

On Repentance: An Interview with Michael L. Morgan

KN: During the fall of 2010 you delivered the Shoshana Shier Distinguished Visiting Lecturer Series at the University of Toronto. The three-part lecture series was entitled: “Continuity and Discontinuity in the Thought of Emil Fackenheim,” and the aim of each lecture was to clarify how the event of the Holocaust led Fackenheim to reassess his early views on revelation, the nature of human freedom and selfhood, and the central task of philosophy. In the second lecture, “Human Freedom and Selfhood in a Post-Holocaust World,” you suggested that the existence of the *Muselmann* in the concentration camps, which Primo Levi chillingly describes in *Survival in Auschwitz*: “Their life is short, but their number is endless: they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand,”¹ forced Fackenheim to reconsider the conception of selfhood that he had developed in his earliest works. In these works Fackenheim largely appropriates Franz Rosenzweig’s view that each person is individuated by his or her capacity to receive and respond to divine revelation.

I want to begin our interview by asking how you understand Rosenzweig’s view that individuation involves receiving and responding to divine revelation. Let me also ask a follow-up question: Do you believe, with Fackenheim, that the Holocaust compels us to abandon, or at least to conceive anew this conception of individuation? Or does it instead force us to sustain a form of radical hope?

MLM: For the moment, let me focus on Fackenheim and how Fackenheim understood selfhood or human existence. As you say, in my second Shier Lecture, I tried to clarify how Fackenheim, prior to his thematic engagement with the Holocaust, characterized human existence. Until 1960 or so, the primary context for that account of human existence was Fackenheim’s defense and articulation of an understanding of the divine-human encounter, what he called “revelation,” and by and large his understanding or conception of revelation is primarily indebted to Buber and Rosenzweig. In 1960, with *Metaphysics and Historicity*, that account of human existence is placed in a larger or broader framework: that framework is a defense of what he calls an existential conception of human self-constitution—self-making and self-choosing—indebted to figures like Heidegger and Sartre. So there is some truth to your way of putting it, that “Fackenheim largely appropriates Franz Rosenzweig’s view that each person is individuated [I would say essentially characterized by] his or her capacity to receive and respond to divine revelation,” but the freedom or spontaneity essential to such capacities is something Fackenheim conceives rather broadly. It goes back to Kant and Kierkegaard and comes to Fackenheim through Heidegger and Sartre.

But it is true that Fackenheim is especially interested in human existence or selfhood insofar as human beings can be believers, insofar as they can live their lives within the framework of an ongoing relationship with God, and this means for Jews within an ongoing relationship with God, the Jewish people, the Jewish past and tradition, and the tasks or claims that are made upon a Jew. Fackenheim takes the divine-human relationship to be established, confirmed, and possibly transformed by moments of divine-human encounter, as well as by other events. In an early essay, he describes the change in the human from pride to humility, as Rosenzweig does, and in terms of receiving and responding to divine love. At other times he describes the divine-human encounter as an I-Thou moment of dialogue. Perhaps the richest account he ever gives occurs in the first chapter of *God’s Presence in History*, when he uses Buber’s description of the experience of a Biblical miracle in terms of an “abiding astonishment” and the awareness of a “sole Power.”² My point is that Fackenheim’s understanding of divine revelation is eclectic; he draws on several sources—even on Kierkegaard, for example, along with Buber and Rosenzweig. What all share is the idea that human existence involves both spontaneity and receptivity, or what he calls in the case of revelation divine power and human freedom. The moment of revelation involves both; the immediate response involves both; and the life lived under the auspices of such an event involves both. My own view is that this idea—that human existence is a union of freedom and limitation, spontaneity and receptivity—comes from a variety of sources: Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre. I know Fackenheim knew well

¹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 90.

² Emil L. Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History* (New York: NYU Press, 1970), 12–16.

Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* and the important second chapter, where Sartre gives his account of the human condition as a union of freedom in a situation, or transcendence and facticity. Someone like Charles Taylor calls this situated agency, and it is a conception of the human condition that we today might call broadly hermeneutical.

For Fackenheim, as I see it, such a conception is as true for non-religious existentialists as it is for religious existentialists like Buber and Rosenzweig. The difference—and it is crucial—is that for them the divine presence is a central, determinative feature of the situation, so to speak. That is, receptivity is not simply the receptivity to worldly conditions; it is also the receptivity to grace, to direction or orientation, or to use the phrase Rosenzweig got from Rosenstock, “revelation is orientation.”³ I like to put this in terms of meaning: for Fackenheim, human existence is intrinsically meaningful in a way that it is not for those who find no room for the divine-human relationship.

Now let me turn to your question about the Holocaust and its effect on Fackenheim. Does confronting its horrors lead him to alter his conception of human existence? Here Fackenheim only gives us suggestions; he never discusses this issue the way one would like, directly and fully. One thing he seems to want is for us not to restrict any sense of human dignity to those with a full-blown capacity for spontaneity and responsiveness. Even the *Muselmänner* deserve our respect, and yet they lacked all sense of spontaneity and the spark of life; they capitulated. Moreover, no receptivity to God, after the Holocaust, should be glib and facile, untroubled and conflicted. Still, for Fackenheim, the human involves the capacity for spontaneity and receptivity, to the world and to the divine. But the ways in which such capacity is realized changes in a host of ways, depending upon who one is and what the situation is. So, to use your expression, there is hope or there might be, but given the horrors of the death camps and of subsequent genocides and atrocities, it will certainly be a challenge to be confident or to recover one's confidence. Nothing in human existence itself, in our personhood, prevents it. To be sure, after the Holocaust, one cannot take for granted what we might call the “continuity” of the world in which we live with the world as it was, the present and the past. There might be a radical rupture in any recovery of the past, or a radical fracture in our identity. But since the process of human existence is temporal, even such a rupture is not once and for all.

PN: I'd like to ask about this temporal quality of human existence you just mentioned. In your response to Karin's first question you note that after 1960 Fackenheim places his account of human existence in a larger or broader framework that draws upon the works of Heidegger and Sartre and views the human condition as that of a situated freedom. But Fackenheim's reconstitution of temporality or what he calls “historicity,” as you noted in your first Shier lecture, has decisive consequences for the traditional conception of revelation within the Jewish tradition: prioritizing this “hermeneutical” situation of the individual over the tradition's conception of a providential entrance of God into history. This new hermeneutical orientation, as you say, is largely indebted to Heidegger. In particular, in *To Mend the World* Fackenheim engages Heidegger's hermeneutic orientation toward death, which represents the only sense of transcendence (*Ganz-sein-können*) and is only a subjective “mood” of the self. While Fackenheim translates Heidegger's hermeneutic orientation into a language of transcendence, he nevertheless criticizes Heidegger, claiming such “[h]istoricity is itself inseparable from Transcendence.”⁴

Despite his criticism of Heidegger, Fackenheim proceeds to characterize Jewish thought that turns either toward a historicity of a messianic future or a “venerable Jewish past” after the *shoah* as “inauthentic”—another Heideggerian concept—Jewish philosophies.⁵ They are inauthentic because of their limited hermeneutic orientation toward the historical *novum* of the *shoah*. Now it seems transcendence *in* history must arise through the subjective hermeneutic appropriation of an event's meaning, whose act of appropriation is “resistance”—an “old-new” form of *teshuvah*.⁶ Both past and future are de-localized in this new historicity. Is Fackenheim's post-1960 view of revelation that this new *teshuvah* of “resistance,”⁷ rather than being oriented toward a divine transcendence, is a subjective ascription of what counts as revelation and redemption? Does the new historicity of *teshuvah* rescind the traditional horizons of temporality: creation, revelation, and redemption? Has Fackenheim not somehow ceded the world-historical and providential character of redemption to the immanence of a historical event? Rather than a providential end,

³ See Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (trans. & eds.), *Franz Rosenzweig: Philosophical and Theological Writings* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 49–50.

⁴ Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend The World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, orig. pub. 1982), 160.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 190ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 317ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 201ff.

has he not turned to the immanence of a selfhood oriented toward its (immanent) death, and an immanent evil “novum in history”? The “old-new” historicity of *teshuvah*—of redefining a new task for this ‘old’ people, in an acknowledgement of Herzl’s *Alte Neueland*—seems to risk Heidegger’s mistake: Does Fackenheim not reduce transcendence to historicity, in the end, siding with Heidegger over Rosenzweig? What, therefore, must an “authentically” Jewish thought make of redemption in light of this “old-new” historicity of transcendence, that is, “resistance”?

MLM: There is no question in my mind that for Fackenheim, especially after his self-exposure of Jewish thought and philosophy to the Holocaust, redemption comes to occupy in his thinking a place that is as central, if not more central, than revelation. This is the way I take your point about the respective roles of Heidegger and Rosenzweig for him. But the centrality of redemption is not a novelty in the twentieth century. In my little book *Interim Judaism* I explore some of the ways in which redemption—and by this I mean some idea of dramatic liberation or repair, an idea often associated with the idea of messianism—was central to European intellectual culture in the period from prior to World War I through Weimar and into the 1930s, and then I analyze what changes the concept of redemption underwent in the later parts of the twentieth century. Basically, these issues touch upon the questions of hope for the future, the goal or goals of human life and human history, and the very meaning of life. They also touch upon the role of politics in human affairs and the relationship between politics—viewed broadly as human conduct in the world—ethics, and religion. In my book I call attention to figures as diverse as Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Martin Buber, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich, as well as Cohen, Rosenzweig, Scholem, and Benjamin, and I could have added a great number of others. In a sense, Fackenheim’s post-Holocaust worries about how to recover the idea of messianism after the Holocaust and his attention to what role the state of Israel plays in this recovery are part of this story.

You frame Fackenheim’s engagements with Heidegger and Rosenzweig in terms of the relationship between immanence or historicity and transcendence. There is something right about this, but I would put it somewhat differently. On the one hand, even though Fackenheim is committed to an existential view of human existence as historically situated agency, he nonetheless in his early period takes that situation to be marked by the entrance of transcendence. Hence, there is meaning and purpose, grounded in the divine-human relationship. He won’t tolerate, for Judaism, either a Barthian neo-Orthodoxy or a liberal individualism, let’s call it. Against this background, the early Fackenheim can accept, that is, the linear conception of history as a narrative from creation to redemption, a view that is Hegelian in spirit but Rosenzweigian in content, so to speak. But, on the other hand, after the Holocaust, one wonders if Fackenheim’s recovery of such a view of final redemption or messianism does not become modified. Does he still cling to it? Indeed, can we and ought we to cling to it? Or should we try, somehow, to retain a sense of purpose but without a strong commitment to the unitary character of the historical narrative and without the same confidence in its realization? If we do give up some aspects of the redemptive hope, what is left? And if Fackenheim still adheres to the centrality of revelation and transcendence, what role does human initiative play in history? What, then, are our goals and purposes, and what role does politics play in our lives?

In *To Mend the World* Fackenheim focuses on the role that the state of Israel plays in Jewish life after the Holocaust. But if one wants to get an overall picture of what Fackenheim thinks Jews ought to be doing, what Jewish life ought to involve, in a post-Holocaust world, one needs to look not only at *To Mend the World* but also at many of the essays in *The Jewish Return into History* and *What Is Judaism?* One might summarize his view this way: Jews have lived under the auspices of a divine-human relationship; in a post-Holocaust world, some are still confident about this fact, others less so. To some, Jewish life is still the task of articulating, understanding, and fulfilling the demands of that relationship; to others, Jewish life means retaining some practices and ideals of the past, while disposing of others. To some, rereading Jewish texts in the light of our historical situation is a primary way of engaging in such a process of articulation and understanding aimed at reinterpreting the covenant; to others such an encounter with texts is the way Jews draw on a tradition that continues to be rich and fruitful but only if it is reinterpreted from our own perspective. In short, there are Jews who are still believers—some are confident believers and some less so—and there are Jews who are very secular but still Jews nonetheless. Moreover, for Fackenheim both can agree on what to do, even if they cannot agree on why. What to do as Jews involves defending Jews and Judaism, appropriating what is meaningful and effective from its reservoir of texts and teachings, defending the claims of human dignity and the ultimacy of the worth of human life, fighting for tolerance and justice, and more. Part of all this, in our world, certainly involves for Fackenheim the defense of the existence of the Jewish state and also, I would argue, advocacy of its character as a humane and democratic polity. Sometimes, of course, these goals may come into conflict or tension, but that does not remove the goals; it

just makes it hard, at times, to cope with them.

Traditionally in Judaism, redemption and messianism are matters of the full sweep of history and the long haul of human conduct; they are about the Jewish people and its role alongside God within the history of all humankind. I believe that Fackenheim, when he came to understand why and how the Holocaust required radical reassessment and recovery, came to realize that such a grand view could no longer be accepted. This was not a matter that he thought about and wrote about a great deal, but one finds hints in his writings that he appreciated how historical, how worldly and contingent, how episodic and fragmentary our actions must be. Again and again, in *To Mend the World*, he remarked that all post-Holocaust existence is fragmentary and partial; even if there was a pre-Holocaust totality or whole, there could not be a post-Holocaust repair of it that would be comprehensive and complete. I like to compare Fackenheim, in this regard, with someone like Levinas, who I think also has a view that once we recognize the limitations of totality, we appreciate that our lives are nonetheless filled with opportunities to care for others, to take our responsibilities to others seriously, and to live humane and just lives. But such a task is an ongoing one that applies to each and every occasion when we are called upon to act on our responsibilities; the successes and the failures all come one at a time. Here I think Fackenheim would agree, even if he thought that the ground of such a mandate—to live with concern and justice—arises for us at this particular moment in response to the horrors and the evil of Auschwitz. Levinas of course would not agree about this, but he would agree that we have such a task, such a mandate.

Your question asks, if I have understood correctly, if Fackenheim does not fall back into a kind of humanism or individualism or subjectivism. I don't think he wants to, and I don't think that he does. He realizes that in a post-Holocaust world, the question of what grounds any obligation to go on as a Jew and in behalf of humane social and ethical purposes may not be answered in the same way, all the time, by everyone—even by everyone who takes him or herself to be part of the Jewish people. Since he believes that nothing has refuted the possibility of revelation, the question about God is not a matter of intellectual honesty. It is instead a matter of whether one can, after Auschwitz, still hear the Divine Voice, so to speak. Some can; others can't. Similarly, today one has to act without the assurances that come with an unqualified hope and confidence in the messianic future. In short, we live in a fragmentary and episodic time, when we confront each challenge as it comes along, in view of the duties that grip us. Some Jews believe that they grip us because it is a divine claim, others for no particular reason other than our sense of what respects human worth and dignity and human rights. This is still a form of redemption or messianism, but it is a "realistic" one. It respects, Fackenheim thinks, the temporality of Jewish existence and its link to transcendence.

JLR: Let me pursue your comparison of Fackenheim and Levinas. As you say, Fackenheim and Levinas agree that living an ethical life is an ongoing task. Yet in the aftermath of the Holocaust—and, as you suggested in the Shier lectures, in response to the events of '67 in Israel—Fackenheim came to believe that there was no particular imperative on a person wishing to go on as a Jew to consider the Divine Voice as the ground of moral obligation: some Jews may understand their obligation to other human beings as a demand issuing from a divine source, and others may understand that same obligation as a demand issuing from our sense "of what respects human worth and dignity and human rights." Effectively, for Fackenheim, the Divine Voice and the voice of other people have the same authority and ability to instantiate the obligation of responsibility. Yet for Levinas the situation does not seem to be entirely the same: the face of the other—at least insofar as it requires a response—cannot be ignored precisely because its demand that one respond has the transcendent character of the Divine Voice. To what extent and in what specific ways would you say that Fackenheim and Levinas differ when they estimate the role of the Divine Voice in grounding Jewish ethics after the Holocaust?

I would like to ask you a second question: If we are trying to understand the divine-human relationship in light of the theme of this issue of the *Journal*, Levinas draws an interesting, and I think important, distinction in *Towards the Other* between *teshuvah* (return) as the solitary mobilization of the self that is necessary to repair one's relationship with God, and forgiveness as the means by which interpersonal relations are mended.⁸ How would you characterize the relationship between *teshuvah* (return or repentance) and forgiveness in Levinas' work?

MLM: I'm glad that you've asked about the relationship between Fackenheim and Levinas. Ever since I began to read Levinas, I've asked myself what brings them together and also what distinguishes them. For

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris, FR: Les Editions de Minuit, 1968), 37–40; *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 15–17.

philosophical reasons and because of what their thinking says about Judaism, they are two of the most important Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century and certainly of its second half, after 1950 or so. The biographical issues are least important, perhaps, but it is worth knowing that they only met once, in Israel I believe, and they couldn't communicate very much, but they seemed to have a good deal of respect for each another. I don't think that Fackenheim read much if anything of Levinas; he never refers to him in print. Levinas did read the French translation of *God's Presence in History* and refers to it in an important essay entitled "Useless Suffering." I also have a copy of a letter from Levinas to Fackenheim, thanking him for sending a copy of *What Is Judaism?* and indicating his respect for his work. I can't say what Fackenheim thought of Levinas' philosophical work or his Jewish writings, even what his impressions were, but I think that Levinas realized that while they shared some things, there was much that separated them.

Both took the Holocaust to be a momentous event that distinguishes our epoch from earlier periods, but Levinas saw it as paradigmatic of a general decline of Western, European civilization in the twentieth century, indicative especially of the failure of people to take seriously their responsibilities one for another, to act in behalf of justice and compassion. Fackenheim worked hard to identify how the historicity of the horrific events ruptured any continuity with the past and yet mandated and enabled a future. And both were very strong supporters of Israel and Zionism, although here too their views on what Zionism means and what the central tasks and responsibilities of a Jewish state are differ, I think.

I once thought that the deepest difference between Fackenheim and Levinas had to do with the way they understood the dialectic of thought and history. This was a central theme for Fackenheim from the late 1940s, I think, one that he learned from Strauss perhaps, and one that was confirmed for him in his study of Hegel and his appropriation of existentialism. At least through the mid-1960s, Fackenheim was committed both to the radical historical situatedness of human existence and to the possibility of philosophical transcendence, to what we might call a kind of objectivity beyond history and beyond the concrete. Finally, by drawing some conclusions about Hegel's system and its relation to history and also about the seriousness of the Nazi horrors, he decided that no such transcendence is immune from historical modification and possibly refutation. Hence, any continuity with the past must be a matter of recovery and not a matter of transcendent permanence. In a post-Holocaust world, where the radical evil of the death camps was beyond explanation and comprehension and threatened our customary categories and principles, going on afterwards requires a selective, hard-won return to the past and recovery or repair of a ruptured world.

Here we are close to the theme you introduced in your question. For Fackenheim, everything about post-Holocaust life must be recovered, refashioned, and re-earned, and this applies to any sense of obligation we have, the ground of such obligations, and their content. And how we negotiate these tasks depends upon who we are, what shapes our point of view, and how we understand our situation and the resources available to us. For this reason, for Fackenheim, it matters whether one is a Jew or a Christian, a secularist or a believer, an American or Canadian or German or Israeli. There is, for him, nothing that is given to us without requiring interpretation and refashioning and recovery.

On this issue, I think, Levinas differs with Fackenheim. To him, there is a feature or character of all of our relationships with others, all of our social life, that is a permanent feature, and this is what Levinas calls the face-to-face. What Levinas means by this relationship or this structural character of all sociality is a complex business, and this is not the time to try to clarify and develop it. But the core of it is that for Levinas human existence is fundamentally relational, and that relation has an ethical character. It involves responsibility and the claim on us that others make—to acknowledge, to accept, to reach out, to care for, and more. Unlike Fackenheim, while the everyday shape of this interpersonal concern and responsibility depends upon particular circumstances and context, there is a fundamental normative character to it and a specific content: to be compassionate and just, responsive and responsible. For Fackenheim, at any moment in our post-Holocaust world, the fact of obligation, its ground, and its content all need to be worked up, as it were, by each one of us. For Levinas, the fact and the ground are always there, already. They never arise; they are permanent features of all our social relationships. The content at any given moment and in any particular situation, to be sure, must be worked out, but this is because compromise and negotiation are always required. In a sense, there is a foundationalist dimension to Levinas that is not there in Fackenheim.

As I said, I once thought that this difference was the most profound difference between Fackenheim and Levinas, and I still am inclined to think that it is very important. Another difference, however, involves God. Fackenheim was always deeply influenced by Buber and Rosenzweig regarding revelation, its nature and possibility. I think that he always felt that the kind of view they articulated about revelation as a divine-human encounter was compelling, and even after confronting the Holocaust, if a serious recovery of God for Judaism continues to be possible, it is a recovery of the God who encounters the Jew in history; it is the Divine Presence and the Divine Voice. To be sure, Fackenheim's confidence about what it meant to recover access to that Presence and that Voice after Auschwitz did undergo changes. In *To Mend the World* and

later, he is much less confident and much more circumspect than he was in *God's Presence in History*. But all in all, for Fackenheim, it is possible and perhaps even desirable for a believing Jew to continue to take Jewish obligations to be grounded in a relationship with God, to hear the Divine Voice and to obey the divine command. Not all Jews, not all people, can still do this. Some only hear the commandment without hearing the Voice of the Commander; they know that they have a duty, even if they have no idea what its ground is, what gives it its normative force. But some can.

I am sure that Levinas would think that Fackenheim has understood the language of divine revelation too literally, so to speak. Even if Fackenheim's interpretation has a certain sophistication, it still would seem too "childish" or "mythological" to Levinas. For him, revelation is a word for the way the other person calls the self into question and makes a claim upon it. Fackenheim tries to retain the language of divine commandment and make sense of it; Levinas takes that language to be a kind of metaphor for the real sense of moral obligation that arises in our lives. That sense arises out of the claim the other person makes upon each of us. But it is too simple to say that Levinas replaces God with the other person or the face of the other person. The story is much more complex and subtle than that. But to some people, it will seem that that is what Levinas is doing. We have to keep in mind that here Levinas is more systematic than Fackenheim. Levinas, one might say, is following Kant: the venue for talking about God and religion is ethics and our moral lives; God and religion are not theoretical or what Levinas would call ontological matters. For Fackenheim, on the other hand, the divine-human relation is a metaphysical or at least an epistemological issue, which has all kinds of implications. This is very different from Levinas.

This issue, of how Levinas and Fackenheim differ about God, relates to your second question. I would think that while Fackenheim would take the reconciliation between God and individuals, or the recovery of the life of faith (after sin, i.e., after human acts that fracture it), to be intimately connected with acts of interpersonal reconciliation, he would hold that these are two different relationships. They are related but distinct. For Levinas, on the other hand, there is no divine-human relationship that isn't interpersonal. The language about God and God's interaction with people is one way of expressing our sense of what we owe to others, what others claim of us, of compassion and justice. Seeking forgiveness from and reconciliation with others whom one has harmed is not a prelude to healing one's relationship with God; it is that healing, that reconciliation. The way that religion and ethics are related for Levinas is different, I think, from the way they are related for Fackenheim.

KN: In your response to Jessica's question you draw our attention to two main differences between Fackenheim and Levinas' thought: one has to do with the way they understand the dialectic of thought and history, the other has to do with how they understand the fact, ground, and content of moral obligation. May I ask you to consider whether and how these two topics are interwoven in each thinker's case?

Let me expose my interest in asking this question and then ask two further questions. I believe the way Rosenzweig understands the dialectic of thought and history is clearly interwoven with how he understands the fact, ground, and content of moral obligation. This is because Rosenzweig's affirmation of a divine-human relationship that is mediated through revelation may be understood in light of his attempt to "realize 1900 as distinctively different from 1800."⁹ In other words: Rosenzweig wanted to develop a conception of history that would enable us to grasp meaning and purpose, yet he also wanted to reject the nineteenth century Hegelian view of history as a divine process developed in time and to be contemplated by a passive onlooker, a view that seemed to deny the reality of evil and that didn't seem to demand human participation. In *The Star of Redemption* Rosenzweig hoped to accomplish that task by developing the conception of history that Schelling began to work out in the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* and in *The Ages of the World* fragments of 1810–15. Let me clarify: For Schelling, granting the reality of evil required thinking anew the concept of human freedom and moral agency, and this required the support of a metaphysical framework that employed the theological categories—Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. Schelling understood Creation as an act of divine self-limitation: in Creation God withdraws His presence from the natural world and decides to reveal Himself according to times. This means that after Creation God is partly absent from, not fully immanent in nature, and that His presence now depends upon the human being's response to the event of Revelation. Considering that we are obliged to respond to the unforeseeable event of Revelation is what constitutes our freedom.

So Rosenzweig follows the late Schelling in thinking that obligations are grounded in a divine-human relationship that is mediated through revelation, and as you point out, Fackenheim was deeply

⁹ Alexander Altmann, "About the Correspondence," *Judaism Despite Christianity*, ed. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 28.

influenced by Rosenzweig in this respect. Schelling, Rosenzweig, and Fackenheim enable us through the “myth” of creation to recover something like the ancient idea that we each have our place in a kindred cosmos, as well as the idea that history has meaning and purpose. Levinas’ view that moral obligations are grounded upon an irreducible relational structure of human existence doesn’t enable us to recover these ideas. Does this reveal a certain limitation in how Levinas understands the ground of moral obligation? Or does the decision to continue to take obligations to be grounded in a relationship with God depend on whether we, like Schelling, Rosenzweig, and Fackenheim, seek a comprehensive explanation for human experience, something that perhaps not all of us seek?

MLM: For Fackenheim, the primary issue concerning history and thought is about the historicity of thought, especially religious thought and philosophy. Since his reading of Strauss’ *Philosophy and Law*—which I think took place when he was in the rabbinic seminary at the Hochschule, sometime between 1935 and 1938—he was convinced that the only reason to return to older thinkers, like Maimonides, was to address current issues, for example, about faith and reason. He always opposed what he took to be antiquarianism. In a sense, then, for the early Fackenheim it was worthwhile to return to the past because past thinkers and present ones could be engaged with the same problems. He took history seriously and also the thinker’s historical situatedness—he would have called this the thinker’s finite perspective—, but he also thought that religious thought and philosophy had what he called a capacity for “transcendence.” Past and present thinkers could deal with the same issues because there were issues that were timeless and not intrinsically historical. It was this idea, I think, that changed with Fackenheim’s study of Hegel, together with his serious encounter with the Holocaust and the death camps. He came to believe that no philosophical concepts or principles and no religious ideas or truths were immune from historical modification and possible refutation. A momentous event like Auschwitz—which he later called “epoch-making”—challenged all our conceptual schemes, all our concepts and principles; to go on required recovering from the past through an act of interpretive re-articulation. It is in this sense, then, that for Fackenheim, thought is intrinsically historical.

For the post-Holocaust Jew, then, what it means to be Jewish and to live a Jewish life must be recovered; the process must be one of repair that is also a process of return, *teshuvah*. Indeed, the very idea that there is a duty or responsibility to go on as a Jew must be discovered and then articulated—from our historical, situated point of view. For this reason, for Fackenheim, the “fact, ground, and content of moral obligation”—as well as other obligations one might sense as a Jew—all of this must be grasped and articulated anew. And the results will very likely be different for different people—and complex and nuanced. Some will sense the force of the sense of duty as powerful and urgent; others less so. Some will feel moved and able to take the source or ground of such obligations to be God; others will not and may not be clear at all about what justifies or requires their continued commitments. And the content will vary tremendously.

What you say about Rosenzweig and Schelling is important; it shows that for them, there is a kind of metaphysics that underwrites views about freedom, transcendence, revelation, and what follows from all of this for human life. I am not sure that even for the early Fackenheim, that systematic or metaphysical dimension was very important. To a degree, it was—in the sense that he saw Creation, Revelation, and Redemption to be the parameters of a genuine Jewish theology, and he did view them in terms of God’s relation to nature, to human existence, and to history. But Fackenheim was never, I think, as systematic as either Schelling or Rosenzweig. He knew Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, of course, but what he took from them was the importance of the perspective of the finite agent and also the possibility of revelation. This may be why he would later often say that the major influence on his Jewish thought was Buber.

Against this background, then, where does Levinas stand? If we stand back and ask: does Levinas think that all our conceptual schemes, ideas, and principles are historically negotiable and in particular does he think that the ground and content of our obligations undergo historically modification, on the face of it one might answer “no” to both questions. At one level, for Levinas, the “ethical” character of our relationships with others is always the same and, for this reason, our responsibilities to others, to act justly and humanely and with concern are always present. Nothing that happens can change this. Moreover, what grounds our obligations to others is “built into” the relationships we have with them; the claim that their needs, dependencies, and vulnerabilities make upon us are both a plea and a demand. We are moved and compelled (morally). At times we may use a language or discourse about God to depict this sense of obligation, but at times we may not; not all find such talk congenial, but there are those who do.

To put it simply, then, one might say that for Fackenheim, the Holocaust has an especially powerful role to play; it marks off our time as one of radical historicity, and yet it demands opposition to evil and atrocity. For Levinas, the Nazi horrors are indicative of a century of extreme atrocity and suffering. But

suffering occurs at all times, and the demand to do something about the suffering of others is always with us. What is distinctive about the twentieth century is how much humankind has failed to take its responsibilities seriously. But this simple view is not sufficient. Levinas clearly takes historical particularity very seriously. One of his most powerful convictions is that while we surely cannot do without theories and principles, institutions and rules, we should never forget that such generalities have a tendency to occlude the concrete particularity of each and every relationship we have with others. In his essay “Useless Suffering” he warns us that “theodicies,” by which he means any theory or explanation or conceptual pattern, have regularly tempted us to avoid the pleas of the suffering for our concern, our help, and our attention. In short, for Levinas, ethical responsibility is always particular and concrete. We certainly have a universal obligation to justice and humanity, but that universal obligation is always present in highly particular circumstances.

At the same time, for Levinas, while the precise character of our responsibilities to others can be determined only by considering the details of each situation, there is a general or universal obligation to reach out to others and to care for them. However, this ethical fact about all of our relationships and hence all of our lives is not derived from certain metaphysical claims; it is neither a premise nor the conclusion of a system. It is a fact about human existence insofar as that existence is social; I think of it as the “fact of the social.” And it is disclosed by means of a philosophical process of examination and exploration—both phenomenological and transcendental. Indeed, in Levinas’ later thinking, after 1963, when he introduces the idea of *illegitimacy* and the notion of the trace, this too is disclosed in the same way. And if this account, which seeks to locate the way the force of obligation is present in our social relationships, seems to draw us close to what traditional Western religions mean by God, it is only in this context. It is not a metaphysical claim and it plays no systematic role.

All of this might suggest that Levinas leaves us without something that Rosenzweig provides, let us say. But I don’t think that in this respect Fackenheim is more like Rosenzweig than he is like Levinas. Neither Fackenheim nor Levinas return us to anything like the “old thinking.” For different reasons, perhaps, they are in some ways anti-systematic, but in other ways both are very systematic philosophers. There is a kind of rigor to be found in Fackenheim’s thinking and also in Levinas’ work. But that rigor and precision is not “explanatory” in some classic or traditional sense. Both have about them a sense of openness to surprise—to the transcendent, the inexpressible. Both share a sense of urgency and seriousness. They are not the only options that ought to appeal to us today—particularly to those seeking to do Jewish philosophy—but they are preeminent among our predecessors; of that I am quite confident.

KN: Many questions come to mind after reading your response, but I’m afraid that we should bring our conversation to a close, at least for now. Let me thank you for the generosity of your answers and for the time that you devoted to this interview. We look forward to welcoming you back to the University of Toronto in the winter term of 2012.