons for discounting Divine determinism. Ethics, as we have already seen, entails a kenosis on the part of the self for the Other. Philosophically speaking, however, human kenosis is made possible by the Divine kenosis. A key component of the Divine kenosis is the creation of a being "naturally atheist," as Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity*. Many spuriously literal readings of Levinas' talk of "atheism" in this and other works, however, have resulted in the idea that Levinas is dismissing the God of Judaism as pure myth, linking him with Existentialists like Nietzsche and Sartre. In point of fact, nothing could be farther from the truth (as I hope we have made clear before now!). Atheism is, simply put, *the necessary corollary to the Divine kenosis.* Eschewing all coercion, direct and indirect, God endures the scandal of limitation by creating man entirely separate and sufficient unto himself. Hence the *conatus essendi*: Man is not created with a "need" for God in any ontological sense.[260] Quite the reverse: by endowing man with interiority, God vouchsafes the freedom of the individual self: "It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with itself," Levinas observes.[261] Interiority protects the creature not only from God, i.e., from being overwhelmed by His majesty; it likewise ensures that the creature can resist being enthralled by Being or by History. Atheism denotes the thwarting of all determinism, whether spiritual, ontological, or naturalistic. Only in

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[260] Levinas' talk of humans as "naturally atheist" always calls to mind "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine": Specifically, the alien race called The Founders, the creators of a warrior caste, the Jem'hadar, who have no needs whatsoever save for a drug called ketracel-white, without which they will die. The Founders' goal, needless to say, is to eliminate any risk of rebellion or disobedience. God could have created man with a similar dependency but did not for the sake of the relation. This is God qua *Otherwise* than Being, the God who creates kenotically and thereby allows man to be and to grow and to come in his own time. The God who *risks*, as John Sanders has it.

[261] *Totality and Infinity*, 58-59.

this manner is reductionism avoided and ethics possible. Only in this manner can the individual wrest himself from the thematization inherent to Being by heeding the call of the anarchic, the *Otherwise* than Being.[262]

Atheism, then, is the separation from God necessary for a true relation—and not only between the self and God but, as we will see, between the self and his fellow humans. Atheism, one might say, entails a separation from God so complete that He is in some sense forgotten. The self is not stricken with a sense of incompleteness, a desire to return to some mystical oneness with God. Such would result in a kind of inherent dependency on God, which would be tantamount to a species of monism, which in turn would render impossible a genuine relation with the Divine. This is *kenotic creation*, wherein God in no wise coerces, however subtly, a relation with His creatures.

This is not, however, to say that God simply abandons His creatures as per the disinterested watchmaker deity of the Deists. Were the God described by Levinas (and Judaism) merely disinterested, He would not take pains to create man "naturally atheist," that is, with a degree of freedom and independence allowing for the ambiguity, even scandal, of Divine risk and defeat. God is in fact deeply concerned with His relation with man, and so with discourse. "Revelation is a discourse; in order to welcome revelation a being apt for this role of interlocutor, a separated being, is required," Levinas asserts. Yet this revelation is just that—discourse. A *commanding* discourse, no less, however indirectly. It resists objectification. It cannot be reduced to mere formulae, nor can it be brought to a conclusion, whether in an epistemological sense or otherwise. It is not about knowledge in the sense discussed in "The Temptation of Temptation,"

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[262] Ibid, 55-57.

wherein a subject is apprehended and thematized and the self retains its disengagement in the very midst of engagement. This discourse is anarchic, speaking from beyond Being, causing the self to question its existence, its powers, its rights, however natural. *Is it righteous for me to be?* What cannot be overstressed is that it is only by virtue of God's kenotic creation—"an infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a space for a separated being"[263]—that man is able to question himself, and so embrace the possibility of his own kenosis.

Indeed, this has implications for Levinas' views on the Tanakh, influenced as they are by the disciplines of Talmud and Midrash. Reading the Tanakh is for Levinas "an exertion, a battle, a tearing up or wresting of meaning from the text." Levinas employs the term *solicitation*, which, etymologically speaking, connotes "a shaking up, in reference to a whole…[as well as] 'wrestling,' 'teasing from,' even 'forcing,'" as Annette Aaronowicz explains in her Introduction to *Nine Talmudic Readings* (xxiii). To be sure, a monumental effort is required to engage the Tanakh, but the violence of the process, the "shaking up," applies as much or more to the effects on the *reader*. A true reading challenges the self, calls into question the self and its presuppositions, and summons it to action on behalf of the Other. One might almost say that a true reading of scripture helps to render the reader unclean, i.e., aware of his own guilt and inadequacy before the face of the Other, including God—who *inhabits*, let us not forget, the very suffering of the sufferer. It is, needless to say, an endless process, as always there is *more* to do. Nothing less could be expected of a God who chooses man to be His partner in the ongoing work

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[263] Ibid, 104.

of creation. Ideas such as timelessness and necessity and omnicontrol, then, are as alien to Levinas' (and Judaism's) understanding as they are incompatible.

To sum up:

> The marvel of creation does not only consist in being a creation *ex nihilo*, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself in question. The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being. And this implies precisely atheism, but at the same time, beyond atheism, shame for the arbitrariness of the freedom that constitutes it.[264]

Creating matter from nothing, while ontologically impressive, says little about God Himself. Which is to say, it perhaps speaks to the abstract *what* of God but says little if anything about the *who* of God. That God created in such a fashion that His beings are free, are not strong-armed in any sense of the term but exist *separately* from God, says a very great deal about Who God is. He accords man the space to be and to grow and to come in his own time—or not. In other words, He undertakes a kenosis on behalf of man by eschewing domination or in any sense stacking the deck in His favor.

Finally, let us consider Levinas' *historical* objections to the idea of Divine omnicontrol. We need look no further than the Shoah, and we can narrow the focus of the discussion by concentrating on the question of theodicy. Recall Cohen's view on the connection between the Divine perfection and the question of evil: "The theological explanation for evil, theodicy, is that evil is willed by God, willed by an absolute God, an absolutely benevolent God."[265] If evil were

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[264] *Totality and Infinity,* 89.

[265] *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 267.

to have a "meaning," that meaning would have to come, in the last analysis, from God. An omnicontrolling God for whom man is but an extension of His will, a mere It to His relentlessly sovereign I—does this not sound disturbingly like Levinas' talk of thematization? And yet we have already seen that Levinas' God endows man with interiority, creating him "naturally atheist," thereby *protecting* him against thematization, whether ontological, historical, *or* Divine! "By virtue of the dimension of interiority," Levinas writes, "each being declines the concept and withstands totalization—a refusal necessary for the idea of Infinity, which does not produce this separation by its own force."[266] The relation with God, qua infinity, is possible precisely insofar as God protects man from thematization and reductionism. As David Patterson observes in a gloss on Levinas' assertion, "There is a life of the mind/soul that is mine; it can't be shared, is independent of the totalizing forces of the world—but this is possible only because there is a Creator with whom one has an anarchic relation."[267]

Theodicy thematizes not only God, rendering Him into a mere Final Cause (or indeed into the Oneness of totality, or the totalizing One); so, too, does it thematize the victims, thereby multiplying the evil exponentially. To explain the sufferings of another, to imply that it has a meaning or (worse) a *purpose*, is to reduce the Other and his sufferings to the object of ratiocination, theory, and judgment. Beyond that, it is to absolve oneself of responsibility for that Other. Argues Richard Cohen in *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, "After Auschwitz theodicy itself becomes immorality. The idea of theodicy may remain a consolation or a moral challenge for the sufferer, but as an interpretation coming *from me*, it is my flight,

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[266] *Totality and Infinity*, 57.

[267] Class notes, HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016).

rationalization, imposition, as if the other's suffering, meaningless or no, were meaningful to me" (275). In a way, we return once more to Levinas' argument that the temptation of temptation is knowledge, as theodicy implies a disengagement, a refusal of responsibility for the pain of the Other, in the very face of (seeming) engagement with the Other: one "knows" the pain of the Other, etiologically and epistemologically, without being ethically changed by that knowledge. One may have the *illusion* of participating in the Other's pain, but the experience is more akin to aesthetics than ethics. One may read a text like Elie Wiesel's *Night* and imagine oneself "changed" by the knowledge one gains, but if there is no ethical response, only pathos without empathy and—more vital still—the attendant *summons*, one is merely deceiving oneself. Or, as David Patterson so beautifully puts it, "Ethics means saying, 'Here I am for you,' even and *especially* when I don't *feel* like it."[268]

In a very real sense, this is a particularly insidious temptation for theologians and for educated Christians in general. For Calvinists and the devotees of Divine perfection in the philosophical sense, however, it is well-nigh inescapable. Against the backdrop of Divine perfection, each and every instance of suffering and degradation is rationalized in light of a "higher harmony." In effect, as we have stressed, there is no evil. Whatever *is* is *right*. Writes Gregory Boyd in *God at War*:

> Hence, as both Augustine and Boethius admit explicitly, for God there is, quite literally, no evil. "Evil does not exist at all," Augustine says, "and not only for you [God], but for your created universe, because there is nothing outside it which could

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[268] Class notes, HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016).

> break in and destroy the order which you have imposed upon it. But in parts of the universe, there are certain elements which are thought evil because of a conflict of interest. (45)

Evil, then, seems merely a matter of perspective. If we could but see as God does, from His timeless, omniscient vantage, we would realize that behind every apparent evil lies the immutable and necessary will of God. Continues Boyd:

> What seems evil, because it conflicts with out finite interests, is actually a dimension of higher harmony. For Augustine, therefore, we ought to regard everything as flowing from God's sovereign hand. Even when an innocent person suffers unjustly at the hands of another person, Augustine maintains, "he ought not to attribute [his suffering] to the will of men, or of angels, or of any created spirit, but rather to His will who gives power to wills. (ibid)

Before I became acquainted with Levinas, I happened upon Lorenzo Albacete's *God at the Ritz*. His talk of "co-suffering" struck a chord within me. Co-suffering entails, among other things, solidarity with the sufferer; the willingness on the part of the self "to serve on the jury in the trial of God and to risk our own faith by identifying with those who suffer in their questioning of God" (101). Those unwilling to do so, Albacete avers, are like Job's friends, for whom "[his] suffering was an occasion to construct their theology rather than an opportunity to express their love. They would not walk with him, co-suffer with him, pray with him for grace. Instead, they fit Job's suffering into a theological system that explained everything away." Much as Levinas, Job resists these efforts to reduce his experience to grist for their theological mill, recognizing that to do

so would be to render himself into an *It*, and not only to his friends' totalizing theology but to the relentlessly sovereign *I* of a totalizing God (103-04).

In much the same vein as Albacete, Levinas writes of genuine faith in terms of responsibility for the Other, which entails an acknowledgement of the self that the greatest evil it faces is that which afflicts the Other. Explains Cohen:

> To take on…the affliction of another…is a being *responsible* for the other, the self-as-responsibility, the self as "ashes and dust," as Abraham said. Morality and humanity, in other words, arise in the humility of a painful solidarity…Beyond theodicy, it is compassion without concern for reward, recompense, remuneration. Putting the other above oneself, converting one's suffering into a suffering for the other's suffering, has "no other recompense than this very elevation."[269]

Before we conclude our Levinasian critique of Divine omnicontrol, let us return once more to the subject of Job and the idea of a trial of God. Specifically, let us focus on Levinas' own interpretation of Job. Years before my first real encounter with Levinas, I began to explore the writings of Walter Brueggemann, whose thoughts on the prophets, like those of Abraham Joshua Heschel, proved transformative for my faith. Along the way I discovered a book of essays in Brueggemann's honor—the aptly titled *God in the Fray*. One of these essays is by Samuel Balentine, which posits a Job who is not, as in classical theism, a foil or fool for God but a "supreme model for humankind that God is committed to nurture and sustain." Balentine discerns in God's speech to Job not condemnation or correction but instead "a radical summons to a new understanding of what it means for humankind to be created in the image of God."

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[269] *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy*, 278.

Contra Calvin, contra Lutzer, God is not desirous of believers so focused on some spurious higher harmony that they mirror His (alleged) impassibility, calmly rejoicing in each flood, fire, famine and fart, but rather those who engage in "steadfast lament and relentless opposition to injustice and innocent suffering."[270] Many years later, I found a strikingly similar view in Levinas' Afterword to Philippe Nemo's *Job and the Excess of Evil*. In keeping with Balentine's view, Levinas sees in Job an exemplar for humanity. Despite Job's "useless suffering"—uselessness being perhaps the essence of suffering, inasmuch as it is without meaning and cannot be justified by *any* ends—"Job [in Levinas' view] perseveres in his faith in God and justice," Renée D. N. van Riessen stresses.[271] Indeed, Levinas goes further than Balentine, pointing to God's speeches about Job's absence at the creation not as a declaration of God's "perfect" knowledge or will but as an assertion of Job's responsibility for the created order even prior to his birth, which is to say, his *anarchic* responsibility. Only by assuming such an asymmetrical responsibility for the Other—which here includes the nonhuman creation—can evil be defeated, if that is quite the right word.

> It is as if, before lamenting my own fate, I must answer the [question of] the other. This is the moment of that a breakthrough of the Good can take place *in* evil, *in* the intention of which I am the target. It is a breakthrough which does not mean a simple reversal of Evil but an elevation of it. Evil is not changed into something Good but is raised to a different level. This gives it a place in the

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[270] "What Are Human Beings, That You Make So Much of Them?" In *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, 259-278 (260).

[271] *Man as a Place of God: Levinas' Hermeneutics of Kenosis*, 115.

> ethical relation, in the relation of one person to the other as fellow human being.[272]

Can Levinas' reasoning in rejecting any notions of Divine omnicontrol be any clearer? Biblically, Levinas points to a God who chooses to engage in a *creatio continua* and to have as His partner a naturally atheistic, and therefore potentially unreliable, even rebellious, being. Surely the ambiguity and risk inherent to this view is the very antithesis of Divine omnicontrol! What is more, and contra the "perfect" God of classical theism, who via His timelessness and necessity foreordains each and every prayer the believer utters, Levinas' God makes Himself dependent on human prayers, not only in order to deepen His relation to the cosmos, and so elevate the created order, but to relieve God's own suffering, which might be described as a "co-suffering" with and for the created order. Again, the contrast with the God of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin could not be more profound. Ethically, Levinas repudiates omnicontrol by positing (in accordance with the Tanakh) a God who endows man with interiority, protecting his freedom from being overwhelmed by forces ontological, natural *and* Divine. Turning finally to history, Levinas points to the Shoah and its implications for theodicy and its tacit philosophical assumptions about perfection. In stark contrast to the classical theist portraits of Job as God's foil or fool, he argues, like Albacete and Balentine, for Job as the exemplary human, the instantiation of the *Imago Dei*, by virtue of his refusal to sunder the ideas of God and justice.

This brings us to the final aspect of our Levinasian critique of the classical theist view of God's relation to the created order: pantheism. For his own reasons, Levinas would argue, like

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[272] Ibid, 115, 118.

Griffin in *God, Power and Evil*, that the classical assumptions of the Biblical-Classical synthesis—specially, the emphasis on God's simplicity, timelessness, immutability, impassibility and omnicontrol lead in the end to a God-world relationship not essentially different from Spinozistic pantheism.

We have unpacked Griffin's argument, analyzed its various steps in terms of attributes implicit to the Divine perfection. We began with timelessness and proceeded through immutability (and impassibility), necessity, and omnicontrol, each of which, we have endeavored to demonstrate, is essential for the idea that the God-world relation is more apropos of pantheism than the Biblical understanding. But what of the idea of pantheism itself? Has Levinas anything to say about pantheism as an idea? Many see in pantheism the best hope for a universal brotherhood; insofar as I and my neighbor are one when all is said and done, any kindness I do unto him I am also doing unto myself. How could people fail to appreciate the beauty of this idea, its implications for the ultimate folly of war and cruelty and selfishness? Is this idea not more powerful than the Christian (theological) idea of an omnicontrolling God, for whom goodness is but a Divine command?

In a way, we have already touched on Levinas' (and Buber's as well) answer to this idea. His answer can be summed up in a single phrase of deceptive simplicity: *Ethics as first philosophy*.

As we have seen, ethics for Levinas bespeaks not some abstract Good, a universal principle or formula, but arises from the Divine kenosis, which is key to the idea of man as the *Imago Dei*. God's kenotic creation, His "contraction" and self-limitation undertaken in order to create a cosmos truly *separate* from Himself and a being, man, capable of undertaking his own kenosis on behalf of his God and his fellow humans, is antithetical to the Oneness of pantheism, whether

Parmenidean or Spinozistic. The God who creates kenotically takes pains to eliminate the possibility of man being bewitched and epistemologically overwhelmed by his Creator. Concomitantly, He creates man in His own image, as capable of undertaking a kenosis of his own—and in this manner assures the possibility of a noncoercive relation with the creation, mankind in particular. "Ethics is the spiritual optics," Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*. "The work of justice—the uprightness of the face to face—is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced—and 'vision' here coincides with this work of justice...There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men" (78). Alterity, not sameness, is the key to Levinas' philosophy. Without an Other, there is no relation, no ethics, no kenosis.

Previously we noted the influence of Plato on Augustine, one of the creators of Western thought whose influence is felt even to the present day. And we have argued that a key influence on Plato, in turn, is Parmenides, particularly his devotion to the One. It is not for nothing, then, that Levinas points to Plato's monistic tendencies as a defining feature of Western thought: "Beginning with Plato, the social ideal will be sought for in an ideal of fusion. It will be thought that, in its relationship with the other, the subject tends to be identified with the other, by being swallowed up in a collective representation, a common ideal."[273] In essentially the same vein, John Zizioulas' *Being as Communion* discusses Classical thought and its inability to endow the individual human with what Levinas describes as interiority and atheism. Like Levinas, he traces the (ongoing) ramifications of Classical philosophy's obsession with perfection, which, as we have seen, necessarily entails the ideas of harmony, unity, and the One.

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[273] *Time and the Other,* 93.

To the Greek mind, Zizioulas explains, the cosmos is a thing of unparalleled beauty and harmony, a view informed by an underlying "ontological monism." *Any* departure from the ultimate oneness of Being, any "'differentiation' or 'accidence,'" must be regarded as imperfection and a deterioration into non-being. The implications for freedom, needless to say, are dire: "However, in such a world it is impossible for the unforeseen to happen of for freedom to operate as an absolute and unrestricted claim to existence; whatever threatens cosmic harmony and is not explained by 'reason' (*logos*), which draws all things together and leads them to this harmony and unity, is rejected and condemned. This also holds true for man." Hence the fact that the term *person* in Greek thought occurs for the first time in the context of tragedy.—Or, at any rate, it appears with the greatest frequency in the context of the theater. "It seems originally to have meant specifically that part of the head that is 'below the cranium.' This is its 'anatomical' meaning. But how and why did this meaning come to be identified so quickly with the mask...which was used in the theater?" Zizioulas argues that the theater afforded the Greeks the ideal venue wherein to wrestle with the conflict inherent in their idea of a perfect, harmonious cosmos, on the one hand, and the idea of human freedom on the other. On the stage, he explains, man defies this cosmic harmony and attempts to wrest himself from the ultimate oneness of Being, the Being to which all beings are inextricably tied—and circumscribed.

> It is there that he fights with the gods and with his fate; it is there that he sins and transgresses; but it is there too that he constantly learns…that he can neither escape fate ultimately, nor continue to show *hubris* to the gods without punishment, nor sin without suffering the consequences. Thus he confirms

tragically the view, expressed so typically in Plato's *Laws*, that *the world does not exist for the sake of man, but man exists for its sake*.

Hence, Zizioulas concludes, the aforementioned linkage between personhood and the mask employed in theatrical performances: What is a person without freedom? Is personhood possible without freedom? No. Freedom is an illusion, a tale, much like a performance. Personhood, then, is likewise an illusion, and therefore a *mask*.[274]

The resonances with Levinas are profound:

> The positions we have outlined oppose the ancient privilege of unity which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel. Separation and interiority were held to be incomprehensible and irrational. The metaphysical knowledge which puts the same in touch with the other then would reflect this fallenness. Metaphysics would endeavor to suppress this separation, to unite; the metaphysical being should absorb the being of the metaphysician. The de facto separation with which metaphysics begins would result from an illusion or a fault. As a stage the separated being traverses on the way of its return to its metaphysical source, a moment of a history that will be concluded by union, metaphysics would be an Odyssey, and its disquietude nostalgia. But the philosophy of unity has never been able to say whence came this accidental illusion and fall, inconceivable in the Infinite, the Absolute, the Perfect. (102)

Hence, Levinas would say, the West's obsession with totality, with unity, with knowledge, with control. Not with individual beings but Being itself; not the flesh-and-blood existents but

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[274] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 29-32.

the comprehensible Existence by which they are subsumed. In this view, Levinas maintains, freedom devolves into solipsism, the "war" of self against all Others in an effort to maintain the self-s autonomy. Being as war—as in Primo Levi's "ferocious aloneness" in Auschwitz, wherein "everything is hostile" and "all are enemies or rivals."[275] Ironically, while for Levi Auschwitz is the anti-world, for Levinas it is the logical outgrowth of Western metaphysics, wherein the self apprehends the Other, literally and metaphorically: "Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other…'I think' comes down to 'I can'—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power."[276]

To sum up: Pantheism is another mask for totality. Totality, we have seen, is theoretical as opposed to ethical, epistemological as opposed to ethical. Totality is about cosmic oneness, the assimilation of individual existents into the awesome panoply of Existence. If ethics is indeed first philosophy, as Levinas claims, can there be any doubt as to his attitudes towards pantheism, which precludes even the merest possibilities of alterity, interiority, or kenosis.

And what becomes of the idea of *Divine* kenosis in classical theism? It is downplayed, ignored, rendered mere poetry or rhetorical flourish. Small wonder! If the relation between God and world is analogous to that between brain and body, what place is there for Divine self-limitation? Is not creation in a sense of the ultimate act of Divine egoism?

Ironically, Levinas the Jew has a deeper understanding and respect for kenosis than many Christians, at least those devoted to ontotheology.

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[275] *Survival in Auschwitz*, 88, 42.

[276] *Totality and Infinity*, 45-46.

Levinas' critique of classical theism and its devotion to Classical ideals like perfection would suggest that the Church, in order to be truly Christian—in order to embrace the full meaning and import of kenosis and to "put on Christ" (Rom. 13:14)—needs must abandon the Biblical-Classical synthesis and return to a more Jewish way of thinking and doing. Christians must look afresh at Judaism, its God-talk, its devotion to Scripture (including its practices of Midrash and Talmud), its prayer life, its very mode of being in the world. This entails, of course, rejecting a settled, establishment God and embracing a God with whom we have endlessly to do. A God for whom kenosis is not merely an idea but a *summons*. A God, one might say, who *sets aside* perfection and power for the sake of the relation, with all that that implies for man and his relationship to the rest of creation.

But does this mean, we must hasten to add, that Christianity has nothing to offer Judaism? Or, perhaps better, that Jesus has no more to say to the Jewish people? As we are about to see, even Jewish philosophers so profoundly insightful and faithful as Abraham Joshua Heschel, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig would benefit from an encounter with the person of Jesus, his life and work, and in ways they might not expect. As this book is concerned chiefly with Levinas, we will mostly confine our focus to him. We will, however, at times allude to other Jewish thinkers, including the aforementioned. For it is our belief that, just as the Church is in dire need of a Levinasian/Jewish corrective, so, too, does Judaism have need of the person of Jesus—which is a far cry from saying that Judaism needs Christianity per se. Theologically, we have stressed, this is certainly *not* the case. Christian theology—classical theism—is in fact the source of Christian Judaeophobia and triumphalism, as we have argued

elsewhere.[277] The ontotheology of the Church cannot but set it at odds with Judaism. In a sense, ontotheology is the antithesis of Judaism and its portrait of the God-world relation. Judaism becomes the ultimate Other for Christian theology. *How could the Church not find itself possessed of a desire to assimilate this Other, which threatens its identity and its comforting vision of ultimate harmony and sameness?*

Only by repudiating ontotheology can the Church's poisonous attitude towards Jews and Judaism be rooted out once and for all. But this does not mean, to say again, that Judaism has nothing to gain from discoursing with the person of Jesus. As we have already intimated, much of the difficulties Judaism has with Jesus arise from issues *ontological*. When it comes to Jesus as a revelation of God's character or *personhood*, however, there is much commonality and resonance, as Levinas himself implies. The problem is that *that* Jesus, the Jesus of kenosis, has been eclipsed by the Cosmic Christ of ontotheology. But what happens if this veil is stripped away?

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[277] Namely, in my Master's thesis: *Dunamis or Kenosis? Classical Theism and Christian Judaeophobia*.

CHAPTER 7

CHRISTIAN IMPLICATIONS FOR LEVINAS

In this chapter, we will explore what the Christian understanding of kenosis and incarnation imply for Levinas. Specifically, we will consider how the Christian understanding of these ideas shares both resonances and divergences with Levinas and how these divergences might hold the potential to enrich Levinas' thinking. These attempts represent not an effort to appropriate or strong-arm Levinas but to challenge his own thinking about Christian claims regarding Jesus.

Christ crucified is foolishness to the Greeks, writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23. What does foolishness to the Greeks entail? Conversely, what does Greek wisdom entail? Parmenides? Plato? Aristotle? Is it for nothing that people, even many Christians, prefer the *Dignum Deo* to Christ crucified? For the *Dignum Deo*, it must be remembered, centers on the (ontological) idea of perfection: timelessness, immutability, necessity and the rest.

In her classic *Mythology*, Edith Hamilton takes to task the romanticism with which moderns view the religions of many (so-called) primitive peoples. Whereas we tend to see the "god-infested" worlds of these peoples as "strangely and beautifully animated," she maintains, the fact is that these were realms wherein terror reigned, "with its close attendant, Magic, and its most common defense, Human Sacrifice." Not so with the Greeks, she argues:

> Saint Paul said that the invisible must be understood by the visible. That was not a Hebrew idea. In Greece alone in the ancient world people were preoccupied with the visible; they were finding the satisfaction of their desires in what was actually in the world around them…The storyteller found Hermes among the among the people he passed in the street. He saw the god "like a young man at

> the age when youth is loveliest," as Homer says….That is the miracle of Greek mythology—a humanized world, men freed from the paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown. The terrifying incomprehensibilities which were worshipped elsewhere…were banned from Greece….Not the priest, but the poet, has influence with Heaven—and no one was ever afraid of a poet….[T]he whole divine company, with a very few and for the most part not important exceptions, were entrancingly beautiful with a human beauty, and nothing humanly beautiful is really terrifying. The early Greek mythologists transformed a world full of fear into a world full of beauty. (14-18)

Could it be that the Greek gods' relations with humanity could be described as "kenotic" in some sense? Do they "condescend" to man, stooping low in order to meet mankind according to its limitations? And if so, could kenosis be more apropos of the Classical component of the Biblical-Classical synthesis?—That is, the *Christian* view of kenosis, tied as it is to Incarnation? It is hard not to hear in Hamilton's allusion to Paul and the visible an echo of Patterson's insights in *Honey from the Rock*: "Couched in the Christian creeds is a theology that is unintelligible to Jewish teaching. The primary concepts that define the creeds—Incarnation, virgin birth, Son of God, the Trinity, and so on—are not contrary to Jewish teaching; they are unintelligible to Jewish thinking" (92). Is the Christian understanding of kenosis, tied as it is to the Incarnation, merely a means of reducing the Otherwise than Being to what is apprehensible and therefore human?

A few points are in order. First, one should take note of Hamilton's emphasis on the centrality of beauty and rationality in Greek culture. Think especially of gods like Hermes,

"'like a young man at the age when youth is loveliest,' as Homer says….That is the miracle of Greek mythology—a humanized world, men freed from the paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown." As we have already taken pains to point out, Jesus is not identified with beauty or rationality. His kenosis, which culminates in the Incarnation, is more akin to the Grotesque than to the Beautiful. It is a transgression of "proper" boundaries. As we have seen in Chapter 4, the Incarnation might also be described as the "carnivalesque grotesque," as Bakhtin conceives it—an unsettling reversal that culminates in revulsion, but also laughter. Pointing to 1 John 4:18, according to which "perfect love drives out fear," Coates argues that for Bakhtin the Gospels are the embodiment of carnival insofar as laughter and agapic (self-giving, i.e.) love are deeply related. As she observes regarding *Rabelais and his World*:

> Laughter is firstly an alternative way of seeing the world which has as great a claim to philosophical value as its 'serious' counterparts; 'it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man' …This truth is universal, as suggested by the quotation. It is also 'unfinished and open'…by nature and therefore opposed to all forms of truth expressed in dogmatism or closure. As such it has a 'positive, regenerating, creative function'…and bears an 'indissoluble and essential relation to freedom'…, both freedom of the spirit and of speech…Finally, to the matrix laughter—truth—freedom must be added its relationship to fear, which Bakhtin sees as the fruit of medieval seriousness and a form of enslavement more profound than any external force of oppression because of its ability to invade man's soul…'Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated

> by laughter…Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world'… (*Christianity in Bakhtin*, 135)

In this view, the Incarnation is, as we have stressed, the ultimate protest against totality and the solipsism of Being. Grounded in the fleshly, the physical, it opposes totality and its inevitable thematization and appropriation of the Other unto the Same.

It may be asked, then: Is belief in Jesus infantilizing? Is Christianity a religion for children, as Levinas might say?—That is, a religion that offers one comfort without responsibility, whether to God or one's fellow human beings?

We must also keep sight of the fact that the transgressive nature of the Incarnation is *prophetic*, i.e., akin to the outcry of the Prophets, but made manifest, made flesh; whereas Jeremiah's tears are surrogates for God's tears, Jesus' tears *are* God's tears. For the Christian, at least, this fact is intimated by the Prophet Isaiah when the latter writes that the Messiah would have "no beauty or majesty to attract us to him" but would instead be "despised and rejected by men…Like one from whom men hide their faces" (53:2-3). Again, it should be emphasized that what is most offensive about Jesus when all is said and done—and I am thinking here as much or more of Christians and their *Dignum Deo*—has ultimately to do with the "grotesqueness" of the *love* implied by his kenosis and incarnation. It is a love that ignores what is considered "proper" to God, such as Almightiness and Immutability, and risks the pain and "messiness," to put it perhaps too euphemistically, inherent to the relationship with man. What makes it especially noisome to humans, Christians included, is the fact that it has an imperative element, implying as it does a love that ignores the "proprieties" of realm and race, class and caste. Yet it is a love so self-sacrificing that it compels *without* compelling a comparable love on the part of the self for

his flesh-and-blood fellows. It commands by *not* commanding overtly or demanding a reciprocity. And that we cannot tolerate. It is not the risk to ourselves that we find most irksome about the relationship with God; it is the risk *God* takes. If God's love risks so very much—the Jews are *right* to be scandalized by the idea of the Incarnation; it *should* disturb us, much as Dostoevsky's "holy fools" like Myshkin, Tikhon, Markel, Zosima, and Alyosha do, only vastly more so—how can ours fail to do likewise? Is there not a command implicit in the Incarnation for this reason? If God is willing to risk so much for me, can I not but do likewise for Him?

This idea of Divine risk is, to be sure, anathema to many Christians of the classical theist persuasion, but a closer reading of the Prophets reveals the incredible shortsightedness of this view. From the start, God risks everything in creating man as naturally atheist and possessed of interiority. Consider the alternating rhythms in Isaiah: For every judgment on Israel, there is a corresponding plea to return to the relationship. The overall feel of most of the Prophetic books is one of excruciating pathos, portraying a cycle of betrayal, anger, and heartbreak on God's part—which of course presupposes God's unrelenting love. One can only be betrayed by someone one loves, an intimate; anger and heartbreak, too, are only possible where love exists. Add to this the fact that God persists in His pleas for Israel to return even in the face of these repeated betrayals and one realizes that the God of Israel is Levinas' *for-the-Other*.

"'I reared children and brought them up, but they rebelled against me. / The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand'" (Isaiah 1:2-3). The pathos in these words is, for the classical theist, overwritten by his a priori commitment to Divine Almightiness and Impassibility. At best, such sentiments are a rhetorical ploy—God "lisping," as Calvin says—inasmuch as a "perfect" God dwells in immutable bliss.

Our obsession with power impoverishes the Prophetic texts and undermines the intense pain this relation with humanity causes God. The association of God with maternal imagery in passages like Isaiah 49:15-16—"'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!'"—is incredibly relevant here. Though most associate God with fatherhood, there is a very real sense in which God is as much Mother as Father. Many of the associations of pregnancy and motherhood are apropos of God's relation to mankind. It is not for nothing, then, that Levinas expresses the idea of the *for-the-Other* in terms of *maternity*: "bearing," suffering" "passivity more passive than passivity," and "persecution"—these Levinasian themes, presented so powerfully in *Otherwise than Being*, have their origins in the God-world relationship exhibited in the Prophets. "Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne? Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor" (*Otherwise than Being*, 75). This talk of maternity is further linked with God when one thinks of the Shekinah, who goes into exile with Israel and endures its sufferings as if She, too, is guilty. In this light, as Patterson elaborates in *Wrestling with the Angel*, it is of no wonder that the Nazis targeted Jewish motherhood with such zeal:

> Defining the mother is the "womb" that is *rechem*; it is a cognate of *racham*, which means to "love" or to "have compassion" as only a mother can love and have compassion. Joined with *rachamim*—that is, "compassion" or "love"—the father becomes the Holy One, as in the expression *Av HaRachamim*, "the Father of love and compassion" or "the loving and compassionate Father"—from the

> Father who is also Mother. Without G-d the Mother we have no access, no relation, to G-d the Father. (97)

The God of the Tanakh is "grotesque" in that He, in a similar manner to Christ Jesus, also disregards our associations of Divine perfection and propriety and embraces a vulnerability more apropos of motherhood—of pregnancy and birth, specifically—thereby eschewing the Almightiness revered by so many classical theists.

The Incarnation, I submit, should be understood in this light—an issue not of ontology but rather of *character*. The Incarnation is entirely in keeping with a God who risks the pain and abuse of a relationship with "naturally atheist" beings like mankind. A God who is as much Mother as Father, with all that that implies. The Incarnation is but the logical extension, so to say, of the *tsimtsum* undertaken by the God of Israel. At the very least, it may be said that it is not so alien to Judaism as some might think, and this by virtue of what it reveals about the character of God and His relationship to the world. And it is certainly not Greek, which fetishizes beauty and rationality! Whereas Hermes, Apollo, Aphrodite et al represent what we deem most admirable in man, the "Man-God" Jesus bears witness to all that we are *not*—namely, that we neither love God with all our more nor identify our truest selves by our love for our neighbor. Yet it is not merely negative; it also bears witness to the extents to which God will condescend for the sake of His relation with man.

And the Incarnation is transgressive in another sense as well, refuting as it does monism and the lure of The One. Beginning with Parmenides and recurring in Spinoza and Hegel (among many others), "Separation and interiority were held to be incomprehensible and irrational," as Levinas notes in *Totality and Infinity*. "Metaphysics would endeavor to suppress this separation,

to unite; the metaphysical being should absorb the being of the metaphysician" (102). The One enthralls precisely insofar as it means an end to the questioning of the self implicit to ethics. "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions," as Levinas elsewhere attests in *Totality and Infinity*, "is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (43). If all is One, then personhood is an illusion; goodness to the neighbor is really goodness to the self. Everything is self-reflective. Ethics, then, is at best utilitarianism, or enlightened self-interest. Kenosis, accordingly, has no place in a monistic conception of reality. And here it must be stressed that monism takes many, often subtle, forms, whether religious, scientific, aesthetic, or political. From Platonism and Hinduism to the materialistic reductionism of contemporary "biologism" and "historiosophy" to the poetry of Virgil and Holderlin[278] to Communism and Fascism, the One is the siren song that lulls mankind into abandoning the ethical for the ecstatic.

Jesus, by contrast, is the one who separates, pitting father again son, mother against daughter, sibling against sibling (Matthew 10:34-36). On an even deeper level, I would argue that, far from blurring the boundary between man and God, the Incarnation is the embodiment of Levinas' Otherwise than Being, at least in one very important respect. How so? Insofar as it preserves the alterity of man even to its own detriment. God does not become ontologically one with man; such a union would erase man's alterity, annul the relationship, and render moot any talk of ethics. Instead He enters the world while remaining separate from it, *in* but not *of*. What unites Him to the world is His love, which is a kenotic love, which always vouchsafes the alterity

[278] Holderlin conceives of human history in a tripartite fashion: a preconscious unity with Being; a withdrawal of Being, giving man the space to reflect on Being, to philosophize and even theologize Being; and an ultimate return to the lost unity, albeit no longer preconscious but fully cognizant. So argues Daniel Whistler in "Heidegger's Atheisms."

of the Other, even at its own expense. Is this idea alien to the Torah? Not at all; as we have already stressed, God's creation is not a simple, once-and-for-all act; rather, it is a *creatio continua*—and, what is more, it is a work that God does not undertake alone but is a collaborative effort between Himself and man. The worlds are elevated or diminished, Levinas avers, by man's actions. Does this not bespeak a kenosis on God's part? He limits His power, His influence, and thereby risks being thwarted, even "killed"—if, as we have argued elsewhere, the Shoah is in fact a kind of deicide, a killing of God by destroying His people on earth. Is Israel not in some sense the "body" of God? This idea of Shoah as deicide, I would argue, no more blurs the distinction between God and world than does Jesus' incarnation.

Furthermore, the Incarnation does not anthropomorphize God but instead "theomorphizes" man by revealing the mystery of the *Imago Dei*; which is to say, what God *intends* man to be. The Incarnation, as the ultimate *for-the-Other*, is God's example to man of what it is to *be* one's love for one's fellow human being. God became flesh in order that he could give the bread from his own mouth, the coat and shirt from his own back, and the very life of his body for the sake of the Other. This is a far, *far* cry from the love of an Aphrodite or a Cupid, which has essentially to do with eros and ecstasy. Aphrodite's child with Hermes, Hermaphroditus, is the embodiment of this sort of love, a love apropos of the realm of Being: The nymph Salmacis is so overwhelmed with desire for the adolescent Hermaphroditus that she overwhelms him in the pool in which he is bathing, wrapping herself about him and praying to the gods that they might never be separated. Her prayers are answered and the two are fused into one form, displaying traits of both sexes. The newborn Hermaphroditus then prays to the gods that the pool would thusly transform all who bathe in its waters ever after, and his prayer is answered.

That Incarnation does not result in a kind of ecstatic oneness between God and man is further borne out by a closer reading of the second chapter of Philippians. In the passage immediately following the kenosis passage so essential to the current work, Paul goes on to exhort his readers to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, / for it is God who works in you, to will and to act according to his good purpose" (2:12-13). He enjoins them to become "blameless and pure" in order to "shine like stars in the universe as [they] hold out the world of life" (2:15-16). He describes his own experience in terms of "being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from [their] faith" and his resulting joy in this fact—the talk of "being poured out" of course echoing his talk of Jesus' own emptying. And in fact he goes on to encourage his readers to "Join with others in following my example…and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave [to them]" (3:17). Jesus' kenosis and incarnation, then, is not something to be theologized but to be actively emulated. It is relational and therefore *ethical*; or, as Levinas would say, it is apropos of Infinity rather than totality. Paul's talk of "fear and trembling," what is more, implies the onerousness and even pain inherent to this process, recalling Levinas' example of maternity as the *for-the-Other* par excellence.

Surely these considerations offset to some extent the charge that Christianity is a religion for children!

Nevertheless, I suspect that on some level Levinas would continue to harbor concerns that Jesus' kenosis and incarnation somehow gives rise to a religion for children, absolving man of much of his responsibility before God. The incredible degree of responsibility he places on man's shoulders is expressed perhaps most forcefully in "Judaism and Kenosis":

> God associates with or withdraws from the worlds, depending on human behavior. Man is answerable for the universe! Man is answerable for others. His faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Torah is not just a way of winning or losing his salvation: the being, elevation and light of the worlds are dependent upon it. Only indirectly, by virtue of the salvation or downfall of the worlds, does his own destiny depend on it. As if through that responsibility, which constitutes man's very identity, each one of us were similar to *Elohim*.[279]

What can the Christian say in response to such a claim? Levinas' philosophy certainly implies a high view of man (even as it implicitly acknowledges the depths to which man can sink, as we will see in our discussion of sin). Is there anything comparable in the teachings of Jesus? Or is Christianity indeed a religion for children?

When in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky writes of God taking seeds from other, higher worlds and planting them on earth and raising up a garden (humankind) whereby the otherworldly is made manifest, the resonance with Levinas' Otherwise than Being, or Infinity, is too profound to ignore or explain away. Zosima's talk of it being thereby "impossible…to conceive the essence of things" (320) is, accordingly, analogous to Levinas' rejection of the exaltation of Being or Existence. Is not Levinas, no less than Zosima, an advocate of holy folly? Is not kenosis, the emptying of the self for the sake of the Other, sheer *idiocy* in a world essentially naturalistic and ontological, a world summed up all too well in such maxims as *cui bono* and *caveat emptor* and "survival of the fittest"? Do we not behold in characters like the

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[279] In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (111).

holy fool "Stinking" Lizvetta the embodiment of Levinas' ethos? Lizvetta, homeless and penniless, takes no thought of herself; when given money or other aid by the townspeople, she uses only the smallest portion and takes the remainder to a church or a jail for the sake of others; and it is quite possibly for this stupid goodness that she is regarded by a group of young gentry—"with lofty disdain"[280] (or "lofty repugnance")—as less than human and therefore raped.[281] Notes Victor Terras in *A Karamazov Companion*, "the 'gentlemen,' who presumably have received a Western education, are utterly insensitive" to Lizvetta's kenotic love for her fellows. Whereas the uneducated townspeople regard her as a holy fool, a picture of the "Man-God" Jesus, "to these 'gentlemen' she is an 'animal'" (168). The example of Lizvetta, one of many such holy fools who populate Dostoevsky's works, resonates with the unbridgeable contradiction between totality and infinity, Being and its Otherwise—and thereby drives home the folly or madness of Levinas' ethic from the perspective of Being. "When I am turned toward the other man and when I am called not to leave him alone. It is a turning contrary to my perseverance in being," he explains to Salomon Malka in *Is It Righteous to Be?* (101). Being and its Otherwise are not joined in some eternal dialectic; the latter is not some oblique path that leads circuitously back, when all is said and done, to the former: "Not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*," Levinas explains early on in *Otherwise than Being*. "And not to not-be; passing over is not here the equivalent to dying. Being and not-being illuminate one another, and unfold a speculative dialectic which is a determination of being. Or else the negativity which attempts to repel being is immediately submerged by being" (3). For the Otherwise is at widdershins with Being, calling

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[280] *The Brothers Karamazov*, 98.

[281] Ibid, 98-99.

upon the self to embrace not *dunamis* but *kenosis*: "a passivity more passive than all passivity" (14), an "exposure to outrage, to wounding…[a] passivity of the accusative form…implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity" (15). This is a questioning not merely of Being but of the *self*'s being, or ego—i.e., *Is it righteous* [for me] *to be?*—an idea regarded by most, the (philosophically) educated in particular, "with lofty repugnance."

Consider, as illustration, David Bentley Hart's revulsion for Levinas' ethics, with which he associates the horror and self-negating tendencies of the sublime: "The foremost representative of this 'school' of the sublime would surely be Emmanuel Levinas," who condemns "other forms of thought…with a vehemence frequently vicious, and a fulminant tone of mystical authority assumed wherever principled argument proves impossible." Indeed, Hart goes further, hinting at Levinas "depraved" understanding of the world.[282] And although he has the wrong aesthetic category, he nevertheless brings to light, however unintentionally, an important aspect of Levinas' thought: namely, its connotations of carnival and the grotesque. For a Christian like Hart, kenosis is tied to incarnation and substitution; and as an *Orthodox* Christian, what is more, Hart seems to conveniently forget that Christ, as his fellow Orthodox believers recognize, is the ultimate fool and as unworthy of respect in the eyes of the Western world as "Stinking" Lizvetta: a scandal, an embarrassment, a *grotesquerie*, even. In stark contrast to Hart, then, I see profound *resonances* between Levinas and Christianity vis-à-vis kenosis, incarnation, and substitution.

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[282] *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 75.

Hart's own revulsion to Levinas, in fact, betrays a connection between the scandal of the Cross and the scandal of Levinas' ethic. The two are more alike than different.

We have also stressed the attendant importance of incarnation for Levinas: only a being naturally atheist and at home with itself, a being separate from God, self-contained in its own fleshliness, can be truly ethical—which is to say, is capable of taking the bread from its own mouth and/or the coat from its own back in order to offer them to the Other. "The reverting of the ego into a self, the de-posing or de-situating of the ego, is the very modality of dis-interestedness," Levinas observes in *Otherwise than Being*. "It has the form of a corporeal life devoted to expression and to giving. It is devoted, and does not devote itself: it is a self despite itself, in incarnation, where it is the very possibility of offering, suffering and trauma" (50). To this author, at least, Levinas' words serves both as a description of the value of fleshliness or corporeality *as well as* a concise summation of the *raison d'être* of *the* Incarnation. At first blush, then, one might well wonder why Levinas affirms so forcefully incarnation but rejects the Incarnation. It seems odd that a God capable of kenosis, as Levinas' is, cannot become incarnate, which seems the ultimate act of kenosis. Levinas, we have already demonstrated, sees much value in the idea of kenosis, recognizing its Jewish antecedents, like *tsimtsum* and the God of the Prophets, who inhabits the suffering of His creatures. It seems he stops just short of Zosima's assertion that "did we not have the precious image of Christ before us, we would perish and be altogether lost, like the race of men before the flood" (320). Why is this?

Simply put, Levinas' rejection of the Incarnation can be summed up in three broad categories: the separateness of the Creator from His creation; the nonthematizability of God; and Judaism as a "religion for adults" (versus a "utopian" Christianity, i.e.). Each of the aforementioned is to

some extent intertwined with the others but is, nevertheless, capable of being analyzed separately. In our discussion, we will rely not only on texts like *Otherwise than Being* and *Of God Who Comes to Mind* but essays from texts like *Entre Nous* ("The Man-God?") and *Difficult Freedom* ("Simone Weil against the Bible," "Place and Utopia," and "Loving the Torah More Than God") as well. In the process, we will seek to confine our discussion to *Levinas*' arguments against the Incarnation—as opposed, i.e., to *Judaism*'s, though of course there will be occasions when there is need to refer to Levinas' Judaism, which as we have argued is indispensable to understanding Levinas' philosophy. Primarily, our purpose is to suggest that aspects of Levinas' conceptions of incarnation seem to resonate with Christian claims regarding the Incarnation. In so doing, we hope to provide fuel for future discussions on the subject rather than to curtail such discussion by "coercing" our readers through "incontrovertible" proofs. As we will see, such labors would undermine the true intent of kenosis, which is to safeguard the freedom of the creature.

Let us begin, then, with the matter of God's separateness from the world.

As we have noted more than a few times already, Levinas' use of the term "atheism" has nothing to do with a denial of God's existence and everything to do with God's kenosis on man's behalf: In creating man as a being possessed of interiority, God safeguards man against the forces of totalization, be they naturalistic, ontological, or Divine. As we have stressed, God has no desire to overpower man with His glory or His truth and thereby coerce man into a relation—to do so would be to reduce man into an *It*, as Buber would say; or, in Levinasian terms, to reify and thematize man. Such would be tantamount to murder. Levinas stresses throughout *Totality and Infinity* and "The Temptation of Temptation" that thematization of the Other is the necessary

precondition for murdering the Other. Levinas' God, by contrast, is the *Otherwise* who makes space for the Other to be and to grow and to come. The *Otherwise*, qua the "radical orientation towards the Other," necessarily implies an opposition to harming the Other, even through inaction. Perhaps Levinas is thinking of the rabbi's linkage of the first and sixth commandments whereby violating one implies the negation of the other: To kill another human being is an assault on God and vice-versa.—Hence, as David Patterson would surely say, the inmate's anguished question after the tortuous hanging of the child in *Night*: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows…" (65)

The point is that God's separateness for Levinas is of a piece with His kenosis—which is to say, it is ultimately about God's love as opposed to His ontology: He vouchsafes man's freedom and so remains apart; albeit not, it cannot be overstressed, in the fashion of the god of the Deists, who merely creates and then withdraws to dispassionately observe the mechanistic unfolding of his created order. "The pathos of love consists, to the contrary, in an insurmountable duality of beings; it is a relationship with what forever slips away," Levinas maintains in *Ethics and Infinity*. "The relationship does not *ipso facto* neutralize alterity, but conserves it" (67). Although in this passage he is speaking of the love that obtains between men and women, Levinas' insight is equally apropos of God's love for the world. Only by conserving the world's alterity can God be in a meaningful relationship with it.

For all the density of Levinas' thought, and despite his criticisms of Buber's (over)emphasis on reciprocity, Levinas takes pains to safeguard the relation of the Creator to the creation. His God, as we stressed early on, is more akin to Heschel's God of pathos than the impersonal deities

of the Greek philosophers. Through the poets, he writes (in "A Man-God?"), the pagan gods are rendered immanent at the cost of their transcendence. "Hence philosophers expel poets from the City to preserve the divinity of the gods in men's minds," he explains. "But divinity thus saved lacks all condescension [*kenosis*, i.e.]. Plato's God is the impersonal Idea of the Good; Aristotle's God is a thought that thinks itself. And it is with this divinity which is indifferent to the worlds of men that Hegel's *Encyclopedia*, that is to say, perhaps, philosophy, ends." Just as pagan poetry assimilates the gods unto the worldly order, pagan philosophy assimilates the world unto "the Absolute." There is therefore no relation: Divinity reveals itself in the world rather than to the world. "Man is no longer *coram Deo* [*in the presence of God*, i.e.]" (54), Levinas concludes.

So great is God's concern lest He overpower the creation, then—such, that is, is His kenosis—that Levinas speaks of God revealing Himself almost entirely through the face of the Other, in the *obsession* one feels, the *persecution*, even, by and on behalf of that Other. "A Thou is inserted between the I and the absolute He," as he writes in "A Man-God?"[283] Even here, Levinas cautions, God's revelation is but a *trace*, in part because human thought cannot contain God, cannot apprehend Him—an idea to which we will return in our talk of God as nonthematizable—but also, to say again, because God has no wish to apprehend *man*. God's goal is not infantilize man, as totalitarian regimes inevitably do to their citizenry, but to *empower* man. God's goal, as Levinas puts it, is to create "a religion for adults."

God maintains a proximity with His creation, enough that the self experiences a desire and an obsession for God qua *Otherwise*. This occurs almost exclusively through the face of the Other,

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[283] In *Entres Nous*, 53-60 (55).

but such is God's desire not to infantilize the self that to no small extent He conceals Himself lest the self become distracted and therefore lose sight of the Other and its ethical obligation thereunto. "Proximity is not a consciousness of proximity. It is an obsession with what is not an overenlarged consciousness, but counterconsciousness, reversing consciousness."[284] Through the Other, God strips the self of its ego—which is to say, its thralldom to Being—and causes it to call itself into question. This is, needless to say, a far cry from the Deism or atheism (or radical apophaticism) often (mis)attributed to Levinas! This is a God who, as self-giving love, wishes to awaken such a love in the hearts and minds of His creatures, but a love directed no less—perhaps even more so, one is tempted to say—to the Other as to God.

Even the desire the self feels for God as a consequence of its encounter with the Other is noncoercive; rather than satisfying the self, and thereby lulling it into a mindless acquiescence, it hollows out the self and thereby creates a still deeper desire for the *Otherwise*. "The negativity of the *In-* of the Infinite—otherwise than being, divine comedy—hollows out a desire that could not be filled, one nourished from its own increase, exalted as Desire—one that withdraws from its satisfaction as it draws near to the Desirable," Levinas maintains in *Otherwise than Being*. "This is a desire for what is beyond satisfaction, and which does not identify as need does, a term or an end. A desire without end, from beyond Being: dis-*interested-ness*, transcendence—desire for the Good" (67). This is a love that never risks devolving into ecstasy but which necessitates, to quote Buber yet again, "a responsibility of an I for a You."[285] For Levinas, this responsibility is effectually unidirectional; which is to say, it is of no matter if the love the self feels for the

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[284] Ibid, 58-59.

[285] Buber, *I and Thou*, 66.

Other remains unreciprocated. It is an imbalanced love ("heavy, but heavy with meaning"[286]) with the burden falling squarely on the lover as opposed to the beloved. The essence of such love is to do everything that the Other might live; including, if need be, dying on the Other's behalf.

And, as we have seen in "Judaism and Kenosis," this is also apropos of the self's love for God, as when the self prays to relieve God, who inhabits the suffering of His creatures, in particular man's: "The suffering self prays to alleviate the 'great suffering' of God who suffers, to relieve the suffering of God, who suffers both for man's sin and for the suffering of his atonement."[287] Per the teachings of Judaism—and Jesus—Levinas effectually fuses the greatest commandments—love for God and love for the Other—together. There cannot be one without the other. Hence, this is a love that draws the self out of itself, out of the *conatus essendi*, in an act of kenosis. As such, it is endless—for in this world, at least, one can never truly free oneself from the *conatus*. It is an ongoing battle, unending, requiring an endless "coring out" of the self. "Love is only possible through the idea of the Infinite, through the Infinite placed in me, by the 'more' that ravages and wakes up the 'less,' turning away from teleology, and destroying the time and the happiness [*l'heure et le Bonheur*] of the end" (*Otherwise than Being*, 67). To the devotee of totality, with its emphasis on strategy, tactics, and logistics, this is sheer idiocy. Even a theist like Paul Ricœur takes umbrage with Levinas on this point, accusing him of rendering the self impotent and in a certain sense groundless.

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[286] Ibid, 158.

[287] In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (116).

So: What does Levinas' argument imply for the Incarnation? Does Jesus, qua "the Man-God," undermine God's separateness, and thereby threaten to leave mankind in an ethically infantile state? Does the idea of God becoming man somehow undo the distance between Creator and creation and thereby set the stage for God's apprehension of man? Does incarnation run the risk of ecstasy, which in turn threatens the self's duty to the Other? That is, does it risk the self "becoming so heavenly minded," as the saying goes, "that it ceases to be any earthly good"? Is Incarnation at odds with, or even inimical to, the idea of God as *Otherwise*? All of the preceding questions are pertinent here, and they are, to be sure, of serious concern for the Christian, or should be. The Christian would find him/herself hard pressed to disagree with these concerns, for Levinas' concerns have basis in reality, i.e., in real crises wrought by false or imbalanced Christologies.

As regards God's separation, let us begin with a passage from early on in *Otherwise than Being*:

> The infinite then cannot be tracked down like game by a hunter. The trace left by the infinite is not the residue of a presence; its very glow is ambiguous. Otherwise, its positivity would not preserve the infinity of the infinity any more than negativity would. The infinite wipes out its traces not in order to trick him who obeys, but because it transcends the present in which it commands me, and because I cannot deduce it from this command. The infinite who orders me is neither a cause acting straight on, nor a theme, already dominated, if only retrospectively, by freedom. This detour at a face and this detour from this detour in the enigma of a face we have called illeity. (12)

Does Jesus, qua "the Man-God," undermine God's separateness and in so doing threaten to undo the ambiguity so vital for Levinas? Does the Incarnation contradict Levinas' talk of "the infinite wip[ing] out its traces" in order that the self not lose sight of its true concern, namely, the Other?

It seems to me that Jesus in his capacity as "the Man-God" is even more separate from the creation than God (the Father, i.e.) in that he does the inconceivable, both ontologically and, far more crucial, morally—he assumes human flesh and has to drink and eat, urinate and defecate, work and sleep. It is the ultimate "incognito," one might say; more so, I daresay, than the one Levinas' God assumes in order to protect Himself from the West's inevitable reductionism: "One may wonder whether the true God can ever discard his incognito, whether the truth which is said should not immediately appear as not said, in order to escape the…historians, philologists, and sociologists who will deck it out in all the names of history, reducing its still small voice to the din of battlefields and marketplaces, or to the structured configurations of meaningless elements."[288] Jesus' incarnation, likewise, renders him incognito, albeit more so: He becomes a being caught between Heaven and earth—in short, a grotesquerie. One who, like Dostoevsky's "Stinking" Lizvetta and Zosima and Alyosha, is as apt to elicit scorn and contempt as love and esteem (indeed, in many cases the two sentiments are intermingled to varying degrees). The grotesqueness of the Incarnation destabilizes our settledness precisely insofar as it defies categorization or apprehension. In this same vein, in his Yale Divinity School lecture "Incarnate Word: Preaching and the Carnivalesque Grotesque," Charles L. Campbell translates John 1:14 as

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[288] In "A Man-God?" In *Entres Nous*, 53-60 (56).

"The Word became grotesque and dwelt among us".[289] God, the Divine Word, became flesh and dwelt among us. "[Conjoining] 'God' and 'flesh'…John [hereby] proclaims a paradoxical anomaly that transgresses our binary categories and subverts the norms of human and Divine," Campbell argues. In point of fact, he continues, this "irresolvable incongruity [of] 'God' and 'flesh'…takes us even more deeply into the grotesque.[290] Write Campbell and Johan Cilliers in *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*:

> The grotesque engages in degradation—i.e., bringing down to earth all that is high and lifted up, including Heaven itself. Mikhail Bakhtin calls this grotesque realism. "The essential principal of grotesque realism is degradation. That is, the lowering of all that is high and spiritual and ideal and abstract. It is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body." Degradation means coming down to earth….Grotesque realism is really the carnivalesque grotesque. The root of carnival is the same as incarnation. Like the body of Jesus, carnival enacts the grotesque; it degrades all that is high and lifted up and brings down the abstract, the idealized, the ethereal and gives them bodily form. (77)

And as we have seen in our discussion of Bakhtin, the grotesque is closely allied with the idea of carnival. Carnival is a reversal of the order of things, exalting the lower body in particular, "with all of its reproductive, digestive, and execratory functions," over the higher, the rational and the spiritual. It celebrates human fleshliness and materiality and its importance for ethics—a move of which Levinas would approve, and not only in spirit. "Carnival, then, is not just a raucous

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[289] Cambell's lecture at Yale Divinity School, October 19, 2018.

[290] Campbell, Ibid.

celebration," Campbell maintains in "Incarnate Word". "It is profoundly theological; it brings theology down to earth, it enfleshes our theological claims about an incarnate God. Words about God become grotesque and dwell among us." This is, needless to say, the antithesis of the *Dignum Deo* and the god of ontotheology. "From the start, Jesus turned all our assumptions of what a divine king is *supposed* to be like on their head," Gregory Boyd observes, going on to describe the Biblical account of Jesus' life and work in such terms as "[an] assault on our commonsense assumptions," "counterintuitive" and "upside-down"[291]—which aligns perfectly with Bakhtin's conception of carnival, the ultimate celebration of the Otherwise than Being.

Intellectually, the Incarnation is a stumbling stone, incomprehensible; the ultimate example of cognitive dissonance—and this to the Greek no less than the Jew. Perhaps *more so*, given Hellenism's obsession with perfection: timelessness, immutability, impassibility, simplicity. What would the Hellene make of a God who creates the cosmos—"The heavens declare the glory of God," as the psalmist rightly says (19:1); a sentiment given renewed force by our current knowledge of "deep time" and the unfathomable depth and breadth of the cosmos—who goes on to become a *human*, thereby *emptying himself* of his (alleged) ontological perfection?—A God, what is more, who is carried in a womb and birthed, with all the messiness and blood that that entails; and, still *more* appalling, exists for a time as a baby who needs his *diapers changed*? Worse by far, a God who is put to death alongside criminals, and in what ranks among the most degrading forms of execution even down to the present day? How could the Cross be seen as beatific or glorious? Is it not, as we have intimated, grotesque? How could it so overwhelm or

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[291] *Inspired Imperfection: How the Bible's Problems Enhance its Divine Authority*, 102-03.

awe as to coerce its viewers, literal or metaphorical, into belief? Would it not tend to have the *opposite* effect, particularly in light of Jesus' injunction to "'take up [your] cross and follow me'" (Matthew 16:24)?

Is this not, to use Levinas' term, an even more radical incognito?—Or, perhaps better, a more *subtle* incognito? Why else would the people who do attempt to emulate Christ be called fools? "But there are people who recognize (God's) beauty in (God's) ugliness. We call them *fools*," argue the authors of *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*. "Fools disturb us by pointing out the chaos and the suffering of life; but more than that, fools believe that out of this ugliness, beauty can be created. They gesture toward alternatives" (6). In this talk of the grotesque, carnival, and fools, one can begin to discern the strange resonance between Levinas' Otherwise than Being and the Jesus—specifically, the grotesqueness inherent to the life and work of Jesus. Both are fundamentally at widdershins with the world, with totality, with business and war, and both point to an alternative mode of being: the *for-the-Other*. Is it for nothing, it may be asked, that Levinas looks to Grossman's Ikonnikov and Dostoevsky's Myshkin, Zosima and Alyosha (et al) as models or bearers of his Otherwise than Being? Does it not at least suggest that holy folly is not so alien to Judaism as people (Christians in particular) suppose? *Tsimtsum* and the specifically Christian sense of kenosis are but differences in *degree*; both conceptions imply the same thing for the *character*, the *Who*, of God, a God whose glory lies precisely in the fact that He is the *Otherwise* than Being, the *for-the-Other*.

Furthermore, does not Jesus' very inassimilability to our ontological and naturalistic paradigms call to mind a God who goes "incognito," as Levinas has it? If not, then why are we still, almost two thousand years later, arguing about Jesus? Why should God empty Himself of

his power to this degree? Why risk the ambiguity and misunderstanding and rejection? Jürgen Moltmann hints at one particularly troubling aspect of Jesus' ambiguity when he writes in *The Crucified God* that "Christians and non-Christians have quite often produced an image of Jesus which suits their own desires," whether "the archetype of the divine authority and glory which men have longed for" or "the resistance fighter from Galilee," to name but two (83). If anything, the ease with which he is appropriated tends to inspire nagging doubts that we can know (let alone *apprehend*!) the true Jesus.

But it is Jesus as God *incarnate* that is the *ultimate* ambiguity, and not merely historically but philosophically and even morally. Who or *what* is Jesus? Is Jesus the God-Man or the Man-God or something else altogether? Angel or demon? Liar, lunatic, or Lord? Was Jesus capable of sin? If so, how can he fathom the human condition? And if so, how could he truly say "'I and the Father are one'" (John 10:30)? How can Jesus be God when God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4)? Did Jesus truly suffer, or did only the fleshliness of Jesus suffer while the Divinity remained untouched?—These questions are as alive today as they were in Jesus' day. Jesus' power to generate disagreement, controversy and even scandal is unparalleled. After very nearly two millennia, he is still a transgressive figure, and not only owing to the many failings of his Church. He troubles our boundaries and easy categories, he challenges our ideas of race and justice and goodness. If God can condescend to fully enter into the human condition, does this not annul the endless –isms and –asms by which we negate alterity and thereby evade responsibility for the Other? It is not, to be sure, an easy path; and one may well ask, *Why did it have to* be *this way?* Why the lack of certainty, the need for questioning faith, the need for trusting (i.e., *costly*) obedience? Why "'take up [your] cross and follow me'" (Matthew 16:24)?

Why no conquering messiah à la Ivan's Grand Inquisitor (or even a merely *cunning* messiah like Skinner's T. E. Frazier in *Walden Two*)?

It is for the same reason that Levinas' God maintains his separation-cum-proximity: for the sake of man. Jesus, no less than Levinas, wants "a religion for adults," an idea to which we will presently return. To be sure, it is not an easy or particularly obvious path, and the evil it makes possible owing to the extreme lengths to which God goes to vouchsafe human freedom seems hardly worth the cost—which opens the door to another, still deeper ambiguity. This is no piercing of transcendence by immanence, resolving our questions and paving the way to apprehension, whether human or Divine. Jesus' incarnation notwithstanding, the questions remain and if anything are even *more* fraught, which is precisely what makes Ivan's argument in *Brothers* so unsettling. *Brothers*, we have seen, is at heart a wrestling with the problem of evil; the tension is expressed most overtly in the ideas and teachings of Ivan and Zosima, respectively, with Ivan the antitheist, Zosima the "apologist." "There is no question as to Dostoevsky's intent: while he meant to let Ivan Karamazov play the role of devil's advocate well, he also meant the novel as a whole to be a refutation of Ivan's attack on God's world and on the gospel of Christ," notes Terras in *A Karamazov Companion*. "But many critics have suggested that Dostoevsky failed in this respect" (48). Later, Terras provides an explanation for this ambiguity: its *polyphony*—an idea tied, as we have seen, to that of kenosis: "Gibson has found a religious justification for Dostoevsky's polyphony: the Christian novelist's refusal to 'play God' in the world of his novel, choosing instead to assume the various selves of his characters, is analogous to Christ's *kenosis*" (85 n. 5). Dostoevsky, like Jesus in his incarnation, gives his readers *and* his

characters the space to be and to grow and to come. It is the very ambiguity of the Incarnation that inspires Dostoevsky's kenotic ethos as a writer.

Contra Levinas, the Incarnation is not the negation of transcendence and the loss of the Otherwise; it is, rather, the *ultimate* act of separation. God does not become incarnate in a manner such that men fall to their knees at his might or wisdom or cunning. Quite the reverse—he is more akin to "Stinking" Lizvetta or Alyosha Karamazov, each of whom is described as an *iurodivyi*, "a word whose primary meaning is that of 'a mentally deficient or deranged person'" but which also refers to the holy fools beloved in the Orthodox tradition, as Terras points out in *A Karamazov Companion* (134 n. 94). Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* and Fathers Tikhon in *Demons* and Zosima in *Brothers* are likewise *iurodivyi*, or holy fools. The very use of the term *iurodivni* reveals the unsettling ambiguity of their goodness—and, more to our point, that of Jesus' own, precisely insofar as he is the *ultimate* holy fool, pouring himself out and taking the form of a servant, obeying God's will even to the point of death by crucifixion.—And all without guarantee that his death will not, when all is said and done, be in vain. Bruce Fisk drives home the appalling nature of Jesus' kenosis when viewed against the backdrop of the Graeco-Roman culture, noting that while Paul's epistle to the Philippians employs "generic structures and constraints" of Greek novels well known to his audience, including the motif of greatness followed by humiliation and loss of status and eventually culminating in a return to glory, Jesus' difference from the heroes of these works is telling: "For Paul, it matters that Christ himself took the initiative and willingly stepped downward. At the centre [sic] of Paul's Jesus story we find *voluntary self*-abasement. Here, perhaps for the first time, Paul's story would bring our novel amateurs up short, for no hero in our secular corpus ever chooses to step downwards into

humiliation."[292] Here Levinas' critique of Buber comes to mind, specifically his wariness of Buber's focus on reciprocity, which seems to undermine the sort of love Levinas—like Jesus—requires: a stupid ("mentally deficient") love, without self-regard or calculation or even guarantee. "To be good is a deficit, a wasting away and a foolishness in being; to be good is excellence and elevation beyond being. Ethics is not a moment of being, it is otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond," Levinas avers in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (69). Levinas' talk of goodness as *deficit*, as *foolishness*—is this not the kind of love Jesus requires of his followers, whom he bids "take up [your] cross[es] and follow me" (Matthew 16:24)?

The ambiguity and scandal of the Incarnation is God leaving space for man to doubt—or, as Levinas would have it, ensuring "a religion for adults." The Gospels were not conceived as unassailable arguments or chocked full of infallible proofs. Their claims can be explained away, and with relative ease, as in the argument that the disciples stole their master's lifeless body or that Jesus was the consummate deceiver, employing tricks like drugs or hypnotism to delude people into thinking he had died. Jesus as God incarnate is the *ultimate* ambiguity, and not merely historically but philosophically and even morally. Again we do well to recall the ambiguities surrounding Jesus: Who or what is Jesus? Is Jesus the God-Man or the Man-God or something altogether different? Angel or demon? Liar, lunatic, or Lord?

In fine, the Incarnation is hardly a negation of transcendence or a loss of the Otherwise. Quite the reverse, as evidenced by the ease with which such terms as *ambiguous*, *transgressive*, and

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[292] "The Odyssey of Christ: A Novel Context for Philippians 2:6-11). In *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans, 45-73 (65).

grotesque may be applied to Jesus as "the Man-God," as Levinas puts it. For he is, precisely as Campbell argues, a grotesquerie—someone who transgresses proper boundaries, blurring or subverting these boundaries and somehow conjoining what cannot conceivably be conjoined. He spits and makes mud to apply the eyes of a blind man (John 9:6-7); he allows a ceremonially unclean woman to touch him and, what is more, allows his power to be taken from him, as if he were passive and helpless (Mark 5:25-34); he eats, drinks and mingles with prostitutes, tax collectors, the possessed, and all manner of disturbed and disturbing people. Instead of taking umbrage, he sees beyond class, status, or visage to the face in all its nakedness and destitution and has *compassion*, recalling Levinas' injunction in *Ethics and Infinity*: "The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that….Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself" (86). He is shunned, accordingly, by Jews and Greeks alike. Christians no less than Jews are uncomfortable with Jesus' ambiguity, and rightly so. Where Judaism straightforwardly rejects Jesus' claims, however, Christians are more cunning: In our theologies, we attempt to "iron out" the ambiguities and ameliorate the transgressive aspects; in the process, we produce a *theologia gloriae*—precisely as we saw in the preceding chapter. We focus on the *ontology* of Jesus and reduce him to his attributes; we appeal to "non-Euclidean" geometry when necessary and so render the scandalous into the mysterious, the imperative (kenosis, i.e.) into antinomy. We sunder *Sermo* from *Logos*, leaving only *Ratio*; or, to borrow Levinas' terminology, we reduce the Saying to the Said. We *willfully* fail to discern the scandal of the self-emptying of Jesus, the setting aside of power and self-regard in a radical *being-for-the-Other*. Jesus is the *Otherwise*—

"Not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*," to borrow again from Levinas[293]—and yet even many in his Church seek to negate the Otherwise, to conform it to Being, to the modes of totality: business and war. In countless ways we seek to negate Jesus' as Otherwise and to bring him into alignment with our own masturbatory fantasies of power and control. "When the western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Christianity was edited by his lawyers," as Whitehead puts it in *Process and Reality*. "The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar" (342).

But is Jesus' incarnation—qua the grotesque, the transgressive—*only* a Divine incognito? *No*. Explains Ruth Coates:

> …[Bakhtin] saw Christ as the means by which God ceases to be an abstract principle: 'even God had to be incarnated in order to show mercy, to suffer and forgive, to come down, as it were, from the abstract viewpoint of justice' ('Author and Hero', 113). Many aspects of Jesus' ministry reflect and carry forward the materialising [sic] and familiarizing principle inherent in the act of Incarnation itself.…The 'high, spiritual, abstract' philosophy of late Temple Judaism is transformed by Christ into a carnivalesque, experiential philosophy. (133)

I would qualify Coates' assessment insofar as Judaism already has within its own spiritual resources, as we have seen, the means of offsetting the "'high, spiritual, abstract'" tendencies of any religion: namely, the idea of *tsimtsum*, to say nothing of the Divine pathos that permeates the writings of the Tanakh, the Prophets in particular. Jesus' incarnation, then, represents the logical fulfillment of the God of Judaism, who as Levinas stresses is the *Otherwise* than Being, the *for-*

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[293] *Otherwise than Being*, 3.

the-Other par excellence. The fact that he assumes physical form and therefore has needs means that physical sacrifice is now possible for him as well. Only in this way can God fulfill the commandment to take the bread from one's own mouth in order to offer it to the Other. Only in this way can God not merely inhabit the sufferings of His creatures but offer Himself as substitution. Again, it must be stressed that this has little to nothing to do with specious assumptions or claims about God's ontology and *everything* to do with His *character*, that is, with the *Who* of God. For the God of Judaism is nothing if not consistent, even to the point of donning *tsitsis* and *tefillin* and thereby bringing Himself closer to His people. Is it so unthinkable, then, to deny the possibility that He might don *flesh* for the sake of His relationship with humanity?

God's separateness obtains not merely in His ontological separateness but in His *moral* separateness—and this applies most of all to the Crucifixion. "My ways are not your ways," indeed! God, rather than overwhelming man with an incontrovertible display of *dunamis*—say, by writing His very name, "I Will Be That I Will Be," in the stars—*limits* Himself for the sake of the created order, that it might have freedom to be and to grow and to come. Levinas says as much: "More important than God's omnipotence is the subordination of that power to man's ethical consent. And that, too, is one of the primordial meanings of kenosis."[294] But then God goes a step further, becomes incarnate, needing care as an infant, eating and drinking, defecating and urinating, and then *dying*, and in one of the most degrading ways imaginable. Yet all of this,

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[294] "Judaism and Kenosis." In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (112-13).

per the God Who creates kenotically, is for the sake of the Other. It is of a piece with Levinas' "religion for adults."

That Levinas himself would see at least some merit in my preceding arguments is borne out in "A Man-God?" As it turns out, it isn't merely the idea of kenosis that Levinas finds commendable; its connection to the Incarnation and the Atonement also find some degree of favor in his sight. Precisely insofar as he remains a dedicated Jew, the fact that he can draw so near to ideas so irrevocably *Christological* is surely not insignificant:

> But, in this transubstantiation of the Creator into the creature, the notion of Man-God affirms the idea of substitution. Hasn't this blow to the principle of identity expressed the secret of subjectivity to some extent? But it is necessary to see to precisely what extent. In a philosophy that, in our time, credits the mind with no other practice than theory, and which leads to the pure mirror of objective structures—the humanity of man reduced to consciousness [man as a res cogitans]—does not the idea of substitution allow for a rehabilitation of the subject, which naturalist humanism, quickly losing in naturalism the privileges of the human, does not always achieve?[295]

In a similar vein, Coates writes of Bakhtin: "In the Incarnation, heaven is brought down to earth; ahistorical, metaphysical truths enter into the realm of chronotopic (spatial and temporal) limitation and possibility and are thereby divested of their power to distance and to terrify the believer" (*Christianity in Bakhtin*, 132-33). Levinas, like Bakhtin, eschews the theoretical for

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295 In *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 53-60 (58).

the ethical: the abstract for the fleshly, Being for carnival (whereby, i.e., the *Otherwise* is revealed), cunning for folly. The resonance that Levinas shares with Christians like Dostoevsky and Bakhtin, arising as does the latter's from the idea of Jesus' kenosis, incarnation and substitutionary death, necessitates a deeper dialogue between Jews and Christians.

Another obvious difficulty Levinas would have with the Incarnation has to do with his argument for a nonthematizable God. "Normally, ideas come to us from a knowledge, and knowledge from a certain objectification, where the parts of the real are inscribed. Starting from a thematization. I always thought that the invisible God of monotheism is not only a God who is not visible to the eyes. It is a nonthematizable God," as he explains to Salomon Malka in *Is It Righteous to Be?* He goes on to acknowledge that some (including Merold Westphal, albeit years later, and therefore unbeknownst to Levinas at the time of this interview) might for this reason deem him an atheist, or at any rate an advocate of a "religion without God." "But all of this is too quickly said," he concludes (101). This is all-too true. As we have stressed from the outset, Levinas' reticence to speak of God as an *overt* actor in the world's affairs is of a piece with his Judaism—specifically, its prophetic iconoclasm. Hence his later remark to Malka that "The God of Nietzsche who is dead is the one who intervenes in the world like all other forces in the world, and which has to be oriented like these forces" (101). Levinas doubtless has in mind Aristotle's "unmoved mover," which signifies not an *Otherwise* than Being but merely the *summit* of Being, Being *par excellence*: "And it is not by accident that the history of Western philosophy has been a destruction of transcendence," he argues in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. "Rational theology, fundamentally ontological, endeavors to accommodate transcendence within the domain of being by expressing it with adverbs of height applied to the verb 'to be'" (56).

(Perhaps Levinas also has in mind the idea of Jesus as *Logos*, which, to be sure, can be translated as *Ratio*, the principle by and on which the creation is created and modeled.)

Moreover, and no less crucial to understanding Levinas, as a survivor the Shoah he is struggling with the virtual complete absence of God in the Shoah, which leads him to engage not in a theodicy per se but in a wrestling with God, a wrestling not at all unlike that of Elie Wiesel in texts like *The Trial of God* (who also, it is worth noting, sat at the feet of Chouchani). Levinas' answer is to "shame" God, as it were, effectually saying, "You may have abandoned the Covenant, but we will not." His credo, "ethics as first philosophy," can be understood as a doubling-up on his commitment to the Covenant. For the God of *tsimtsum* and kenosis—the God of Judaism—is indeed a God radically oriented towards the other. All of Tanakh can be summed up in the two great, intertwined commandments: "Love God with all your might" and "Be your love for your neighbor." Levinas' emphasis on ethics and the Other cannot but be understood in this light; far from breaking with God, he is in a certain sense *protesting* to God—and such protest is not merely apropos of the Prophets; it signifies a profound *intimacy* with God. For only the beloved can say *Why?!* or *Ayeka?!*—"How *could* you?!" Levinas shares Ivan's horror at the useless suffering in the world, yet his arguments overall align him more closely with Zosima, whose "answer" to Ivan is to point to God's kenosis, which in turn makes possible and necessitates the self's own. Kenosis, i.e., as *command*.

For now, though, let us return to the specific issue of a nonthematizable God and its implications for the Incarnation.

Need we say it? A nonthematizable God seems to utterly preclude the Incarnation, to render it a destruction of transcendence. It is to render visible the invisible, to apprehend the

inapprehensible. Partly we have answered this objection in our preceding section, though we focused more on the *Otherwise* of God, which is tied to but not identical with the nonthematizableness of God. We argued that the Incarnation is itself an *Otherwise* than Being inasmuch as it goes against ontological and naturalistic conceptions of the world and entails a self-emptying—the *antithesis* of the modes of Being, business and war. One need only consider the necessarily utilitarian implications of Darwinism ("survival of the fittest" and "selfish genes," e.g.) and Machiavellianism ("it is better to be feared than loved")—both modes of Being *par excellence*—to recognize that Levinas is advocating a holy folly along the selfsame lines as Jesus' kenosis.

But how, precisely, does a nonthematizable God preclude an idea like the Incarnation? We need look no further than the following passage from *Of God Who Comes to Mind*:

> In this ethical turnabout, in this reference [*renvoi*] from the Desirable to the Undesirable, in this strange mission commanding the approach to the other, God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being. He is neither object nor interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility—the non-erotic *par excellence*—for the other. And it is from the analysis just carried out that God is not simply the 'first other,' or the 'other *par excellence*,' or the 'absolutely other,' but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of his possible confusion with the agitation of the *there is* [*il y a*]. (69)

A nonthematizable God—a God incapable of being apprehended, "transcendent to the point of absence"—makes possible the self's responsibility. An incarnate God, by contrast, would risk infantilizing the self. Hence Levinas' remark that a God who "hides His face" and thereby allows an evil such as the Shoah is a God who seeks to vouchsafe the maturity of His people: "The condition of the victims in a disordered world—that is to say, in a world where good does not triumph—is that of suffering. The condition reveals a God Who renounces all aids to manifestation, and appeals instead to the full maturity of the responsible man."[296] By virtue of his role as the Savior of mankind, Jesus tends to be understood in terms of all-encompassing grace, as if nothing were required of man but his passive acceptance of forgiveness—a religion, as Bonhoeffer would agree, for children. And when Levinas speaks of God as neither "object nor interlocutor," I assume he is thinking not of the God of the Tanakh but Jesus, inasmuch as the former speaks invisibly and, what is more, imperatively. And perhaps the invisibility also implies a certain opacity about His speech, inasmuch as God's utterances tend to raise as many (or more) questions as they answer. Jesus, by contrast, becomes a palpable presence in time and is therefore apprehensible and "non-anarchic," thereby undermining the radical priority of God's "speech" in the face of the Other. Jesus' speech he seems to adjudge to be less troubling than God's speech, as God's troubles and agitates "to the point of his possible confusion with the agitation of the *there is* [*il y a*]"—a partial reference to, or perhaps of a piece with, the aforementioned opacity of God's speech, which necessitates endless engagement with Torah, which entails the disciplines of Talmud and Midrash. Jesus apparently lacks this troubling

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[296] "Loving the Torah more than God." In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 142-145 (143).

aspect, and perhaps Levinas is thinking of Jesus as *Logos*, which many—Christians included—tend to think of more in terms of *Ratio* than *Sermo*. *Logos*, i.e., as *–logy*, "science" or "mastery."

This talk of Jesus as the *Logos*—reduced, as we have suggested, to mere *Ratio*—opens the door to another profound motif in Levinasian thought: namely, the saying and the said. We have intimated that Christian theology divorces *Logos* from *Sermo*, reducing Jesus qua saying to the said, and we will now probe this allegation more deeply. A few words, however, are necessary in order to clarify what Levinas means by these terms.

On one level, the saying-said binary is analogous to Buber's I-Thou and I-It modes. Saying is apropos of infinity, which is about the *ethical*; the said is tied to totality, to *knowledge*, to the strategic and the tactical. Saying is love, "responsibility of an I for a You" (66) and "makes life heavier but heavy with meaning" (158), whereas the said entails "a sanction for [the self's] ability to use" (109). Saying is like the language of so-called "primitive" peoples, that is to say, focused on "the genuine original unity, the lived relationship" (70), while the said has to do with "the ability to experience and use, [which] generally involves a decrease in man's power to relate" (92). Accordingly, saying has nothing to do with a "system of coordinates" useful for "finding one's way in the world and eventually for the project of conquering the world" (81, 91) but rather aids in sloughing the false self, the ego by helping man to "[enter] the event of the relation" (84). The said, contrariwise, has to do with "the unlimited sway of causality" (100), which prevents the self from attaining genuine selfhood by causing it to become enthralled with "the biologistic and the historiosophical" and thereby "yoked to an inescapable process [it] cannot resist" (105). Finally, whereas saying is more apropos of "sacrifice and prayer," which "say You and listen" (and here one cannot but think of the Biblical *Hineni*, "Here I am *for you*"),

the said is like magic, which seeks "to be effective without entering into any relationship" (131)—recalling Levinas' description of the temptation of knowledge as a movement of the ego whereby "in the midst of engagement, [it] assures itself a continual disengagement."[297]

Levinas, of course, takes it to an altogether greater depth than Buber, the afore-cited similarities notwithstanding. For him, saying is irrevocably bound up with ideas like kenosis, incarnation, and even substitution. Saying is, in short, about the *Otherwise* than Being. It is about my anarchic responsibility to and for the Other; my "involuntary election," as Levinas has it.[298] Saying entails a "passivity more passive than passivity"[299] before the Other, "an exposure without holding back, exposure of exposedness, expression, saying. This exposure is the frankness, sincerity, veracity of saying. Not saying dissimulating itself and protecting itself in the said, just giving out words in the face of the other, but saying uncovering itself, that is, denuding itself of its skin, at the edge of the nerves, offering itself even in suffering—and thus wholly sign, signifying itself (*Otherwise than Being*, 14, 15).

Here an aside of sorts is in order, involving as it does Levinas' beloved Dostoevsky, the kenotic writer par excellence. For how, in light of the preceding, can one not recall Alyosha Karamazov and his crisis of faith after Zosima's death? Alyosha had assumed that Zosima's corpse would emit no putrefying stink as a testament to his sanctity before God. And, as Terras relates, this was hardly unreasonable on Alyosha's part: "The incorruptibility of a holy man's remains was traditionally considered to be a sign of his true sainthood and a step toward eventual

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[297] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (33-34).

[298] *Otherwise than Being*, 15.

[299] Ibid, 14.

canonization" (*A Karamazov Companion*, 263 n. 9). And yet his corpse does emit an undeniable stench. One can well imagine that this is a final, posthumous act of kenosis on Zosima's part; for however scandalous it might be to certain monks and others—"'Why is he considered so holy?' And the gradual repetition of that one question finally generated a whole abyss of the most insatiable spite"[300]—it spurs Alyosha to a crisis of faith ("cores him out," i.e.), from which he emerges a more kenotic Christian than before. "But it was justice, justice he thirsted for, not simply miracles! And now he who, according to his hope, was to have been exalted higher than anyone in the whole world, this very man, instead of receiving the glory that was due him, was suddenly thrown down and disgraced! Why?...Who could have judged so?...Where was Providence and its finger?"[301] During a conversation with the progressive (and therefore scientistic/reductionistic) Rakitin, who ranks among Zosima's detractors, Alyosha indulges in a rare display of anger: "'''I do not rebel against my God, I simply do not accept his world,''' Alyosha suddenly smiled crookedly," echoing his brother Ivan's rebellion in the eponymously named fourth chapter of Book Five. When he returns to the monastery, he tries to pray, but in vain. He listens, halfheartedly, to Father Paissey's sermon, which centers on Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Alyosha has a sudden epiphany, realizing that Jesus' kenosis and incarnation represents not merely his willingness to die on man's behalf but his openness to "the simple, artless merrymaking of some uncouth, uncouth but gentle beings, who lovingly invited him to their poor wedding feast…Indeed, was it to increase the wine at poor weddings that he came down to earth?" With this, Alyosha experiences a vision of his beloved

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[300] *Brothers Karamazov*, 331.

[301] Ibid, 339-40.

Zosima, who bids him to look upon his fellow-traveler, "our Sun" (Jesus, i.e.). Alyosha replies that he is afraid, but Zosima bids him to let go of his fear, reassuring him that "Awful is [Jesus'] greatness before us, terrible is his loftiness, yet he is boundlessly merciful, he became like us out of love, and he is rejoicing with us, transforming water into wine, that the joy of the guests may not end." Here again we have the theme of holy folly, of Jesus' condescension that he might enter into relation with man. The wine and the "uncouth but gentle beings," needless to say, recall Bakhtin's talk of carnival, of the reversal of heaven and earth; that is, the undoing of totality and the transgressing of boundaries—the seeing past all physiognomies, races, classes, and castes to the trace in the face of the Other. This experience of the Otherwise comes to its climax when Alysoha, almost without realizing it, casts himself suddenly to the earth and, weeping, begins to kiss it (another carnivalesque move):

> …and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto the ages. "Water the earth with the tears of your joy, and love those tears…" rang in his soul. What was he weeping for?...He wanted to forgive everyone and for everything, oh, not for himself! but for all and for everything, "as others are asking for me," rang again in his soul. But with each moment he felt clearly and almost tangible something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend into his soul. Some sort of idea, as it were, was coming to reign in his mind—now for the whole of his life and unto ages of ages. He fell to the earth weak and rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life….Three days later he left the monastery, which was also in accordance with the words of his late elder, who had bidden him to "sojourn in the world." (362-63)

One is here reminded of Levinas' talk of desire—that is, of how the Infinite awakens an unfulfillable desire in the self for the Infinite and, in so doing (and more immediately), the flesh-and-blood Other before the self. "Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (34). Despite the description of Alyosha's experience in terms of "ecstasy," it should be noted that prior to this time he was reluctant to leave the monastery behind and go into the world. One might say that despite his status as a holy fool, before now Alyosha's was, nevertheless, a religion for children, requiring no *serious* sacrifice on his part. Now, however, he has surrendered both his comfort and his almost idolatrous adulation of Zosima. He has come to love the world more than the ideal of the monastery and the comforting presence of Zosima.

Two final points are necessary: First, we must repeat that the putrefying stink of Zosima's corpse seems a final, posthumous kenosis on his part, specifically, though not only, for Alyosha's sake; the crisis of faith Alyosha endures is made possible only by Zosima's postmortem humility. What makes it truly kenotic is that in a sense it is the ultimate act for Zosima, as unostentatious as it is oblique. Taking no thought of the risk of misunderstanding and scandal, he thinks only of the benefit to Alyosha. True, this is not expressly stated by Dostoevsky, but it seems very much in keeping with his faith and his understanding of saints, signs, and sanctification as an Orthodox Christian. Second, and more crucial, Alyosha's trial recalls Jesus' own when the latter is tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Writes Terras in *A Karamazov Companion*: "The full impact of the 'odor of corruption' now becomes clear. Aliosha [sic] is caught on the web of the second temptation of Christ (Matt. 4:5-7) as he allows

his faith to depend on a miracle" (265-66, n. 43). I would go a step or two beyond Terras and point out that Satan is tempting Jesus not so much to create bread from stones for *himself* but for his followers and for humanity in general. To abandon the way of kenosis, that is, for the "good" of his humanity, embracing instead the path of *dunamis*, using his power, however beneficently, to rob mankind of its autonomy by coercing a relationship, becoming what amounts to a "bread Messiah," as the Disciple's Study Bible has it (1173, n. 4:1-11). Jesus' reply—"'It is written: ''Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'''" (Matthew 4:4)—calls to mind, ironically enough, Levinas' assertion that "the link between God and man is not an emotional communion that takes place within the love of a God incarnate, but a spiritual or intellectual [*esprits*] relationship which takes place through an education in Torah."[302]

Alyosha, like Jesus, has embraced the vulnerability and nakedness apropos of the saying. Eschewing the cunning and power Levinas associates with totality, they opt for the sacrifice and vulnerability of saying—which is to say, of the *Otherwise*. To live on the bread of Torah is a supreme risk, as Levinas points out in "The Temptation of Temptation" when he writes that "The Torah itself is exposed to danger because being in itself is nothing but violence, and nothing can be more exposed to violence than the Torah, which says no to it…Those who accept this Law also go from one danger to the next."[303] The supremely radical nature of the *Otherwise*—

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[302] "Loving the Torah more than God." In *Difficult Freedom Essays on Judaism*, 142-145 (144).

[303] In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

including the *risk* that it entails, eschewing control or guarantees or a "back door"—must not be forgotten or underestimated.

Thematization and the said, we have stressed, lie at the root of murder. The inevitable reductionism inherent to thematization leads to apprehension and assimilation, which makes possible, if only in theory, the murder of the Other, whether literally or metaphorically (i.e., by including the Other in the Same). In the realm of Being, Levinas explains, the questions "who?" and "what?" are effectually synonymous: "And the logical supremacy of the 'what?' in the said abolishes this difference [with the 'who?']. The logos as said, a revelation of being in its amphibology of being and entities, lets the 'who?' get lost in the 'what?' Sans *Otherwise*, the "who?", as "the being discovered in truth [and]…truncated in its inwardness; …[is] in truth partly dissimulated, apparent and non-true." (*Otherwise than Being*, 27, 28). And yet, as with Buber's I-It mode, there is a certain ambiguity about thematization and the said. Neither can be described as evil per se, inasmuch as both are an integral part of our Existence as existents. Even in the revelation of the *Otherwise* in the face of the Other, Being is not negated. There is no adversarial or Manichaean relationship between *Otherwise* and Being; insofar as humans are incarnate creatures possessed of interiority, at home with themselves, the *Otherwise* doesn't work *against* Being but *with* Being. In a way, the *Otherwise* makes man's work as incarnate beings even more vital; were that not the case, once a human came into contact with the *Otherwise* he or she would, like Enoch, simply "walk with God" into Heaven (Genesis 5:24). Enoch, however, is a rarity, the exception to the rule. For the remainder of humans, contact with the *Otherwise* is only a beginning, an election that, once recognized and accepted, means an even deeper commitment to the realm of Being. (A "religion for adults," as we will soon see.) Not, to

be sure, to be in thrall to it, to say "Yes" to it and to accept the violence inherent to it, but rather to *transform* it, albeit through *kenosis* rather than *dunamis*.

On this point, I think, Levinas would find himself in agreement (or at the very least sympathizing) with Simon Weil—or, more accurately, with Anne Dillard's gloss on Simon Weil:

> I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not *in* its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them, under the wind-rent clouds, upstream and down. Simone Weil says simply, "Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love." (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 101)

It is precisely because Being in a certain sense resists the Otherwise that ethics is meaningful. It is more like than unlike Buber's talk of the I-It mode. "Every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again," explains Buber in *I and Thou* (69). As he goes on to assert, "And in all the seriousness of truth, listen: without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" (85). Methodologically and even to a large extent conceptually, science, medicine and business are bound inextricably to the I-It mode. Detachment, calculation, and pragmatism are indispensable qua methodology. The same can be said of thematization and the said. A good example of this is the practice of law and justice, which entails abstractions like "Crimes Against Humanity" and

reduces the individual victim into a statistic, a datum, a precedent (etc.) in its attempts to understand criminality and violence in the hopes of bringing an end to it. Even with "ethics as first philosophy," there is no way to entirely escape thematization. Try as one might to evade thematization, it creeps back in—and I speak from experience. That is, as a (so-called) scholar of the Shoah: Reading Primo Levi or Sara Nomberg-Przytyk or Yehiel De-Nur (Ka-Tzetnik, i.e.), I cannot help but think of their testimonies in an abstract sense, reducing their experiences to data—reducing *them* to data, try as I might to avoid doing so. I do the unthinkable and "draw a lesson" from their experiences, thereby turning what Levinas rightly calls "useless suffering" into *useful* suffering (as this work all-too clearly attests). I cannot escape the perpetual disengagement in the very midst of my engagement with Levi and Nomberg-Przytyk and De-Nur. I derive *intellectual satisfaction* from their texts, from the acuity of their insights and the careful construction of their narratives; on some level I derive a macabre "pleasure," if that is quite the right word, in the darkness they describe, compelled, almost, to peer into the abyss in the knowledge that it cannot look back into me and so draw me to my own doom. Yet for all that, could I function as a scholar without thematization and the said? No. Even a De-Nur struggles with this inevitability of thematization! "I felt the split, the ordeal, the alienation of it, and, worst of all—may God forgive me—I felt like the Writer of Literature" (*Shivitti: A Vision*, 73). That is why it entails an endless effort to remain *wary* of thematization and its perils, and to be always on guard against being pulled deeper into the *It*-world.

As David Patterson notes, "the saying becomes the Said as soon as it is uttered; thematization is unavoidable—hence the importance of the face." Moreover, as he goes on to explain, "Thematization is inevitable, even regarding the Torah; hence the fact that the Torah raises more

questions than it answers and requires *endless engagement*."[304] Hence the disciplines of Talmud and Midrash and, contrariwise, the perils of theology—qua theo-*logy*, "God-*science*" or "the *science* of God"—which seeks to put an end to the necessarily endless engagement, exactly as Brueggemann relates: "Jewishness is characterized by dialogical-dialectical modes of discourse, whereas Western Christianity has long practiced a flight to the transcendent [the universalizing, i.e.]."[305]

In a way, this returns to what I struggled to convey in the first section of this chapter about man's *existence* rather than his "essence" being sinful. The ambiguity surrounding thematization and the said is inescapable; and even if thematization need not end in murder, the fact that it is the *sine qua non* of murder is problematic. Safely ensconced in the cradle of its *conatus essendi*, the self is naturally solipsistic, naturally inclined to assure itself "a continual disengagement" in the very midst of its engagement.[306] It is naturally inclined, conditioned as it is by Being, in which it exists, to eschew alterity, to include it in the backdrop of its All. And there is indeed something *murderous* about this. Nor can we forget that the self has its place in the sun because others do without—such is a central tenet of Darwinism, and as a description of reality, of Being, it is most apt. The cosmos is governed by the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology—and is therefore relentlessly amoral. Human life, qua Existence, is reducible to chemistry and biology (methodologically, at the very least). And yet man is made in the image of the *Otherwise*, and is therefore capable—albeit not on his own, so powerful, so enthralling is the realm and mode of

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[304] Class notes, HUHI 6395: Topics in the History of Ideas (fall 2016).

[305] *Theology of the Old Testament*, 83.

[306] Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (33-34).

Being—of transcending Existence. Yet God does not coerce this realm into obedience, conforming it to His will by brute force or *dunamis*. That is the very *modus operandi* of Being, yet God chooses to operate according to higher rules! It does us well to recall the words of Jürgen Moltmann in "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World":

> From the creation, by way of reconciliation, right down to the redemption, God's self-humiliation and self-emptying deepen and unfold. Why? Because the creation proceeds from God's love, and this love respects the particular existence of all things, and the freedom of the human beings who have been created. A love that gives the beloved space, allows them time, and expects and demands of them freedom is the power of lovers who can withdraw in order to allow the beloved to grow and to come. Consequently, it is not just self-giving that belongs to creative love; it is self-limitation too; not only affection, but respect for the unique nature of the others as well.[307]

I believe that this is what Zosima is trying to convey to Alyosha when he bids his disciple to water the earth with his tears. It is an affirmation of Being, of Existence, yet not in some Romantic or ecstatic sense, inasmuch as it is of a piece with Alyosha's desire "to forgive everyone and for everything, oh, not for himself! but for all and for everything" (*Brothers Karamazov*, 362). And I believe that Levinas, too, would read Zosima's exhortation in this manner. Only in the realm of Being is ethics possible. Only an incarnate being—a being bound in a literal and metaphorical sense to Being—can be ethical, can undertake a kenosis on behalf of

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[307] In John Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, 137-51 (147).

the Other. Only someone bound to Being can undertake a movement towards and into the *Otherwise* than Being.

So what, then, has any of the preceding to Levinas' objection to the Incarnation as entailing a necessary thematization of the nonthematizable God?

Simply this: Incarnation is a move unavoidable to a God who creates otherness in its broadest sense, that is, a cosmos wherein Being is the order of the day; a cosmos, that is, wherein individuals are naturally atheistic and possessed of interiority. In short, Incarnation is the necessary and logical extension of kenosis. The creation Levinas describes—a kenotic creation—affirms that there is on some level something *good* (though not unambiguously so) about Being. Only in the realm of Being can one being lay down its life for another; though this of course refers specifically to mankind—hence the *Very good* on the day of man's creation after the "merely" *Good* pronounced over the preceding days of creation (Genesis 1:31). Levinas, I believe, would affirm this. "Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being," he explains in *Totality and Infinity*. "Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a space for a separated being exists divinely" (34). But this sort of creation, as we have intimated but not explored in depth, implies a God who *risks*. This is a crucial part of the ambiguity of kenosis. God, qua Otherwise, eschews the disengagement in the very midst of engagement to which humans are inevitably prone. God does not stack the deck or coerce in any sense but risks all the ambiguity, uncertainty, and pain of the relationship. That is the essence of the *for-the-Other*. It

is, to quote Levinas, "a passivity more passive than passivity."[308] One thinks, too, of Jesus' silence before the Grand Inquisitor. But to appreciate that, we must consider the arguments of the Grand Inquisitor, which from the perspective of Being make perfect sense. We will begin with his thoughts on the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness:

> "Why did you reject that last gift? Had you accepted that third counsel of the mighty spirit, you would have furnished all that man seek on earth, that is: someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience, and a means for uniting everyone at last into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill—for the need for universal union is the third and last torment of men. Mankind in its entirety has always yearned to arrange things so that they must be universal….With us everyone will be happy, and they will no longer rebel or destroy each other, as in your freedom, everywhere. Oh, we shall convince them that they will only become free when they resign their freedom to us, and submit to us….And everyone will be happy, all the millions of creatures, except for the hundred thousand of those who govern them. For only we, we who keep the mystery, only we shall be unhappy. There will be thousands of millions of happy babes, and a hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil." (257-59)

Even after the Inquisitor threatens to burn Jesus the latter's response is no less shocking to Him:

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[308] *Otherwise than Being*, 14.

> "The [Inquisitor] would have liked [Jesus] to say something, even something bitter, terrible. But suddenly he approaches the [Inquisitor] in silence and gently kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is the whole answer. The old man shudders. Something stirs at the corners of his mouth; he walks to the door, opens it, and says to him: 'Go and do not come again…do not come at all…never, never!' And he lets him out into the 'dark squares of the city.' The prisoner goes away." (262)

Can it be more obvious? The Inquisitor despises Being, and therefore the *Otherwise* than Being! Or perhaps it is the reverse, or very likely *both*. Refusing kenosis—refusing, that is, Jesus' incarnation and what it implies for him (calling as it does for a kenosis on his part, i.e.)—he essentially says that Being is not worthy of a kenosis. Instead he affirms, despite his contempt for it, the ways of Being. Hence the "misery" of his hundred-thousand cohorts. He employs the "ethics" of Being—which are more akin to methodologies, i.e., business and war, the modes of Being par excellence—even as he cries against it. The essence of his argument with Jesus is that the latter should have adopted the modes of Being, business and war, and ruled the world accordingly. Despising kenosis or the *Otherwise*, he also despises Being—and vice-versa.

By undertaking kenosis and becoming incarnate, God the Son affirms the value of the realm of Being. Recall Dillard's citation of Simone Weil in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: "'Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love'" (101). God the Son, in his capacity as the Otherwise, does not maintain his distance or seek to maintain a disengagement masquerading as an engagement. He does not despise the world for its ambiguous aspects

arising to its grounding in Being. Instead, he sets aside his power and self-regard and enters into Being as a necessary "corollary" of his love for it. In so doing, he prepares the way for his followers to undertake their own kenosis for the sake of the world and its inhabitants. He raises up not warriors or anchorites or flagellants but people willing to follow his example and take up their cross for the betterment of the world and mankind. Incarnation is the next logical step for the God who inhabits the suffering of His creatures, an idea Levinas endorses, as we saw in "Judaism and Kenosis"; he *becomes* a creature—thereby risking thematization.

Is kenosis *merely* humility and diminishment, after all? Does it operate in a void? Is it a gesture undertaken simply for its own benefit? Does it preclude risk? *No.* Kenosis is the ultimate *for-the-Other*. Accordingly, it entails the risk of thematization, albeit not, to be clear, the thematization of *man*. No, the risk is to God. But what does this mean, exactly?

As we have already seen and will continue to argue, Jesus as God incarnate is as much a stumbling stone to the Greek as to the Jew—a transgressor of boundaries, a *grotesquerie*—and so disturbs the "the absurd 'that's the way it is' claimed by the Power of the powerful"[309] by pointing to the *Otherwise*. Hence Bakhtin's celebration of the carnival and its deeply grotesque associations in *Rabelais and His World*, which is in fact a utopian challenge to the totalizing impulses of Communism, as Michael Holquist explains in his foreword to the text:

> [Bakhtin] was, in effect, proposing his vision of the novel genre as a celebration of linguistic and stylistic variety as a counter to tight canonical formulas…The "grotesque realism" of which so much is made in this book is a

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[309] Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

> point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism…Bakhtin's carnival, surely the most provocative concept in this book, is not only not an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself…The sanction for carnival derives ultimately…from a force that preexists kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing when they endorse carnival. (xvii-xviii)

A God who embraces the grotesqueness of incarnation is, however paradoxically, a nonthematizable God! "To be good is a deficit, a wasting away and a foolishness in being," Levinas maintains in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (69), which seems to resonate with Charles Campbell's "the Word became grotesque and dwelt among us." The Incarnation defies apprehension, eliciting confusion and revulsion as much as love and gratitude.—Indeed, given what it implies for those wishing to flee the earth or to overpower it (however "benignly"), the revulsion factor cannot be underestimated. Beyond that, it is the *character* of God, the *Who* of God, that is ultimately unthematizable—and it is also the reason the majority of believers tend to seek out other, easier gods to follow. If God becomes incarnate out of love for the world (of Being), affirming its value by enduring its contradictions, its "'resistance to love,'" as Weil puts it,[310] can I not but love the world and "water the earth" with my tears? If God so loves humans, who are bound up with Being even as they represent a *breach* in being (hence the resurrection of humanity in the Messianic age), can I not but so love my fellow humans that I give my bread and my cloak and even my *life* for them, irrespective of their biological or social remoteness from me? How does Incarnation subvert my love for the world or the individual human beings who

[310] Anne Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 300.

inhabit it? Is not Jesus' incarnation of a piece with Levinas' ethic, which, as we have argued before, is very much in keeping with kenotic Christianity and its tradition of holy folly? Is he not the *ultimate* holy fool, as contemptibly piteous as Myshkin, as offensive to our sensibilities as "Stinking" Lizvetta?

The very folly inherent to the Incarnation, to say again, defies apprehension and so constitutes the nonthematizability of God, or at least a crucial aspect thereof. To be sure, owing to the ambiguity and incomprehensibility of his incarnation, countless people try to appropriate Jesus. "An analysis of the changing ideas of Christ and portraits of Jesus in history shows that they correspond so much to the needs of their age, place of origin and intended purpose that one cannot avoid the suspicion that they are illusory and artificial," notes Moltmann in *The Crucified God* (83). Communism, for instance, attempted to render Jesus into the ultimate Revolutionary; the Nazis, the ultimate Aryan, at war with the "satanic" Jew. And these are but two examples of many. Even orthodox Christians struggle with this tendency, resulting in Christologies in countless accents and emphases and which often (unintentionally?) negate the radical, transgressive nature of his incarnation. The fact that Jesus allows people to try to do so points to the *true* nonthematizability of God. And yes, it entails a very real *risk.* As with God the Father—the God of the Tanakh, i.e.—Jesus risks his name being abused and misused. He risks becoming an "establishment" Jesus, the justification of the status quo. He risks being reduced to his attributes, his ontology. He risks being trivialized and "mastered," that is, theologized. He risks rejection, contempt, and heartbreak. Finally, in a manner perhaps unique to himself, he risks ambiguity and grotesqueness by transgressing barriers. The ultimate "Mercurian," one might (almost) say.

Perhaps most of all, he risks alienating even those who love him. For the honest Christian will admit that on some level he struggles with the apparent nihilism of the self inherent to kenosis. Jesus became the substitute for mankind; if I receive this gift, I, too, am "compelled" (*see following paragrap*h) to substitute myself for individual men. *And I do not like this*. I believe that Paul Ricœur's criticism of Levinas would be leveled against Jesus as well: "'Your ''I'' has no esteem for itself.'"[311]—That is, that Ricœur would echo, or at any rate sympathize with, the Grand Inquisitor, deeming kenosis and incarnation too demanding, too onerous, and too risky; too lacking in the guarantees apropos of Being.

Nor is Ricœur alone. As I once overheard a Calvinist acquaintance observe, "Who would follow God if He couldn't guarantee the victory of His people?"—An echo, perhaps, of my pastor friend's assurance that I was on the "winning side" and needn't worry about all the evil in the world. Such Christians lose sight of Good Friday, with all its darkness and ambiguity, by focusing instead on Easter Sunday. "There is a sense that Sunday resolves Friday, that the core testimony [of God's faithful sovereignty, i.e.] resolves the countertestimony [the "negativity of Yahweh," i.e.]—except that liturgically, *both claims linger*," Brueggemann argues in *Theology of the Old Testament*. Both crucifixion and resurrection constitute what Moltmann calls a "'dialectic of reconciliation'" and are therefore equally urgent. If nothing else, as Brueggemann concludes, "the lived reality of the world, with its barbarism and alienation, indicates unambiguously that Easter has not singularly settled all" (401). Redemption, like creation is an ongoing process.

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[311] As quoted by Levinas in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 192.

To return to our main point, however: What makes Jesus' incarnation and substitution truly inapprehensible is that the gift is offered without a demand for payment or reciprocity: "I do *this* for you, you do *that* for me." There is none of that. And it is precisely that fact, the lack of the satisfaction on my part of engaging in a reciprocity with God, that makes it so appalling. It is for that reason that the "persecution" of which Levinas speaks, the calling into question of my being for the sake of the Other, is more compelling. Jesus' sacrifice is not borne of calculation or a desire for reciprocity but represents the absolute *for-the-Other*—and is therefore all the more "piercing," to use a word so dear, as we have already seen, to Dostoevsky. The incarnation embodies the goodness to which Levinas points in *Otherwise than Being* when he writes that "To reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history, is to nullify goodness. The ever possible sliding between subjectivity and being, of which subjectivity would be but a mode, the equivalence of two languages, stops here. Goodness gives to subjectivity its irreducible signification" (18). This is precisely the goodness that Jesus' incarnation awakens in the self. Jesus' kenotic love is not a mode or an attribute or a calculation but makes possible the self's ability to say "I": insofar as I receive Jesus' *for-the-Other*, I begin to free myself of the solipsism of Being and to realize the *Otherwise*—the *for-the-Other*—in my own life. Jesus' kenosis and incarnation awakens selfhood by "electing" the self without the use of force or enticement. Jesus' election of the self is experienced in love, which "demands" *without* demanding. Therein obtains its inapprehensibility: its power-*less* power to elect the self. Hence, per Larry and Carol Lacy, the unofficial subtitle—or, better, the underlying *obsessio*[312] of *The Brothers Karamazov*:

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[312] The term is taken from W, Paul Jones' *Theological Worlds* and denotes several various "fundamental rhythms capable of being stated as themes. These are characterized by what we will develop as differing *obsessios* (dilemmas), attuned to

"Is love possible?" Or, if you prefer, "Is love too hard?" Love, qua *Otherwise*, is not possible for Being. It is too hard precisely in that it arises from a power*less*ness. Jesus' kenosis and incarnation are indeed madness—inapprehensible—to the world of Being. Hence the Grand Inquisitor's promise to burn Jesus. This is of a piece with Levinas' rejection of theodicy: Love does not accumulate power, whether physical or epistemological; love *empties itself* for the sake of the Other, becomes naked and vulnerable and bears the sufferings of the Other.

"The idea of a truth whose manifestation is not glorious or bursting with light, the idea of a truth that manifests itself in its humility, like the still small voice in the biblical expression—the idea of a persecuted truth—is that not henceforth the only possible modality of transcendence?" So asks Levinas in "The Man-God?"[313] How is this any less apropos of Jesus' incarnation? Is Jesus' incarnation and substitution "glorious or bursting with light"? Is his incarnation not, as we have stressed, the nonthematizability of Levinas' nonthematizable God? Is the incarnation so incontrovertible as to force humankind into acknowledging Jesus as God's Messiah? Is it not instead the epitome of humility? As God creates kenotically, reducing Himself so as to make a space that guarantees man's alterity, his interiority and natural atheism, so, too, does Jesus' incarnation and substitution. God could have so arranged things that the resurrection of Jesus was manifest for all to see, ensuring that rulers, philosophers, sages and the most elite of humanity were present to bear witness; instead no-one saw the actual event. Even its immediate effect—the empty tomb—is attested to by a mere handful of women, who by virtue of their sex and small number would have been dismissed as reliable witnesses in a court of law. As Luke

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contrasting *epiphanias* (resolutions)" (18-22).

[313] In *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 53-60 (55).

relates, even their compatriots and fellow followers, the Eleven (Disciples), did not believe them (24:9)! But this is the risk Jesus took. Jesus is Infinity. Totality removes risk by eliminating alterity and reducing every individual to a mere cog in its "machine." Infinity, by contrast, makes space for the Other to be and to grow and to come—and that, as we have argued practically to the point of bathos, necessarily entails risk.

The resulting ambiguity of the Incarnation is more like than unlike that which surrounds the I-It and the I-You, the said and the saying. To speak of incarnation as contradicting God's humility, asserting, as Levinas does, that God is "too humble" for incarnation,[314] seems a trifle awkward in light of the justifiable consternation it elicits in Jews, seeming as it does to imply a violation of God's glory. (On this last point, I would argue, per Levinas, that God's glory is inextricably bound to God qua self-giving love, God qua the *for-the-Other*.) God is humble, but is this merely an aspect of His ontology? Is it inherent to His essence? Humility does not operate in a vacuum, nor is it a virtue for its own sake; humility is an essential component of the *for-the-Other*, that is, a calling into question of the self's right to be for the sake of the Other. In "Judaism and Kenosis," Levinas speaks of "that ambivalence or that enigma of humility" in such Biblical texts as Psalm 113, which "sings of 'the elevation above all nations and the glory above the heavens' of 'our God that is enthroned on high'; but He 'looketh down low upon heaven and upon earth…As if to say that exaltation were at its height in these very acts of humbling!"[315] How can the Incarnation be *too humble* for the Most High God? Is it not an even more "ambivalent" or "enigmatic" humility(—to the point, one might continue, of *humiliation*)? And

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[314] "The Man-God?" In *Entre Nous*, 53-60 (55).

[315] In *In the Time of the Nations*, 101-118 (101-02).

in this same vein, is it not the ultimate *for-the-Other*? To return to a prior point, the fact that we can rigorously debate this issue—for in fact that things are unsettled, still under debate—seems proof enough of the depth of humility apropos of Incarnation. That's how *disturbing* Incarnation is, especially vis-à-vis what it implies for man.

Returning momentarily to Dostoevsky and to Zosima, I would argue that Jesus' incarnation parallels the putrefying stink of Zosima's corpse. For, as in Levinas, incarnation and substitution cannot be separated. Jesus' incarnation was necessary in order to suffer with as well as for mankind. A God who can be killed, and by crucifixion, no less? The very idea would be as shocking, and *should be* as shocking, as the stench emitted by Zosima's corpse was to his Orthodox fellows. This to me is a *profounder* humility than mere absence. Absence has connotations of regality and majesty, as in apophatic theology: a God so very transcendent as to be impossible to describe save in terms of negation.

Being entails a world, to return to Buber, where the You—*every* You—"is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again" (*I and Thou*, 69). We can no more escape the I-It mode than we can thematization. Each seems a *sine qua non* of human fleshliness and interiority and its natural atheism. God chooses to create kenotically and to work in the world in a kenotic manner, eschewing coercion for persuasion—for despite Levinas' use of terms like "persecution" and a "passivity more passive than passivity," the fact of the matter is that the self is able to slough the "Divine speech" in the face of the Other with ridiculous ease.(—As Levinas himself admits when he remarks that "The Law essentially dwells

in the fragile human conscience, which protects it badly and where it runs every risk."[316]) Incarnation is the *ultimate* condescension on God's part, more humiliating, as I have labored to demonstrate, than mere absence (even "to the point of his possible confusion with the agitation of the *there is* [*il y a*]," as he writes in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* [69]). It is God accommodating the world without contradicting his nature as the *for-the-Other*. Insofar as humans cannot separate themselves from Being, from thematization and the said, and insofar as every "I" reverts repeatedly to "thinghood," as Buber says, God's condescension has to go beyond "mere" condescension, embracing the full, radical vulnerability of incarnation in order to *live*, and literally, *physically*, the vulnerability and sacrifice (*substitution*) required of each human being.

On a final note, I would like to address a closely related question: Is God man's "Other" or not? In an endnote in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas asserts that "The Infinite presents itself anarchically…Language about God rings false or becomes a myth, that is, can never be taken literally" (197, n. 25). This might be taken to imply that God is so transcendent, so relentlessly *other*, as to be beyond relation: "not simply the 'first other,' or the 'other *par excellence*,' or the 'absolutely other,' but other than the other, other otherwise," as Levinas puts it in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (69). One suspects, however, that Levinas is thinking more in terms of philosophy and theology, with their pretensions of reducing God to a thing, an object of study and analysis. (Levinas, i.e., in his capacity as iconoclast.) In point of fact, Levinas' affirmation of God's kenosis seems to imply that in some sense, at least, man *is* God's Other. What is more,

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[316] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (39).

if, per "Judaism and Kenosis" (and Rav Chayyim of Volozhin's *The Soul of Life*), man can pray to alleviate God's sufferings, then in a certain sense it also true that God is *man's* Other. The relationship might not be one of reciprocity or entail a dialectic which somehow unites God to world (resulting in pantheism), yet there is a relationship, and it is not inappropriate to speak of it in terms of love, albeit unfulfillable and therefore ongoing, one of *endless engagement*.

Against this backdrop, then, I should like to pose a preposterous claim: God, qua *Otherwise*, opposes not Being per se but a key constituent of Being—namely, murder; ergo, God, qua unthematizable, speaks through the face of the Other *by becoming a human being in order to have a physical face and thereby* be *a physical Other.* His nonthematizability is ultimately *ethical* in nature insofar as thematization, we have seen, is the root of murder.

Jesus endures abuse, torture, and death by crucifixion—one of the most degrading deaths imaginable. He *becomes* the very wretchedness and vulnerability Levinas sees in the face of the Other. He bears witness to Levinas' ethics, allowing mankind to see what it is to be Other.—For he is the *ultimate* Other, even more so than God, who at least maintains His respectability by observing the boundaries and keeps Himself separate from man and world. And, more to the point, Jesus bears out what it is to refuse to leave the Other in his alterity but to instead incorporate him into the All. This is anarchy in a literal sense, the greatest challenge to Being and its order: Jesus as anarchic, repudiating Being's modes, business and war, by allowing them to overcome him—and yet not, defying thematizability by not resisting via power or cunning but through kenosis or self-emptying.

Jesus is defying or protesting murder by literally attesting to the truth of the terrible interconnection of the First and the Sixth commandments: If committing murder is tantamount to

denying God, i.e., negating the relation between God and world (and thereby "murdering" God), then surely the reverse is true—that denying God, negating the relation between world and God, is to commit murder, or at any rate make it even theoretically possible. Sans God, "'Everything is permitted,'" as Smerdyakov, parroting Ivan Karamazov, says.[317]

Again we see that God's nonthematizable aspect is ultimately *ethical* in nature. It is about the *Who* rather than the *What* of God. "Whoever knows the world as something to be utilized knows God the same way," writes Buber in *I and Thou*. The Incarnation is the ultimate reduction; God allows himself to be, in a very real sense, reduced to the status of an *It* and thereby "employed along with the other things for the project of finding one's way in the world, and eventually for the project of 'conquering' the world" (156, 91). Is this not the real death of God? Yet Jesus' death turns the old order of being and war on its head: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will keep it" (Matthew 16:25). This is only compounded when we recall Paul's injunction in Philippians: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus…who made himself nothing ["emptied himself, i.e.]" (2:5,7). Kenosis as *command*!

By giving man the opportunity to kill God, might it be that Jesus is seeking to awaken man's conscience?—Not merely by shining a sort of light on the face of the Other that somehow signals to the self that killing is wrong, but by displaying *in his own face* the vulnerability and wretchedness the face of the human person should awaken in the self? Is God perhaps seeking to undermine what Levinas calls "the temptation of knowledge"? "The priority of knowledge is the temptation of temptation…It will no longer leave the other in its otherness but will always

[317] *The Brothers Karamazov*, 625.

include it in the whole…From this stems the inability to recognize the other person as other person, as outside all calculation, as neighbor, as first come."[318] Is it not possible that God, not by removing Himself but by drawing closer than is thought possible—resulting in an agitation disturbingly like "the agitation of the *there is*"—is short-circuiting this process? Such an agitation and short-circuiting might not be possible under the *theologia gloriae*, but how faithfully does the *theologia gloriae* align with the Christian Scriptures' portrayal of Jesus' life and death? Viewed without philosophical or theological lenses, is not Jesus' incarnation and death the *ultimate* form of protest or resistance to the temptation of knowledge?—Or, as Levinas says, a challenge "to the absurd 'that's the way it is' claimed by the Power of the powerful"?[319] How more *powerfully* (yet without overpowering) could God discourage man from the modes of Being, business and war, than by *becoming* the Other in whose face He says, "Thou shalt not kill?"

Finally we come to the last broad objection to the Incarnation raised by Levinas: that its implications are utopian and hence engenders a religion for children; whereas Judaism is a "religion for adults." We have touched on this subject in the preceding sections, but now we will explore its full meaning and implications. I believe there are two main objections implicit to Levinas' charge that Christianity is utopian: *(i.)* Jesus' incarnation puts an end to ethics and the urgency of the *for-the-Other*, and *(ii.)* Jesus' incarnation puts an end to the endless engagement with God, to prophetism and to the discipline of Torah. In this section, I will address Levinas' concerns and attempt to demonstrate why he is perhaps misinformed—which is to say, why his

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318 "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings,* 30-50 (34-35).

319 Ibid, 39.

concerns, while entirely pertinent where *classical theism* is concerned, are essentially unfounded when applied to the person and work of Jesus.

Let us begin with the first challenge—that the Incarnation undermines ethics and the *for-the-Other*.

"Why is the beyond separated from the below? Why, to go unto the good, are evil, evolution, drama, separation necessary?" So asks Levinas towards the conclusion of *Totality and Infinity* (284). We have seen that God's kenotic creation vouchsafes man's separation, and perforce his interiority and natural atheism. In this way *ethics* is possible. We have seen, what is more, that a kenotic creation necessarily implies a Creator who eschews omnicontrol and coercion, opting instead to work by persuasion, working *with* as opposed to *upon*. "By fecundity I dispose of an infinite time, necessary for truth to be told, necessary for the particularism of the apology to be converted into efficacious goodness, which maintains the I of the apology in its particularity, without history breaking and crushing this allegedly still subjective concordance," Levinas continues. Even as infinity makes a space for the self to be, a space in Being, it likewise works to ensure that the self is not simply overwhelmed by Being, whether by ontology, nature, or history. So what, then, does this mean for the idea of an afterlife? "The dream of a happy eternity, which subsists in man along with his happiness, is not a simple aberration," Levinas acknowledges. As he goes on to explain, however: "The completion of time is not death, but messianic time, where the perpetual is converted into the eternal. Messianic triumph is the pure triumph; it is secured against the revenge of evil whose return the infinite time does not prohibit. Is this eternity a new structure of time, or an extreme vigilance of the messianic consciousness?" Could it be that Christianity's ideas about a time wherein strife and suffering (and therefore

ethics) has ended is flawed? Levinas concludes by admitting that this question is beyond the scope of *Totality and Infinity* (285). Infinity, then, even as it seems to imply the possibility of an afterlife wherein man is united with itself, finally freed from the solipsism of Being, also calls such an idea into question. It is an ambiguity Levinas returns to in his later writings, such as the various essays in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, some of which we will turn to presently.

In a way, the preceding is of a piece with Levinas' arguments in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*: "This is a desire for what is beyond satisfaction, and which does not identify as need does, a term or an end. A desire without end, from beyond Being: dis-*interested-ness*, transcendence—desire for the Good" (67). Couched as an approach that never attains its goal, with the Desired receding even as the self approaches, God's separation might be taken to imply an *eternal* separation—which might, in turn, be taken to imply a refutation of the Christian understanding of the Millennial Kingdom and/or heaven.—That is, an end to evil, a rest from the work of goodness. "In order that disinter*estedness* be possible in the Desire for the Infinite—in order that the Desire beyond being, or transcendence, might not be an absorption into immanence, which would thus make its return—the Desirable, or God, must remain separated in the Desire; as desirable—near yet different—Holy. This can only be if the Desirable commands me…to what is the nondesirable, to the undesirable *par excellence*; to another" (68). God's separateness makes possible ethical behavior; and it would seem that, for Levinas, ethics and the *for-the-Other* is of such immense value that it precludes the possibility of traditional Christian (and some Jewish) ideas about eschatology and the afterlife. It is as if for Levinas the ideas of Incarnation, Atonement, and the Messianic Age are so interconnected that to embrace Jesus qua Christ is to

put an end to ethics—if not now, in the current epoch, then certainly at the time of the Eschaton. David Patterson and Alan Berger touch on this point in *Honey from the Rock*:

> Further, because sin is associated with death—Adam became mortal through his sin—the Messiah who atones for sin through the crucifixion also conquers death through the resurrection. **Once this task is completed with the cry of "It is finished!" (John 19:30), history becomes a matter of waiting for the Last Judgment**…This logic is sublime and profound; but it is not Jewish. Indeed, nothing could be farther from Jewish teaching concerning the Messiah. (111-12, boldface mine)

This "'It is finished!'" is problematic for Levinas, both as a Jew and philosopher. Even to this author, a Christian, there is something to Levinas' concerns. Will the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1) spell an end to the need for ethical behavior? If it is a time when God "will wipe away every tear from every eye," as Isaiah says, it seems safe to assume that there will be no more suffering. Yet even this issue is problematic: What of the victims of the Shoah? What will the afterlife be like for them? What does it *mean* for God to wipe away their tears? Will God simply erase all memory of the Shoah? Will Yehiel De-Nur's fellow inmate "Baby" no longer recall the orderlies dumping the week's ration of marmalade over his head and the ensuing "mass frenzy" that left him "a chewed carcass…gnawed as if by a horde of famished rats" (*Shiviti*, 52-53)? Will the unnamed child in *Night* who died by hanging, "lingering between life and death, writhing before [his fellows' eyes]" for more than thirty minutes (65), simply have his memory wiped upon his resurrection? What of De-Nur's brother and all the other *piepel* who suffered such insidious degradation before their own monstrous

ends?—Will they be blessed with an eternal amnesia, bathed, as it were, in a sort of Jewish Lethe?

One has but to consider the memoirs of survivors such as Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo in order to realize that there is no real escape from the anti-world; that its scars linger so long as the victims live:

> They say spiritless people, people with no appetite for living, are not alive. That is not what I mean to say. Obviously, I'm neither optimistic nor joyful—who among us can be? Sometimes, of course, we still experience a surge of enthusiasm, isn't that so? With all the dead we bear in our arms, hearts, memories? I'm not despondent, bored, occasionally I even laugh. No, it isn't that I am given to sadness or ennui. I just don't feel myself living. My blood circulates as though it flowed through veins outside my body. All of me is outside of me and yet escapes from the others…My reason tells me, "Your son, your husband." If my reason didn't tell me so, they wouldn't exist. They're not present within me, not part of me. They're outside of me, as I am outside of myself….I'm not alive. I look at those who are. They are vain, ignorant…If they had my knowledge they'd be like me.[320]

Will this carry over into the afterlife? If so, would not such an existence be more akin to Hell than to Heaven? But if not—if God erases the victims' memories, or merely the attendant pain—are we not reminded of Levinas' objection to theodicy? Theodicy attempts to *explain away* the suffering of the sufferer; to place it within a greater context wherein it has meaning and

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[320] Delbo, *The Measure of Our Days*. In *Auschwitz and After*, 233-355 (262-63).

purpose. In this manner, the victim is re-victimized, suffering a second thematization. Isn't something similar occurring if God simply erases the memories of the victims of the Shoah?—Or, for that matter, of *any* victim? Erasure is not equivalent to explanation, true enough; in fact, erasure implies a rendering meaning*less*. But the result is the same, however paradoxical that might seem: For if the suffering has no meaning or value, are terms like "good" or "evil" even relevant? One can appreciate the insights apropos of Delbo's talk of "useless knowledge" and Levinas' of "useless suffering"; but is this the same as *meaningless* knowledge or suffering? If *meaningless*, how *ethical*? That is to say, how can it elicit an *ethical response*? (Is Levi's tormentor *right*? Is there no *why* here?) To erase the effects of the evil is to erase the evil itself, to render it neutral—and in so doing to nullify the compassion (as well as outrage) we should feel. These concerns are more than mere semantics; in point of fact, they reveal yet another level of ambiguity to human existence. Insofar as Levinas takes human existence with the utmost seriousness, it follows that he must take seriously all the ambiguities pertaining thereunto.

One can begin to understand, then, why the idea of an "It is finished!"—which to this author also implies the idea of an afterlife wherein God will wipe away every tear (Isaiah 25:8)—is so problematic for a Levinas. I believe that this is what he is trying to get at when he poses the aforementioned question in *Totality and Infinity*: "Is this eternity a new structure of time, or an extreme vigilance of the messianic consciousness?" (285). If the face of the victim of the Shoah is to speak to me—to say "Thou shalt not kill" and all that that entails for Levinas—then it almost seems as if there can be no messianic age and no Heaven, no wiping of every tear from every eye, precisely insofar as that would put an end to my ethical obligation to the victim. (For surely the face of a Primo Levi or a Walter De-Nur still speaks to me; surely I am *still*

summoned to answer even years after their deaths—especially insofar as the summons is anarchic, which entails an effect that precedes it cause!) To short-circuit the persecution experienced by the self via the face of the Other would be to end what is an endless responsibility.—Which, to say again, risks short-circuiting the very idea of the *for-the-Other*. The idea of a messianic epoch, then, is more appropriately a *mode* for Levinas—a more intense *for-the-Other* wherein every self will look into the face of every Other and hear, louder than ever, "Thou shalt not kill," with all, to say again, that that entails.

I believe that these considerations are at the back of Levinas' mind when in texts like "Loving the Torah More than God" he wrestles with questions such as the relationship of the Messiah and the Messianic Age to evil, suffering, and accountability. I believe there is merit to Levinas' concerns, but at the same time, I do not believe they need entail an outright denial of a Messiah or a Messianic Age. A *rethinking*, absolutely.

Even if we assume that Levinas would not include past victims, it is nonetheless true, and more to our point, that he looks askance at the idea of the Incarnation because it seems to entail a rejection of this world; hence his binary of "utopia or ethics":

> To be without being a murderer. One can uproot oneself from this responsibility, deny the place where it is incumbent on me to do something, to look for an anchorite's salvation. One can choose utopia. On the other hand, in the name of spirit, one can choose not to flee the conditions from which one's work draws its meaning, and remain here below. And that means choosing ethical action. (100)

True enough; Christianity seems to imply that this world, the realm of Being, is inherently evil and that to be good one must flee from it, whether literally or metaphorically or indeed both. "Do not love the world or anything in the world," writes the author of 1 John. "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (2:15). As we have argued, however, Incarnation implies nothing of the sort; God loves the world and affirms its dearness by becoming flesh, entering into its contradictions. He loves the world *but not its ways*, in particular its totalizing systems of thought: that is, the varyingly murderous –isms and –asms man set up as substitutes for God and Torah. But even in seeking to change the ways of Being—business and war—God works kenotically, by persuasion, rather than employing the means apropos of Being (*dunamis*, i.e.). "This is a God of self-emptying love, a God of humble love, who takes all the time in the world to create, a God who invites rather than forces the world to realize new possibilities of being," observes Ilia Delio, O.S.E., in *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* (77). This is, in a way, a variation of the old maxim "Hate the sin but love the sinner." The Christian, then, is called to be in the world but not of it—an idea not unlike Levinas' conception of the *Otherwise* than Being as it works *through* the life of the responsive self. The Otherwise is not for Levinas a flight from or a negation of the world per se; it means to enter more deeply into the world, to love the world *at the cost of one's self-regard, one's comfort, even one's life*. In this regard, the *for-the-Other* is a *for-the-world*.

We have, however, already touched on these ideas. What we are addressing here is the idea of Jesus' "It is finished!" as implying an end to ethics and the *for-the-Other* in the here-and-now. Our answer is twofold:

First, the "It is finished!" has to do with the redemption of mankind. Redemption, however, is but the first step of mankind's journey. Redemption makes possible the "take up [your] cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24) that is absolutely essential to Christian faith. Redemption makes possible the self's ability to "clothe [itself] with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14), which, when viewed from the perspective of kenosis, enjoins the self to empty itself of self-regard for the sake of God and the Other—not, i.e., to love the neighbor as yourself but to *be* the self-giving love, the *for-the-Other*, revealed in the Incarnation.(—Kenosis, that is, not merely as "doctrinal" truth but as ethical truth, as *command*, which is in fact Paul's twofold purpose in writing the epistle to the Philippians.) Loving God means loving the world and its creatures, one's fellow humans in particular, rather than abandoning them in a solipsistic salvationary impulse. "For whosoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25). "[This] is a God who shows himself to us in poor and humble fragile human flesh. This is a God who loves us so much as be reckless in love; a God who throws it all away out of love and never tires of loving," to quote Delio once more. "The humility of God makes people uneasy. It is not the way we normally think about God who we claim is almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing and everywhere present"—precisely, as we have stressed, owing to its implications for our own conduct, our own mode of being (*The Humility of God*, 25-26).

Second, even when we extend the "It is finished!" to eschatology, to the idea of a Messianic Age wherein "the Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8) and "The wolf will lay down with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf with the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6), this need not imply that ethics will be no more. For Isaiah does not address the *how* or the *what* of the process. Who

is to say that mankind will not have work to do to help attain these ends? Will man be a passive recipient in the messianic age, enjoying its fruits but contributing nothing to their production; or, as per the implication of God as kenotic creator, will mankind work *with* God, serve as His *partner*, in the healing of the cosmos? I recall a conversation I had with David Patterson in the very early days of our friendship. "Why do you think God creates a cosmos of such unimaginable breadth and depth, Karl?" he asked. "Is it merely a matter of aesthetics? No. When the end of this epoch dawns, man will work with God in the ongoing *creatio continua*. Man's labors will not be confined to the Earth. We will have work to be about for all *eternity*." As a Christian, I saw and still see nothing in Patterson's assertion that contradicts my understanding of Jesus, qua God Incarnate, qua Savior.

In a closely related vein, Levinas fears that Jesus' incarnation and substitution *infantilizes* man, and not only ethically. Engaging in what might (very) loosely be described as a sort of *lectio divina* with Kolitz's *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, Levinas in "Loving the Torah More than God" flatly asserts that "The consolation of divine presence to be found in infantile religious feeling is equally denied [the sufferer], and the individual can prevail only through his conscience, which necessarily involves suffering."[321] His association of "infantile religious feeling" with "divine presence" doubtless includes the Christian idea of Incarnation, though I would guess he has other, non-Christian ideas in mind as well. Whether he means to or not, Levinas reveals another aspect of suffering—one that is extremely apropos of his own experience during the Shoah: For the believer, a crucial component of suffering is God's

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[321] In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 142-45 (143).

apparent absence in the experience itself—and for the contemporary Jew, this means the Shoah. "For the first time, I felt anger rising within me. The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?" Such are the thoughts of young Elie Wiesel en route to the camp (*Night*, 33). Primo Levi, too, echoes such anger, though his narrative is more guarded and the accent is on logos rather than pathos: Speaking of Kuhn's insensitivity in thanking God for his deliverance even as their friend Beppo the Greek learns he is bound for the gas chamber, Levi writes, "If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer" (130). If, as Patterson maintains, Kuhn's prayer suggests that his connection to God is diminished, Levi's anger implies that his own connection to God, qua the *for-the-Other*, is stronger than he realizes.[322] Levinas' anger at God, his prophetic protest, is less overt than Wiesel's and is indeed oblique by comparison; but it is there. Again, then, I would argue that Levinas' purpose in writing is much the same as Wiesel's, if only in *The Trial of God*: to shame God for His inaction. That is why Levinas makes what can legitimately be described as a *superhuman* demand of man, the Jew in particular. While eschewing theodicy, Levinas is, nevertheless, wrestling with God. To be sure, he denies that the Jews' sufferings can be understood as "a mystical atonement" (i.e., the fulfillment of the "suffering servant" passage in Isaiah 53), let alone as some kind of punishment (e.g., for the sin of Zionism, per Joseph Soloveitchik). For him, the only "meaning" inherent to Jewish suffering is tied to the idea of a kenotic God who eschews coercion in order that His followers might be spiritual adults. And for Levinas, eschewing coercion precludes the possibility of incarnation even in its broader senses: "The condition reveals a God Who renounces all aids to manifestation, and appeals instead to the full maturity of the responsible

[322] Class notes from a course taught by David Patterson at the University of Memphis, course number and date unknown.

man."[323] As he proceeds, Levinas slowly tightens his focus, addressing the idea of Jesus' incarnation more directly: "God is real and concrete not through incarnation but through Law, and His greatness is not inspired by His sacral mystery…To hide one's face so as to demand the superhuman of man, to create a man who can approach God and speak to Him without always being in his debt—this is a truly divine mark of greatness!"[324] Although Levinas speaks in terms of intimacy with God, behind it there is a sense of protest: *No matter your inaction, we will love you all the more!*

Needless to say, though, it is only those who are intimate with God who can protest, and a key component of intimacy is fidelity to Torah—to the point of wielding it "against" God, which Levinas, in his oblique way, takes to new level. Levinas is both struggling to formulate a response to evil in general and the Shoah in particular as well as attempting to shame God by taking the "all the more" of the commandment to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) to an undreamt-of height. Perhaps nowhere else in his corpus does he come closer to admitting his true program than in the following passage from "Loving the Torah More than God":

> Our monologue begins and ends with this refusal of resignation. Man can have confidence in an absent God and also be an adult who can judge his own sense of weakness. The heroic situation in which he places himself gives the world value and equally puts it in danger. Nurtured by a faith that is produced by the Torah, he reproaches God for His inordinate Greatness and excessive demands. He will love Him in spite of all God's attempts to discourage such

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[323] In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 142-45 (143).

[324] Ibid, 145.

> love. But 'do not bend the bow too far', cries Yossel ben Yossel. The religious life can end only in this heroic situation. God must show His face, justice and power must join, just institutions must reign on earth. This vigorous dialectic establishes an equality between God and man at the very heart of their disproportion.[325]

It is almost as if the Jew must *stand in* for God in the world. "You may have abandoned the Covenant, but we will not! We will even bear Your part of it!" Hence, perhaps, Levinas' radical assertion in "Messianic Texts" that "The Messiah is the King who no longer commands from outside—this idea of Jeremiah's is brought by R. Nahman to its logical conclusion. The Messiah is Myself [*Moir*]; to be Myself is to be the Messiah….Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility."[326] Indeed, Levinas' description in *Otherwise than Being* of what of what "to be Myself is to be the Messiah" entails sounds uncannily like the Christian understanding of the Messiah: "I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted. The ipseity, in the passivity without arche [sic] characteristic of identity, is a hostage. The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone. Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting, which the limits of identity cannot retain" (114, boldface mine).

Levinas' conception of Messianism, at first blush, would certainly seem to imply a diminished accountability on the part of believers in the Christian Messiah. But is this in fact the

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[325] In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 142-145 (145).

[326] In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 59-96 (89-90).

case? Certainly there is warrant for concern, as evidenced by Bonhoeffer's cautionary remarks about "cheap grace" in *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Does Jesus' incarnation infantilize me? By the Incarnation, bound as it is to the Atonement, does God expect *less* of me as a believer? Does the knowledge that Jesus, qua God, appeared in the flesh and walked among mankind entail mere epistemological acceptance of this fact on my part and no more? Do I simply cast my cares on Jesus and hunker down to await his return, having naught to do but keep my nose clean and maintain my belief in him? *No.* The Incarnation, as I will argue, allows for a more intense counter to human solipsism than God's "speech" in the face of the Other ("Thou shalt not kill") alone.

While I *profoundly* admire Levinas' ethic and, equally if not more so, his faith—contra Westphal, I see his reticence to speak of God too affirmatively as a testament to his prophetism, which entails both iconoclasm and protest (*exactly* as one finds in figures like Moses and Jeremiah)—I cannot agree with his linkage of Incarnation and infantilization. Had I been blessed to be his contemporary and peer, I would have pointed him to another of his beloved Dostoevsky's classics, *Demons*, by way of a refutation. Specifically to the original Part Two, Chapter Nine, "At Tikhon's," which was removed from the main text and relocated to serve as a sort of "appendix" to the novel. It recounts a remarkable, if harrowing, conversation between the holy fool Tikhon and Nikolai Stavrogin, one of the leaders of the nihilists (or "possessed," as some translations have it) of the novel.

Stavrogin, as he confides to Tikhon, has molested a very young girl, an act which leads *her* to feel such guilt that she confesses to "killing God." Ultimately she hangs herself. Torn by guilt, Stavrogin imagines maiming himself or some comparably dreadful act as a means of penance. In

the end, however, he opts to write a detailed confession of the incident with the intent of publishing it, thereby making his crime known to all. He intends, he informs Tikhon, to face the full consequences of his actions once his crime is known.

Tikhon, no mean psychologist, opposes this plan, and to this end he presents Stavrogin with a series of questions.

"'Repentance cannot go any further than the astonishing deed you are contemplating,'" Tikhon begins. "'If only…'" "'If only what?'" Stavrogin prompts. "'If only it is indeed repentance and indeed a Christian thought,'" comes the reply. Tikhon observes that Stavrogin seems to be taking pains to portray himself as "'coarser than [his] heart would wish,'" then proceeds to remark that his "confession" is more of a challenge to his readers, noting the painstaking detail and craft of the confession. "'If you are not ashamed to confess the crime, why are you ashamed of repentance?...What is that if not the proud challenge of a guilty man to his judge?'" (706).

As the conversation unfolds, Tikhon's observations become more piercing. He remarks that Stavrogin's crime isn't so remarkable in itself, that what is uncanny is Stavrogin's realization of the darkness of his deed. Stavrogin seems offended by this and adds that he has, perhaps, exaggerated his feelings of guilt. He acknowledges that perhaps he wants to offend his readers by making himself appear coarser than he is in order to make things easier for himself. "'That is, their hatred will evoke yours,'" Tikhon inquires, "'and, hating, it will be easier for you than if you were to accept their pity?'" (707).

Tikhon goes on to ask as to whether Stavrogin would find it easier to be forgiven by a friend or a stranger. The latter, Stavrogin replies, whereupon he asks Tikhon for his forgiveness.

"'And you me, as well,'" Tikhon replies, much to Stavrogin's shock. "'In sinning, each man sins against all, and each man is at least partly guilty for another's sin,'" Tikhon explains. "'There is no isolated sin. And I am a greater sinner, perhaps more than you are'" (708).

The conversation continues until Stavrogin finally admits that he needs to forgive himself: "'I know that only then will the apparition vanish. That is why I am seeking boundless suffering, seeking it myself. So do not frighten me'" (710). Tikhon responds by pleading with Stavrogin to abandon his plan: "'You are in the grip of a desire for martyrdom and self-sacrifice; conquer this desire as well, set aside your pages and your intention—and then you will overcome everything. You will put to shame all your pride and your demon! You will win, you will attain freedom…'" Tikhon enjoins Stavrogin to submit to a fellow monk for as long as he feels necessary. He assures the incredulous Stavrogin that he need not enter a monastery per se or take vows, "'just be a novice secretly, unapparently, it may even be done so that you live entirely in the world…'" Stavrogin becomes agitated. Tikhon realizes that never before has he come so close to understanding the full extent of his crime. As Stavrogin prepares to storm from Tikhon's cell, lamely promising to delay publication of his confession lest people drive him to some new crime, Tikhon prophesies that he will commit some new crime in order not to publish it at all (713-14).

So: How does the aforementioned exchange in *Demons* answer Levinas' charge that Jesus' incarnation (and, by extension, atonement), infantilize the self? How does the experience of Stavrogin reveal that the Incarnation leads not to less of an expectation of the self but a far greater one?

To accept forgiveness is not so easy, nor simple, as it may seem, as is apparent from Stavrogin's disgust with Tikhon's counterproposal. To act out of guilt or duty or a sense of reciprocity is easy. There is something irksome, by contrast, about receiving something that is, by its very nature, undeserved. Something entailing no reciprocity, no "this for that." However paradoxical, it is *more* demanding in its very lack of demand for a reciprocal gesture. Knowing that God forgives without demanding anything in return makes *more* of a demand—or, as Levinas would say, "cores out" the self more effectively—insofar as the self is motivated by astonishment, gratitude and a love for God and the Other: If God so loves me as to forgive me freely, how can I not but do likewise for my fellows? If God the Son becomes incarnate and offers Himself as substitution for me, can I not but seek to emulate his kenosis? Do I not feel persecution beholding the crucified Jesus? Is it not he who teaches me, through his solidarity with and substitution for mankind, to recognize God's voice in the face of the Other? Is it not the "other Otherwise" revealed in the Incarnation and Crucifixion—with all their kenotic grotesqueness and transgressiveness—that cores me out and makes me aware that I am indeed the guiltiest of all? Jesus so loved me that he died for me; am I not guiltiest of all because I obliged him to do so? And if I love him, must I not love all that he loves? It is an experience borne of love and gratitude rather than guilt or even a sense of responsibility per se, but no less powerful for that. It, too, necessitates an *Is it righteous for me to be?* moment; it awakens a sense of endless obligation to the world and my fellows. To paraphrase Tikhon's exhortation, it involves loving this world more than the next by serving it with my "all the more" in the here-and-now: "'…just be a novice secretly, unapparently, it may even be done so that you live entirely in the world…'" It involves, in other words, loving not noble abstractions like Man or

Truth or Justice but the everyday, flesh-and-blood creatures. It involves not spectacular deeds of self-sacrifice but residing in the world, performing simple, even banal acts of loving kindness. Kenosis need not be something sublime! Quite often it is nondescript. Sometimes it is even laughable, grotesque, or simply pathetic.

The incarnate God reveals to me the unfathomable lengths to which He will go for me and for this world. He suffers the world's inconsistencies, and willingly: he endures the need to eat and drink, defecate and urinate; he knows hard work and fatigue; he suffers bodily pain; he endures death. He knows *physically* how resistant the world is to love. He knows *palpably* what it is to sacrifice, whether food, sleep, comfort, or even closeness to God. He knows the excruciating reality of Psalm 22—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—as only a *flesh-and-blood* being can. He does not merely observe, as from a distance, but knows *intimately* what it is to dwell in the realm of Being. That is the ultimate *for-the-Other*.

Despite the fact that Stavrogin feels genuine guilt over his actions and even believes in God and the possibility of forgiveness, he cannot, in the end, make the final step. Why? Because in the last analysis he despises this world and wants to demonstrate his contempt for it, as Tikhon discerns—and he realizes all-too well that the way of the Cross means *loving* this world.

Like and unlike Ivan's Grand Inquisitor, Stavrogin the nihilist hates Being *and* its Otherwise—for, as we have seen, a person cannot hate one without also hating the other. If God the Son so loves the world that he becomes incarnate, He loves Being, even if He does not countenance its *modes*. Ergo, if one hates the world, one hates God. People may try to delude themselves into affirming one without the other, but in the end, they end up hating all. Such is Buber's capricious man: "When he says You, he means: You, my ability to use!...He has no

great will and tries to pass off caprice in its place. For sacrifice he lacks all capacity, however much he may talk of it…He constantly interferes, in order 'to let it happen'" (*I and Thou*, 109). Nor, to return to Dostoevsky, is Stavrogin alone in this malady; his compatriots Pyotr Verkhovensky and Alexei Kirilov are likewise possessed of this mutual hatred for Being and its Otherwise—hence their nihilism, the apex of the sundry –isms and –asms which for Dostoevsky represent the latter-day demons which (literally) possess so many of the Western mindset.[327] Yet Stavrogin stands at the threshold of true forgiveness—and rebirth, calling himself into question for the sake of the Other and embracing the ensuing life of election and persecution—only to pull back at the very last.

So it is that we return to Larry and Carol Lacy's insight that the subtitle to *The Brothers Karamazov* might well be "Is love possible?" or "Is love too hard?"[328] For *receiving* kenotic love is at least as difficult as *giving* such love. At the very least, the two are inextricably bound. On this score, I cannot but agree with David Bentley Hart's critique of Levinas in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*: "And this is why the hope of reciprocity, of gratitude, is the only true generosity: it is one's consent to behold and be beholden to another (anything less reduces the other to nothing)" (84). And there is another, related concern: As crucial as it is for the self to do everything that the Other might live, does this entail *only* physical or bodily needs? What of the Other's moral and spiritual needs? Should I not, when conditions permit, allow the Other to grow beyond his or her own solipsism? Are there not

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[327] As Richard Pevear notes in his Foreword to *Demons*, "The demons, the, are ideas, that legion of isms that came to Russia from the West" (xvii).

[328] From a book club reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* conducted by Drs. Larry and Carol Lacy in their home in March, April and May of 2012.

circumstances wherein accepting the Other's sacrifice may be more important than prohibiting that sacrifice? I believe that this is what Hart is trying to get at when he writes, somewhat acerbically: "Obviously, Levinas's concern is to safeguard the purity of ethical intention—but this always means only *my* purity. Does this not perhaps serve a somewhat self-aggrandizing moral heroism, a selflessness so hyperbolic that it must ultimately erase everything distinct, desirable, and genuinely *other* in the other in order to preserve itself from the contamination of need, dependency, or hope?" (82).

To sum up, hopefully in somewhat kinder terms: For all Levinas' admiration for Zosima and Alyosha—and, one would assume, Tikhon—can it be lost on him that their love for the world, their embrace of a kenotic love for the world and their fellows, has its origins *precisely* in the very Incarnation Levinas claims to result in infantilization? Even Grossman's Ikonnikov might be named here; though he describes himself as an *erstwhile* Christian and Tolstoyan, the ultimate model for his action is the Incarnation.

"The attributes of God are given not in the indicative, but in the imperative. The knowledge of God comes to us like a commandment, like a *Mitzvah*. To know God is to know what must be done," writes Levinas in "A Religion for Adults."[329] Is there any reason why this is not equally true for the Christian? Is it not the case, as I have argued, that kenosis is as much a *command* as it is a Divine action? Is a Christian not guided by a *kenotic ethic*? Is he not commanded to go the extra mile, to give his shirt as well as his cloak, to turn his cheek, to take up his cross? The

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[329] In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 11-26 (17).

aforementioned commands are unintelligible apart from the Incarnation, the example of kenosis *par excellence*.

Could the Christian who understands the true meaning of Jesus' incarnation and substitution *in good conscience* not fail to offer himself as a substitute for Wiesel's youngest sister, Tzipora, Celan's parents, Leo and Fritzi, or De-Nur's brother Moni? Are those who failed to do so not guilty for their inaction, when all is said and done, on the basis of their Savior's example? Do post-Auschwitz Christians like Franklin Littell feel less troubled by the Shoah, even apart from Christian culpability, because of Jesus' incarnation and atonement? Are we not even *more* disturbed, our faith shaken to its core, when confronted with the Shoah?—And again it must be clarified that this is quite *apart* from Christian complicity! By virtue of Christ's incarnation and atonement, we are called to follow his example, to become troubled and to challenge God on behalf of the six million.

And when one *does* factor in the deadly history of Christian Judaeophobia, our predicament becomes infinitely worse, not better. Do we excuse ourselves with some insipid appeal to Christ's forgiveness? *No*. Even if we did not live during the Shoah, are we not members of the Body of Christ, to which Chrysostom and Luther also belonged? Are our hands any less bloody than theirs? We, no less than the Jews, are bound to give God no peace over His silence, only in our case we do so as a self-indictment: *How might we be accountable for this evil, Lord? What then must we do?* We must risk our faith on multiple levels, not "merely" because we are literally guilty but even if we were not—such is the example of the Incarnation: If God empties Himself for me—and, more importantly, for the *world*—can I not but do likewise for my fellow

humans? Even Jesus' Atonement, or substitution, speaks to me in an imperative sense; I may not be able to die for another's *sins*, but I can die that they might live.

Does believing in God the Son's incarnation and atonement make me *less* inclined to acknowledge my sins against Israel or to question God, to stand in the gap between Himself and Israel? For surely God owes His people Israel an explanation, at the very least, for the Shoah! And perhaps He likewise owes the Christian an answer: *Why, God, did You not punish the Church for its Judaeophobia, send it into exile? Why did You allow us to continue on in our sin? Where were the prophets, where the judgments?*

—And by now it should be apparent that we have crossed over into the second of Levinas' objections to the Incarnation and the faith it inspires as "utopian." As he maintains in "A Religion for Adults," "Judaism believes in this regeneration of man without the intervention of extrahuman factors other than the consciousness of Good, and the Law…Human effort has unlimited possibilities. There is finally the help given by a just society from which the unjust person may benefit."[330] This mention of the Law is key. Levinas would seem to argue that the Incarnation and Atonement—the "It is finished!"—rob mankind of the endless engagement engendered by Torah, the Prophets, the Talmud and Midrash. The study of Torah he compares to the discipline associated with serious athletics or even warfare. It entails no passive acquiescence or "bibliolatry." Rather, "It is acquired and held, finally, in the particular type of intellectual life known as the study of Torah, that permanent revision and updating of the content of the Revelation where every situation within the human adventure can be judged." As he sums

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[330] In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 11-26 (20).

up shortly thereafter, "Revelation offers clarification but not a formula."[331] There is a *grayness* to much of human existence, an ambivalence; oftentimes there is no clear, incontrovertible solution, which is to say, one that does not involve risk, whether ethical or literal. Hence, as Levinas says, the need for "permanent revision and updating" and a non-formulaic approach to engaging the Torah. It has the potential to offer us fresh insight in each situation, but we must engage it dynamically as well as dialectically; which is to say, as a community, heeding the opinions and insights of fellow believers, whether living or no. The contrast with the Western approach, which of course includes the Biblical-Classical synthesis, is intense. "Whereas that tradition of thought and reason understood itself to be responsibly engaged in large, coherent claims, Jewish testimony relishes the disjunction that disrupts the large claim and that attends to the contradiction as the truth of the matter," writes Walter Brueggemann in *Theology of the Old Testament* (325). In other words, whereas adherents of the Biblical-Classical synthesis are apt to focus more on the questions of *how?* and *what?*, Judaism focuses more on the "fuzzier" questions of *who?* and *why?* in order to understand its God more intimately. Jews are concerned to know God and His ways; Biblical-Classical theists, by contrast, are more concerned to understand God's attributes and methods. Harking back to *Totality and Infinity*, one might say that Judaism is concerned with ethics, with *infinity*; classical theism, with theory, with *totality*—hence the countless pages devoted to discussions on the perfection of God, His immutability, impassibility, simplicity and so on. Very often these texts are subtle justifications of the status quo, theodicies intended to lull their readers into *not* refusing "the inane 'that's just the way

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[331] "Judaism in the Present." In *Difficult Freedom*, 208-15 (213-14).

things are' of the power of the Powerful." The precision and impersonality of ontology, as we saw in the preceding chapter, thereby trumps the messiness of relationality and the often irksome demands of ethics.

Christianity, or rather its theology, seems a religion of *answers*, whereas Judaism is about the question. Oftentimes the questions one asks are more important than the answers one provides; the question keeps alive the dialogue and people's minds continually focused on God and His ways. God is *in* the question; the *El* who dwells in the *shelah*. Hence Wiesel's account of Moishe the Beadle's prayer for the strength to ask God the life-giving questions (*Night*, 5).

Herein obtains the fearlessness of Judaism—its willingness to produce commentaries with multiple, often contradictory interpretations of the same passage. Judaism, concerned with God, the human and ethics ("The Torah is given in the Light of a face," as Levinas says[332]), is willing to look beneath the surface, as it were, and to coax the reader to reflect on multiple perspectives in order to discern less obvious (but potentially more crucial) truths. Judaism does not shy away from the difficulties implicit to a God who makes space for His people to be and to grow and to come by denying us easy, formulaic answers; instead it embraces the ambivalence of Being and the ensuing grayness of human existence and so treats Torah as a necessarily ongoing dialogue.

The Torah may not offer a prophetic "scoop" regarding such things as nanotechnology or quantum computing, but it does provide the wisdom—in particular the *ethical* wisdom—with which we might determine the guidelines of their use. "It is the eternal anteriority of wisdom with respect to science and history," as Levinas puts it.[333] God does not oblige us by spelling

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[332] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (47).

[333] "Judaism in the Present." In *Difficult Freedom*, 208-15 (213-14).

everything out in a clear, coherent picture; the Torah is no obvious "road map" but is more akin to a puzzle with pieces intentionally left out in order to make men work for understanding, to engage God and community dynamically and dialectically. Details are withheld in some instances for the express purpose of troubling the readers of Torah, to make them ask of God and one another *Why?* as opposed to deriving universal truths and formulae.—And, let us hasten to add, to ask not merely *Why, God?* but *Why* me*? What does this require of* me*?* And while details may be withheld, there are clues to help one fill in some of the blanks; but in order to do so, one must immerse oneself in Torah and to engage it dynamically and even *violently*: Hence Levinas' recounting the story of a rabbi rubbing his foot until it bleeds as he immerses himself in the study of Torah. The point is that the student of Torah "must 'rub' the text to arrive at the life it conceals...To the degree that it rests on the trust granted the author, it can only consist in this violence done to words to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimentations, a process begun as soon as these words appear in the open air of history," as Levinas explains. "One must, by rubbing, remove this layer which corrodes them."[334]

Such an approach to sacred Scripture, needless to say, is of a piece with Levinas' talk of the most essential of questions, "Is it righteous to be?" That is the first question, asked anarchically, preceding even the giving of Torah, with which God confronts the self via the face of the Other. It makes perfect sense that a God who asks such a question would provide a sacred text that gives rise to still *more* questioning, much of it of an ethical nature. The faith of Judaism "cannot be learned like a catechism or summarized like a credo...It is acquired through a way of living

[334] "The Temptation of Temptation." In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-50 (46-47).

that is a ritual and a heartfelt generosity, wherein a human fraternity and an attention to the present are reconciled with an eternal distance in relation to the contemporary world. It is an asceticism, like the training of a fighter," as Levinas avers in "Judaism in the Present."[335] It harks back to the tension between totality and infinity: The former seeks a closed system wherein everything is reducible to a cog and efficiency and utility are the order of the day. Everything must be accounted for and settled so that the machine might run smoothly. The latter, by contrast, is essentially open, as in kenotic openness. Things are not settled, a priori or otherwise; space and time are accorded to the Other, who is given the option to be and to grow and to come in his own time—which in turn entails unsettledness, risk, and an implicit *for-the-Other*. The discipline of Torah, which includes Talmud and Midrash, are, to say again, of a piece with infinity, an outgrowth of the *Otherwise* than Being.

Another key component of the Torah and the endless engagement it engenders is to be found in its prophetic tradition. In this case, the value lies as much or more in the *example* set by the prophets as in their various and sundry predictions. Prophetism, and not only as Levinas sees it, has more to do with engaging God in protest over the evil and injustice in the world than mere prognostication. It is to question God, to challenge Him when necessary, as Levinas approvingly cites Kolitz's Yosl Rakover in "Loving the Torah More than God." The fact that God allows for and even encourages such questioning cannot be overstressed. Levinas' God is the God of the Prophets, a God of pathos. A supremely relational God.—Which both exacerbates and makes possible Levinas' own oblique protest in his apparent placing of all the responsibility for creation on man.

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[335] In *Difficult Freedom*, 208-15 (213-14).

So what, then, of Jesus? Does Jesus put an end to prophetism and to the endless engagement with God's word? Levinas might think so, as would Handelman, who writes in *The Slayers of Moses* that "Christianity…is bound to a Greek ontology in which beings are related to Being via participation, not discourse, incarnation, not interpretation, and in which absence is intolerable. In the reconciliation of the logos with itself, what is other must be returned to the same" (173). With the Resurrection, then, Jesus eliminates the need for questioning and discourse. All is settled. All the Christian need do is await the triumphant return of Jesus at the end of Armageddon. But is this indeed the case? George Steiner would not agree. He writes of the events of Holy Week, of Good Friday, Easter Saturday, and Resurrection Sunday, acknowledging the apparent banishment of all darkness and doubt:

> But ours is a long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth the other. In the face of the torture of a child, of the death of love which is Friday, even the greatest art and poetry are almost helpless. In the Utopia of the Sunday, the aesthetic will, presumably, no longer have logic or necessity. The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and of hope, of the flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour [sic] of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man. Without them, how could we be patient? (403)

Commenting on Steiner's observations, Brueggemann writes, "The unresolved is as profound in the New Testament as the Old. The Old ends with the waiting of Elijah "before the

great and terrible day of the Lord comes (Mal 4:5). The New ends with a prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20)…All wait not doubting, but having nothing in hand except this rich, complex, disturbing testimony" (*Theology of the Old Testament*, 403).

Jesus' work may be finished, but the Church's is not. As we have labored to convey, the Christian's work is only just beginning. The troubling figure of Jesus—Jesus qua Incarnate God, qua grotesquerie, qua transgressor—bids his people to "occupy until [he] comes" and to beseech God to make everything on earth "as it is in Heaven."

To draw this chapter to a close, I should emphasize, ironically enough in light of its length, that the preceding represents only a beginning. The first faltering steps of a renewed dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, with Levinas as the "mediator." As I have remarked elsewhere, *Otherwise than Being* could very easily serve as a textbook on Christological ethics, and with little qualification. Levinas' insights throughout this and many other texts are too vital for Christians to ignore. And as I have endeavored (to the point of bathos) to show throughout this chapter, I believe that Jesus has something to offer to Levinas, if only a challenge to his notion that Christianity is not a serious contender for the title "a religion for adults." At the very least, I hope that this chapter has made clear that it is indeed possible to be a Levinasian Christian. But it must go beyond that. Jesus and Levinas must be placed into a deeper dialogue. Such a dialogue will prove an incredibly fruitful affair.

CONCLUSION

A KENOTIC COSMOLOGY?

By this point, it is my sincere hope that I have challenged my readers to think afresh about Levinas. I pray that my discussion in Chapter 1 has provoked those who too-readily pigeonhole Levinas as an "atheist" to recognize that his so-called "secular" and "Jewish" writings cannot be separated, that even foundational texts like *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* are profoundly *Jewish* in their understandings of the God-world relationship and the relation of one human being to another.

By setting him into a sort of "dialogue" with survivors like Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, I have likewise labored to give my readers a new perspective on Levinas by helping them to recognize Levinas' attempts as a Jew to come to grips with the unthinkable horror of the Shoah as well as the spiritual resources Judaism affords him in this effort. To see texts like *Of God Who Comes to Mind* not as an acquiescence to negative theology or a Jewish version of "Christian atheism" but a very *Biblical* response to God's apparent failure to live up to the Covenant. I have taken great pains to shed new light on Levinas via texts like *The Trial of God* and the ministries and writings of the Prophets.

In this same vein, I have stressed the underlying commitment to the analogous ideas of *tsimtsum* and kenosis in many Levinasian terms and motifs—an effort hopefully reinforced by my discussions of Dostoevsky and Bakhtin. That Levinas was so drawn to a Dostoevsky, I maintain, is attributable to the latter's kenoticism, both thematically and methodologically; an idea borne out by Bakhtin, whose works, per Ruth Coates' *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author*, at least suggest that much of his literary theory can double, however indirectly, as

a kind of theology. A *kenotic* theology. This idea of God as an exiled author reinforces the ideas of *tsimtsum* and kenosis; God is "exiled" in the sense that He has undertaken a radical self-limitation on behalf of his creation. Grossman, too, reinforces the idea of holy folly, particularly in terms of its implications for mankind.

In this work, I have attempted a Levinasian critique of classical theism and the project of "ontotheology." I did so in part to address the question raised at the very outset of this work—that of how Christianity could fall so *egregiously* short of Jesus' teachings, and to such an extent as to negate every last iota of its credibility. More than that, however, I sought to reveal Levinas' commitment to Biblical theism; for at the core of his critique there burns an undeniably *Jewish* faith. Were Levinas not committed to Judaism, more than a few of his criticisms would lack substance. A third purpose, to which I alluded in the Introduction, was to prepare the way for an ongoing dialogue between Jews and Christians, who today are faced with a rabid antitheism. Christians are desperately in need of this dialogue, as only by turning from classical theism and returning to their Jewish roots can the credibility of the Church be restored and the possibility of another Shoah prevented.

At the same time, however, I sought to provide Levinas with an impetus to rethink some of his criticisms of Christianity, in particular those lodged in "A Man-God?" and "A Religion for Adults." I challenged the idea that the ideas of the Incarnation and Atonement lead inevitably to immaturity, stagnation and/or solipsism by endeavoring to show how such teachings in fact promote a Levinasian ethic. Even in my weightiest challenges, though, I was more interested in provoking dialogue based on the common ground shared by Jews and Christians—namely, the character of our God and the nature of the God-world relation as revealed in the teachings of

tsimtsum and kenosis. The potential of these teachings to renew not only ethics but the status of Biblical theism in our culture cannot be overestimated.

Rather than waste space simply reiterating what I have attempted to argue in this paper, I would like to end by setting forth the beginnings of another dialogue, this time between religion and science. Specifically, a dialogue about cosmology. We have already argued that ethics and cosmology go hand in hand, that the relationship of God and world reveals a great deal about ethics. While this is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of this last, I will attempt to provide an intimation of what some call "kenotic creation" might entail.

Levinas' discussion of totality and infinity has profound resonances with the kenotic creation model posited by thinkers like Arthur Peacocke, Jürgen Moltmann, John Polkinghorne, Denis Edwards, and Gloria L. Schaab, to name but a few. Peacocke, in "The Cost of New Life" in *The Work of Love*, writes of creation as a continuous process on God's part, and not only positively, as a *creatio continua* entailing ongoing involvement, but negatively, i.e., as a perpetual limitation:

> This independence and freedom in humanity attains the critical point where it can attempt an independence of, and freedom from, the intentions of the Creator. This independence and freedom are an inevitable consequence of that very self-consciousness that has emerged naturalistically through the evolutionary processes in God's regular way of making effectual God's creative intentions.[336]

This of course entails a God who *risks*, if only the possibility that His creatures might work against His will:

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[336] In *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne, 21-42 (39-40).

> This idea that *God took a risk in creation* is not new—as evidenced by…the creation narratives of the Old Testament—but is now, I am suggesting, reinforced and given a wider context by these considerations based on the nature of biological processes….The cost to God, we may venture to say, was in a continuing self-limitation which is the negative aspect of God's creative action, and also in a self-inflicted vulnerability to the created processes in order to achieve an overriding purpose: the emergence of free persons.[337]

In a closely related vein, Moltmann's *God in Creation* picks up on the maternal aspects of God the Creator:

> God 'withdraws' himself from himself in order to make creation possible. His creative activity outwards is preceded by this humble divine self-restriction. In this sense God's self-humiliation does not begin merely with creation, inasmuch as God commits himself to this world: it begins beforehand, and is the presupposition that makes creation possible. God's creative love is grounded in his humble, self-humiliating love. This self-restricting love is the beginning of the self-emptying of God which Philippians 2 sees as the divine mystery of the Messiah. Even in order to create heaven and earth, God emptied himself of his all-plenishing omnipotence, and as Creator took upon himself the form of a servant….In a more profound sense he 'creates' by letting-be, by making room, and by withdrawing himself…[Ergo,] the creative letting-be is better brought out through motherly categories. (88)

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[337] In *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne, 21-42 (39-40).

For his part, Polkinghorne in *Science and Religion in Quest of Truth* writes along the selfsame lines as Peacocke, remarking that the God of self-giving love described in the Bible is as contrary to the disinterested watchmaker deity of Unitarianism as He is to the "Cosmic Tyrant" of Calvinistic theologies—which of course has implications both positive and negative:

> One might dare to say that an evolving creation, in which creatures are allowed to be themselves, is a more fitting creation for such a God than a ready-made world would have been. Yet it is also a world with an inescapable shadow side to its history. The shuffling explorations of potentiality that result from the interplay between Chance and Necessity at the edge of chaos will not only bring great fruitfulness to birth but will also inevitably have ragged edges and sometime lead to blind alleys. (80-81)

Drawing on the insights of Peacocke, Gloria Schaab, finally, spells out the full implications of kenotic creation for God's relationship to the created order:

> Divine love is manifest in the creative self-emptying and self-offering of God in creation, a sharing in the sufferings of God's creatures in the evolutionary processes of the world. Not only does God self-offer and self-empty in love for the created "other" but also God "suffers the natural evils of the world along with ourselves because…God purposes to bring about a greater good thereby, that is, the kaleidoscope of living creatures delighting their Creator, and eventually free-willing, loving persons who also have the possibility of communion with God and with each other." The inevitable conclusion of such observations, Peacocke suggested, is that "love and self-sacrifice are…seen as inherent in the divine

> nature and expressed in the whole process of creation. Perhaps this is what the author of the Revelation was hinting at when he described Christ, whom he saw as now present with God, as "The Lamb slain *from the foundations of the world*." (*The Creative Suffering of the Triune God,* 135)

Can it be more clear? The kenosis and incarnation of Jesus are of a piece with the character of the Creator-God of Judaism. This is not, to say again, any sort of ecstatic union or return to a fictitious Primordial Unity. The God who creates by *tsimtsum*, by Divine self-restriction, creates what is *other* than Himself. "Naturally atheist" and possessed of "interiority," as Levinas says. Kenotic creation precludes the idea of ecstatic union, whether primordial or eschatological. And kenotic creation is what Levinas describes in *Totality and Infinity* when he writes:

> The marvel of creation does not only consist in being a creation *ex nihilo*, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself in question. The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being. And this implies precisely atheism, but at the same time, beyond atheism, shame for the arbitrariness of the freedom that constitutes it. (89)

What convinces me of the truth of the Incarnation is the undeniable resonance with the actions of the Creator-God of Judaism: "This self-restricting love [inherent to the creation] is the beginning of the self-emptying of God which Philippians 2 sees as the divine mystery of the Messiah," to quote Moltmann's *God in Creation* once more. "Even in order to create heaven and earth, God emptied himself of his all-plenishing omnipotence, and as Creator took upon himself the form of a servant" (88). This is surely the very essence of Jesus' assertion that "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working….I tell you the truth, the Son can do

nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:17, 19). Creation is ongoing, and it begins with an ongoing act of Divine humiliation on God's part. The Incarnation is, ethically speaking, of a piece with this action—exactly as Moltmann suggests.

Moreover, that the goal of God's kenosis is ethical as opposed to ecstatic in any sense if clear from the fact that, as Levinas himself stresses, its very purpose is to create and empower beings who are comparably ethical, capable of undertaking their own kenosis and thereby *becoming* their love for their fellow humans. Nor is Levinas the only one possessed of this insight, as we have seen from the afore-cited passages from Peacocke, Moltmann, and Polkinghorne. As George Ellis aptly puts it, Jesus' kenosis "shows us the way we should act if we are to be true to a Christian calling....It does not lead to political impotence, as the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King have shown; rather it is the basis of that transforming spirit which is the basis of social and political miracles."[338]

The preceding holds a very real possibility, *in fine*, of offering what amounts to a unified field theory. A kenotic creation, as I have termed it, explains not only God's methodology for creation—evolution, that is, along with the associated ideas of "deep time" and the like—but suggests that the idea of a radical self-limitation for the sake of the Other (or a radical reorientation towards the Other, as Levinas might say) is the *ultimate grounding for reality*. The implications for other fields, from History to Art to Politics to Business (etc. ad nauseam)—are nothing short of incredible.

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[338] "Kenosis as a Unifying Theme for Life and Cosmology." In *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne, 107-126 (112).

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Karl Shankar Sengupta was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. He attended White Station High School from 1981 to 1986. Karl attended the University of Memphis from 1986 to 1991; he graduated *summa cum laude* with a double major in English and Philosophy. He worked in the Circulation department at the University of Memphis Main Library from 1988 to 1998. From 2007 to 2010 he worked on his MALS (Master of Arts in Liberal Studies) degree at the University of Memphis. During this time he worked as a graduate assistant for Dr. David Patterson, the Head of Bornblum Judaic Studies. Duties included assisting with research, substitute teaching, grading papers, and seeing to the transportation and other needs of visiting speakers. He also taught his own courses in Holocaust Studies for two semesters.

From 2010 to 2012 Karl worked for Home Helpers, a caregiving agency. He cared for people with conditions like dementia, heart disease, and spinocerebellar ataxia. In this capacity he also helped with house and yard work, shopping, exercise regimens and physical therapy, and like activities. In 2012 he transferred to Out On A Limb, another caregiving agency. His duties and activities were essentially the same as those enumerated above. He remained with the agency until 2013.

From 2012 to 2013 Karl also worked for Argus IT Security, an information technology company for which he served as the Human Resources Officer. Drawing on his knowledge of Buber and Levinas, Karl wrote the company handbook and created the core values. Other duties included recruitment, upholding morale, and overseeing the various educational programs.

In 2014 Karl enrolled in the PhD program at The University of Texas at Dallas. For his first year, he worked in the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies as Dr. David Patterson's research assistant. His duties consisted primarily in assisting with research and proofreading texts.

From the fall of 2015 to the fall of 2020, Karl served as the instructor of record for Rhetoric 1302.

Upon obtaining his PhD, Karl hopes to teach at the university level and to publish books on Levinas, Buber, and other Jewish thinkers as well as ethics, theology, and Holocaust studies.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Karl Shankar Sengupta

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PROFILE

I am currently enrolled in the Ph.D. program at the University of Texas at Dallas. My degree is in General Humanities; my focus is on post-Holocaust ethics, with particular emphasis on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. My intention is to teach at the university level; my approach is unashamedly interdisciplinary. I plan to write and teach on a "constellation" of relevant subjects, including but not limited to the Holocaust; Holocaust literature (Levi, Ka-Tzetnik, Sachs, and Celan, e.g.); the (ongoing) history of anti-Semitism, particularly in terms of its Christian theological antecedents; and Russian literature, in particular Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Grossman, and Solzhenitsyn. Jewish philosophy, however, will always be my cherished focus, and it is my fervent hope to teach and design courses on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (and perhaps Buber, Rosenzweig, and Soloveitchik as well).

My teaching philosophy can be summarized in terms of four "core values." The first is ***Ethos***: "Ethics is forceful not because it opposes power with more power... but rather because it opposes power with what appears to be weakness and vulnerability but is responsibility and sincerity," writes Levinas.[ii] Ergo, as a teacher my students are not my consumers or clients; rather, I am profoundly accountable to and for them.

Logos is my second key principle: "…the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing in the Other a *right* over [my] egoism, and hence in justifying [myself]. Apology, in which the I at the same time asserts itself and inclines before the transcendent, belongs to the essence of conversation."[iii] In other words, does my labor justify my place as my students' teacher? Can I ever do enough?

Liberalis is the next core value of my teaching philosophy and includes both a social and an ethical aspect: "free" as both "not servile" and "not bound (by prejudice, e.g.)." Above all, however, is the sense of "free" as in *education*, as in *Liberal Arts*: "The free study seeks nothing beyond itself and desires the activity of knowing for that activity's own sake," C. S. Lewis explains. "The pragmatist will of course ask, 'But what *use* is it?' and pronounce it 'bunk.'"[iv]

This brings me to my final principle: ***Humanitas***. The humanity of the human is tied to the *Humanities*, which attest to a certain *vertical* dimension to human being. One of the few sanctuaries for verticality in today's mechanistic culture, Sven Birkerts urges, is to be found "...in authentic works of art...Immersed in a ballet performance, planted in front of a painting, we shatter the horizontal plane."[v]

EDUCATION

- The University of Memphis (1987-1991), B.A. (*summa cum laude*). Majors: English and Philosophy.
- The University of Memphis (2007-2010), M.A.L.S. Master's Thesis: "Totality or Infinity: Christian Theology and Judeaophobia."
- The University of Texas at Dallas (2014-2019), Ph.D. Dissertation: *The Significance of Kenosis in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

The 47th Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches: "Lessons for a Wounded World: Post-Holocaust Wisdom in the Face of Terror and Fear" (11-13 March 2017, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA).

paper title: "Kenosis as Command: On Franklin H. Littell's *The Crucifixion of the Jews* and the Christian Response"

The 27th Annual Ezra Pound International Conference: "Ezra Pound, Philadelphia Genius, and Modern American Poetry" (19-23 June 2017, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA).

paper title: "The Antisemitism of Ezra Pound: Metaphysics and Midrash"

The 11th Congress of the European Association for Jewish Studies (15-19 July 2018, Krakow, Poland).

paper title: "Schindler, Auslander, and the Temptation of Temptation"

The 48th Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches: "Critical Moments in the History and Memory of the Holocaust" (3-5 March 2018, the University of Texas at Dallas, Dallas, Texas, USA).

paper title: "The Loss of the Human and the Forgetfulness of the Other in Cassirer and Heidegger" (Jeffrey David Hirschberg, co-author/-presenter)

Internationale Rosenzweig Gesellschaft Conference: "Back to Redemption: Rosenzweig's *Star*" (17-20 February 2019, Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, Israel).

paper title: "Dunamis or Kenosis? Divine and Human Self-Limitation in the Drama of Redemption"

2 April 2019 – Taught a single class in Dr. Carie King's spring 2019 Ethics class on the subject of twentieth century Jewish Ethics.

PUBLICATIONS

"Kenosis as Command: On Franklin H. Littell's *The Crucifixion of the Jews* and the Christian Response." In *Legacy of an Impassioned Plea: Franklin H. Littell's* The Crucifixion of the Jews, eds. Patterson, David and Marcia Sachs Littell (Paragon House: St. Paul, Minnesota, 2018).

Book Review of Peter Banki's *The Forgiveness to Come: the Holocaust and the Hyper-ethical*. In *Shofar: An International Journal of Jewish Studies*, Volume 38, Number 3, Winter 2018.

WORK EXPERIENCE

- University of Memphis Main Library (1988-1998), Circulation Department. Duties included processing returned books, shelf reading, and assisting patrons.
- University of Memphis, Bornblum Judaic Studies (2007-2010). I began as Dr. David Patterson's teaching assistant and went on to become his graduate assistant. Duties included assisting with research, substitute teaching, grading papers, and seeing to the transportation and other needs of visiting speakers. (I also taught my own courses in Holocaust Studies for two semesters.)
- Home Helpers (2010-2012). Home Helpers is a caregiving agency. I cared for people with conditions like dementia, heart disease, and spinocerebellar ataxia. In this capacity I helped with house and yard work, went shopping, assisted in exercise regimens and physical therapy, and like activities.
- Out On A Limb? (2012-2013). Out On A Limb? is another caregiving agency for which I worked. My duties and activities were essentially the same as those enumerated above.
- Argus IT Security (2012-2013). Argus was an information technology company for which I served as the Human Resources Officer. Drawing on my knowledge of Buber and Levinas, I wrote the company handbook and created the core values. My duties included recruitment, upholding morale, and overseeing the various educational programs.

- Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies (2014-2015). I served as Dr. David Patterson's research assistant. My duties consist primarily in assisting with research and proofreading texts.
- Rhetoric TA (2015-). For more than four years now, I have served as the instructor of record for the Rhetoric 1302 course at UTD.

SKILLS

- My teaching experience spans several years, beginning at the University of Memphis under Dr. David Patterson, where I taught several sections of Holocaust courses to seniors and juniors. In keeping with Dr. Patterson's approach, I encouraged discussion and avoided a purely lecture format. At the University of Texas at Dallas I teach Rhetoric to freshmen and sophomores; the Spring 2017 term marks my fourth semester as an instructor of record. In this capacity I explain to my students that our classroom is a "discourse community" and stress the importance of dialogue and communal thinking and learning. As well, I try to impress upon them that *questioning* is an essential skill despite its low regard in our high-tech, logistically- and outcome-oriented era.

- In addition to teaching, I have had a great deal of general experience in academia. I have been a student in some form or fashion for most of my adult life, and I worked in an academic library for not less than a decade. I have been an avid reader most of my life, and my interests are wide-ranging, from Literature to Philosophy to History to Science. I am a naturally interdisciplinary thinker and tend to be drawn to the "big picture" and the ways in which ideas from disparate fields interrelate.

- I have also worked as a caregiver, which taught me not only practical skills (operating a hoyer lift, emptying and cleaning catheters, performing bowel irrigations, e.g.) but made me appreciate the (hard) realities of trying to *live* the philosophy of a Levinas. I have cared for individuals with degenerative conditions like spinocerebellar ataxia and held the hand of the dying on more than one occasion. Through such experiences, I learned that one's best efforts on behalf of the Other are *never* enough; *always* there is more to do.

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[i] Watson, 4.

[ii] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, 13.

[iii] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40.

[iv] Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 127.

[v] Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Culture*, 74-75.