Judaism against Paganism

Emmanuel Levinas’s Response to Heidegger and Nazism in the 1930s*

Samuel Moyn

Jews, Nazism and the Holocaust have an unsuspected importance as themes in that body of thought usually known in the English-speaking world as “post-structuralist” or “postmodernist.” In fact, any meaningful appraisal of that group of loosely affiliated intellectuals in post–World War II France comprised of Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy and several others would have to acknowledge and understand the precipitate of twentieth-century history that appears in different ways in their work. Whether it is the honorific status these thinkers confer on Jews and especially German-speaking Jews such as Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka, or their interest in what one may call an “aesthetics of survivorhood” in poets like Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès, or their direct and indirect commentaries on National Socialism and the Holocaust themselves, this precipitate demands attention and may even indicate the existence of a single, non-exclusive, hitherto largely unoccupied but privileged vantage point from which the emergence of this body of thought can come to be understood historically and in context.

Any full-scale interpretation of an entire tradition in postwar intellectual life based on these assumptions would, of course, have to make sense of the complexities of a movement or “discourse” whose links to Nazism and the Holocaust were always highly indirect. This discourse emerged to special prominence only in the 1970s with
Marxism’s apparent collapse, and partly depended on and departed from the terms set by the delayed return in the late 1950s and 1960s of the Holocaust as a subject of deliberation and inquiry. How both of these developments occurred relates deeply to the structure and form of the new discourse. If there exists any historical, generative relationship between the Nazi genocide and this body of thought, it is clearly an extraordinarily complex as well as a highly mediated one. And yet grounds for positing such a relationship not only exist but deserve the closest scrutiny.

All of this complexity of development and diversity of incarnation notwithstanding, many of this discourse’s roots extend back to the work of a single thinker who influenced all the others yet labored in relative isolation for decades before his thought experienced the curious afterlife it came and continues to enjoy. The encounter of that thinker, Emmanuel Levinas, with history in the 1930s is a largely unknown story but a fascinating one pregnant in implications for understanding his intellectual legacy after 1945. Levinas once wrote that his life had been “dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror,” and this essay claims that this “presentiment” needs to be understood as a recuperative move to Nazism in the crucial few years after 1933 and more specifically to Levinas’s imaginative philosophical connection of a politically barbaric ideology to a certain variant of phenomenology.

Before 1933 Levinas had been perhaps the most important interpreter and naturalizer of the early philosophy of Martin Heidegger in France, but after he learned of the latter’s decision to support the Nazi Party, he could not continue along his earlier trajectory unperturbed, as if the philosophy of Being and Time and Heidegger’s political allegiance had been only contingently related. Instead, he groped toward a theory of the ways in which Heideggerianism and Hitlerism might have a deep and intimate association, and this nascent conceptual linkage dislodged him from the position of Heideggerian acolyte and both permitted and demanded the development of an independent and unique philosophical stance. This specific moment in Levinas’s career has to be understood in as much detail as possible if one wishes to grasp its results: a turn to and an elaboration of a conception of Judaism which afforded an escape from crisis, and an integration of that conception into philosophy with
eventually far-reaching consequences for twentieth-century intellectual life and the contemporary, post-1968 scene in particular.

The fury of the recent “Heidegger controversy” makes it necessary to recall that the German philosopher’s Nazism has been a matter of record and in many quarters more or less well known since 1933. After World War II, the issue that has provoked responses ranging from anxious reflection to angry denial to vituperative, almost inquisitorial, accusation, three times crystallizing in fierce public debate in France, has not been the fact of Heidegger’s temporary allegiance to the movement, but its extent, persistence and, most important, its relationship to his philosophy and its evolution. The terms of those disputes, especially the most recent one, have little relevance here for two reasons. First, Levinas kept a relatively low profile in the “Heidegger controversy” of the 1980s, and had none at all in the two that took place in the 1940s and the 1960s. But second, Levinas appears to have had his own personal Auseinandersetzung (reckoning) with Heidegger, both his politics and the philosophical basis he imputed to them, in the 1930s in terms almost totally foreign to those that reign today. It is from this struggle that Levinas’s project originates, and it is therefore a matter for the interpreter of giving content to Adriaan Peperzak’s tantalizing but undeveloped suggestion that “Levinas’s critique has its root ... in the conviction that Heidegger collaborated to some extent with the Nazis, not just as the Rector of the University of Freiburg, but also as a philosopher who shared in their mentality and who aided and abetted in their endeavors.”

Though they have to be treated with caution given their retrospective nature, Levinas’s interviews from the 1980s, as well as his minor but powerful response to the most recent affair, provide an excellent starting point because they indicate exactly when he learned of Heidegger’s political misadventure and intimate how personally shocking it must have been. In “As If Consenting to Horror,” a short article printed in Le Nouvel Observateur in 1988 along with the responses of a number of other philosophers, Levinas wrote:

I learned very early, perhaps even before 1933 and certainly after Hitler’s huge success at the time of his election to the Reichstag, of Heidegger’s sympathy toward National Socialism. It was the late Alexandre Koyré who mentioned it to me for the first time on his
return from a trip to Germany. I could not doubt the news, but
took it with stupor and disappointment, and also with the faint
hope that it expressed only the temporary lapse of a great specula-
tive mind into practical banality. It cast a shadow over my firm
confidence that an unbridgeable distance forever separated the
delirious and criminal hatred voiced by Evil on the pages of Mein
Kampf from the intellectual vigor and extreme analytical virtuosity
displayed in Sein und Zeit, which had opened the field to a new
type of philosophical inquiry.\(^3\)

In his postwar comments, Levinas never stated without ambiguity
whether he believed that any aspects of Being and Time, the book that
made him a near apostle, might have allowed or even encouraged
Heidegger’s later political association. Yet without ever repudiating the
book, as his good friend Jean Wahl for instance did in later years, Levinas
did not deny the possibility of a connection. “Can we be assured,” he
asks,

that there was never any echo of Evil in it? The diabolical is not
limited to the wickedness popular wisdom ascribes to it and whose
malice, based on guile, is familiar and predictable in an adult
culture. The diabolical is endowed with intelligence and enters
where it will. To reject it, it is first necessary to refute it. Intellectual
effort is needed to recognize it. Who can boast of having done so?
Say what you will, the diabolical gives food for thought.\(^4\)

These reflections strongly imply that in the earlier period—when an
obvious possibility of association with Heidegger’s philosophy had not
yet been transcended—Levinas’s recriminations at Heidegger’s political
association must have been great. At points in interviews he seems to
hint at them. For example, recalling the experience of near conversion
that he appears to have had and that Heidegger’s performance against
Ernst Cassirer at the famous philosophical conference in Davos,
Switzerland seems to have capped, Levinas said: “Heidegger announced
a world that would be thrown into confusion. You know whom he
would join three years later: it would, however, have required the gift of
prophecy to foretell it at Davos. I imagined for a long time, during the
course of the dark years, that I had detected it then, despite my enthusiasm.” But he did not, to his own regret. “I held it against myself during the Nazi years to have preferred Heidegger at Davos.” A similar moment of contrition surfaces once again when he remembers that Heidegger’s “firm and categorical voice came back to me frequently when I listened to Hitler on the radio.” At least a sense (even a misguided one) of some connection between Heidegger and Hitler—or, more precisely, between being-in-the-world and what Levinas called “practical banality”—seems to be the condition for the possibility of Levinas’s guilty conscience in the 1930s. Given the imputed connection, Levinas, implicated in the philosophy, might have felt himself to be if not implicated then at least associated with the politics. Prima facie, then, there seems to be extremely good reason to postulate that Levinas’s reaction to Heidegger’s political misadventure must have been profound and personally exacting—very possibly the catalyst in his own development.

It remains, of course, only a postulation until it has been specified through a detailed chronological and contextual examination of Levinas’s writings of the 1930s; such an examination imposes two demands worth noting before it is undertaken. For one thing, it is necessary to begin before 1933, to traverse the somewhat contested terrain of Levinas’s reception of phenomenology, in order to determine precisely his personal attractions and philosophical allegiances at that time. It needs to be clear that the historical procedure adopted does not replace purely internal commentary on the texts; indeed, what follows depends on it. Second, the texts involved are little known in France and unknown in the English-speaking world. They require extensive quotation and synopsis, which force the essay to verge dangerously on a full-scale account of Levinas’s writings in these years. But despite its lengthy prologue and its many accoutrements, the narrative this essay provides meets its intended purpose only if it is taken in the end less as a summary overview of Levinas’s thought in this period than as a plausible explanation for how it developed out of a generative personal crisis—one in which common interpretive dichotomies such as philosophy and politics, meaning and experience, and theory and history collapse upon inspection because their terms were imbricated and mutually defined.
"DISCOVERING EXISTENCE," 1928–1932

"I remain to this day a phenomenologist," Levinas commented in an interview now a decade old. Whether his earlier interests and preoccupations and however novel his latest work, then, it is necessary to reconstruct the formative matrix of Levinas's distinctive project by examining in some detail his reception of phenomenology in the crucial years of 1928–1932. After finishing the equivalent of his undergraduate years at the University of Strasbourg, and on the strength of a close reading of Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, Levinas traveled to Freiburg and spent the 1928/29 academic year there, taking informal courses from Husserl, who had just retired, and attending the formal lecture course of Martin Heidegger, who had assumed his former teacher's chair in philosophy. The visit had an incalculable impact on Levinas: along with many others in the apparently heady atmosphere of Freiburg in the late 1920s, phenomenology seemed to be offering, as he himself put it in an appreciation soon after his departure, "more than a new theory: it is a new ideal for life, a new page in history, almost a new religion." Yet in the crucial years in the late 1920s and the very early 1930s, Levinas never counted as a pure Husserlian except in the short time between his reading of the *Logical Investigations* and the beginning of his sojourn in Freiburg, and perhaps not even then given his earlier training in Strasbourg. "To speak the language of a tourist," Levinas recalled in the 1980s of his trip to Freiburg, "I had the impression that I went thinking to visit Husserl and found Heidegger instead." It is difficult to overestimate Heidegger's role in Levinas's development, and the burden of the interpreter rests partly on retrieving what Levinas called in retrospect "the ambiance of those readings when 1933 was still unthinkable." Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which Levinas continued to count as "one of the finest books in the history of philosophy" came as a shock to Levinas as to many in his generation, "completely altered the course and character of European philosophy," and revolutionized Husserlian phenomenology by retrieving a question and mode of analysis long forgotten. Even after 1945, Levinas remained of the opinion that "a man who undertakes to philosophize in the twentieth century cannot not have gone through Heidegger's philosophy, even to escape it."
Heidegger's invitation, Levinas attended the colloquium of French and German intellectuals at Davos in the summer of 1929, which he called "a summit of thought"\(^1\) that signaled "the end of a certain humanism,"\(^2\) and the announcement of a new philosophical order.

Levinas's first substantial comments on that order, "Martin Heidegger and Ontology," appeared only in 1932 (in a different, more admiring form from that under which they were later published in the postwar collection, *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger*) and do not express any reservations whatever toward Heidegger's project.\(^3\) The late date of publication does not signal a defection to a Heideggerian position from an original Husserlian perspective. Levinas's prize-winning dissertation, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* of 1930, may have been decisive in the introduction of Husserl to France—Paul Ricoeur claims that it "quite simply founded Husserlian studies in France"\(^4\)—but it is in fact a partisan account that violated Husserl's own understanding of his work, explicated a body of philosophy that Levinas considered already superseded—or rather actualized according to its own unthought suppositions. "In my first book which appeared fifty years ago, in 1930," Levinas has admitted, "I made every effort to present Husserl's doctrine by finding Heideggerian elements in it, as if Husserl's philosophy already posed the Heideggerian problem ... I do not think even today to have been wholly mistaken."\(^5\) By 1930, in other words, Levinas had joined Heidegger at the cutting edge, and surveyed Husserl's contribution from there.

If it is impossible in this space to provide comprehensive evidence for these assertions, it is fortunately unnecessary, for much of it has already been assembled by several professional philosophers, and only certain essential points need to be emphasized.\(^6\) Levinas understood Heidegger to have gone beyond Husserl from two different vantage points. First, since for Levinas Husserl's project had not just laid the necessary foundations for, but had actually covertly been an ontology, Heidegger by restituting investigation at the ontological level had brought to the surface Husserl's implicit concerns. Heidegger's ontology could thus be understood as "the fruition and flowering of Husserl's phenomenology,"\(^7\) and Husserl retroactively investigated as Heidegger's unwitting forerunner. But second, and crucial for the purposes of this essay, if Husserl's epistemology amounted in fact to an ontology in the
Heideggerian sense, it harbored indefensible and arbitrary biases for theoreticism and representation, linked to an unjustified theory of the sovereign, transcendental, autonomous, and spectatorial subject, all of which needed to be contradicted in favor of an exploration of “being-in-the-world,” to recall Heidegger’s famous phrase.

Levinas’s position, then, had two dimensions—anti-Husserlian and pro-Heideggerian. Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, Levinas wrote in *The Theory of Intuition*, illegitimately elevated “[t]heory and representation” to the position of “forms of intentionality that give a foundation to all others,” thereby denigrating “[a]cts of will, desire, affection” which could have equally served as normative or been given equal status. For Husserl had conferred privilege on the role of spectatorial objectification without any justification: “Husserl gives himself the freedom of theory just as he gives himself theory.” In sum, Husserl “may have been wrong in seeing the concrete world as a world of objects that are primarily perceived. Is our main attitude toward reality that of theoretical contemplation? Is not the world presented in its very being as a center of action, as a field of activity or of care—to speak the language of Martin Heidegger?” Moreover, the phenomenological reduction also held out as a possibility, and even prescribed, the achievement of extramundane, atemporal, suprahistorical perspective so that “philosophy seems as independent of the historical situation of man as any theory that tries to consider everything sub specie aeternitatis.” In opposition, Levinas contended that “historicity is not a secondary property of man as if man existed first and then became temporal and historical. Historicity and temporality form the very substantiality of man’s substance.” Life cannot be surveyed from a god’s external and eternal vantage point when it is lived by human beings in a finite situation.

Levinas credited Heidegger with remediating the ills of theoretical and ahistorical explorations of consciousness, but it is truer to say that Heidegger provided Levinas with the supplemented point of view from which they became recognizable as deficient. Most importantly, Heidegger toppled the autonomous, distantiated subject Husserl had insistently preserved in his attempted rehabilitation of Descartes, and enmeshed it deeply in the world. Thus, as Adriaan Peperzak has summarized the thrust of Levinas’s first article on Heidegger,
Levinas explains the unbreakable connection between the ontological question of Being and the hermeneutics of the being called *Dasein* and follows Heidegger’s clarification of *Seinsverständnis* in its difference from the contemplative or theoretical knowledge, which has dominated Western philosophy from Plato to Husserl. The world of the ready-at-hand (*Zubehörheit*) and of care (*Sorge*) is firmly opposed to the objectivity of representationism. The finite character of transcendence is stressed by an explanation of Heidegger’s analysis of “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*), “disposition” (*Befindlichkeit*), facticity (*Faktizität*), and “fallenness” (*Verfallenheit*). The fundamental and unifying role of anxiety (*Angst*) is underlined and the radicality of Heidegger’s analysis of temporality ... is brought to the fore.\(^{25}\)

In particular, it is necessary to emphasize Levinas’s appreciative description of *Befindlichkeit* and *Geworfenheit* with which Heidegger revealed “the fact that *Dasein* is fixed (rivé) to its possibilities, that its circumstantiality imposes itself on it. By existing, *Dasein* is always already thrown in the midst of its possibilities and not situated in front of them.”\(^{26}\) In these sentences, which acquire more importance from the perspective of later texts in the 1930s, Levinas introduces a notion that here remains close to Heidegger’s intention but would soon take on different resonances. But as Peperzak’s useful summary implies, in “Martin Heidegger and Ontology” all of the German philosopher’s rich analyses of temporalized “being-in-the-world” are recapitulated, albeit succinctly, as a reviving substitution for a Husserlian phenomenology “in which we consider life in all its concreteness but no longer live it.”\(^{27}\)

The particulars of this individual reception history have warranted such lengthy reconstruction because it is of the essence to understand that by 1932 Levinas had departed from Husserl only insofar as he understood himself to have adopted Heidegger’s project without serious or significant reservation. Levinas intended his article, “Martin Heidegger and Ontology,” as the first part of a book which would explicate *Being and Time* and argue its supersession of Husserlian phenomenology,\(^{28}\) a thesis which as the discussion has shown existed in germ form even in the dissertation. Levinas at the advent of National Socialism might have
even deserved to be called a relatively orthodox, even ardent Heideggerian.

Richard A. Cohen, otherwise Levinas’s most profound American exegete and disciple, claims that “Levinas has never been a Heideggerian,” and adds elsewhere that “[t]hough influenced [by Heidegger], Levinas was never—contrary to Herbert Spiegelberg’s unsupported charge—a Heideggerian.”29 It is indeed possible and worthwhile to construct a meaningful argument to the effect that Levinas had differences with Heidegger from the very beginning, yet it is only through an equal sensitivity to how far Levinas traveled with the early Heidegger and how much he drew from him (a willingness that does not entail “charging” Levinas with anything) that the biographical and philosophical itinerary between 1930 and 1935 becomes intelligible. Indeed, a recovery of the excitement Heidegger’s work inspired upon its publication licenses such an interpretation. In his article, Levinas noted the enthusiasm that had spread through Germany beginning in the 1920s and saw it as valid. “/L’a Gloire ne s’est pas trompée,” he commented. “No one who has ever done philosophy can keep himself from declaring, before the Heideggerian corpus, that the originality and power of his effort, born of genius, have allied themselves with a conscientious, meticulous, and solid elaboration.” Heidegger’s work had to be seen, he added, as the belle fierté of phenomenology.30 Instead, then, of vainly attempting to redeem Levinas from any Heideggerian association, even at the peril of anachronism, it is more fruitful to hypothesize that it might have been exactly that peril of association and even identity that compromised Levinas after 1933 and forced him to attempt to transcend Heidegger. Levinas, in other words, understood himself and thus has to be understood as enough of “a Heideggerian” in 1930 to have been shocked, distraught, and philosophically instigated by Heidegger’s Nazi turn.

If a Heideggerian, Levinas did not remain one. But in spite of Jacques Derrida’s claim that Levinas always remained “uncomfortably situated in the difference between Husserl and Heidegger,”31 it is more accurate, speaking historically with Robert John Sheffler Manning, to say of the early 1930s that “Levinas quite clearly situates himself beside Heidegger, and it is there that he grows uncomfortable.”32 Soon after 1933, Levinas abandoned his intended book-length study on Heidegger
and entered into a period of apparent crisis, one whose nature, dimensions, and generative power it is the purpose of the next section to begin to understand. For if Levinas discovered existence in the company of Husserl and Heidegger, he would have to master it quite alone.

**PHILOSOPHY IN THE REALM OF POLITICS**

It has to be admitted, even considering Levinas’s early and documented fascination with Heidegger, that he need not (along with many Heideggerians past, present and future) have considered the German philosopher’s flirtation with Nazism philosophically relevant and thus personally difficult—unless, that is, Nazism itself were understood as a philosophically significant phenomenon. How the French generally and intellectuals in particular understood National Socialism in the 1930s, and how that understanding evolved as the decade waned, has not been adequately studied. Nonetheless, recent scholarship on French literary fascism and Georges Bataille’s *surfascisme* suggest that Nazism exerted a strange attraction on intellectuals, whether as the object of unfortunate affirmation or simply as the subject of necessary speculation and philosophical understanding in a time of acute intellectual, cultural and political dislocation. Philosophers and more especially literary intellectuals in France were implicated in the same troubling syndrome Hans Sluga has recently analyzed for Germany’s case, a syndrome which prominently featured in all factions “the belief that the time was one of world-historical crisis, a crisis so deep that it was no longer purely a political event but a spiritual and philosophical one.”

A critical and historical investigation requires the sober recognition that Levinas’s first work bears the marks of this climate.

The very title of Levinas’s article, “Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” which appeared in *Esprit* in early 1934, suggests that for its author the issue of coming to terms with National Socialism had special, metaphysical stakes. In later years, Levinas excluded these reflections from his list of publications, regretting an attribution of philosophical status to his subject that conferred on it a dignity he did not think it deserved. Yet it is of extraordinary moment that Levinas attempted to understand Nazism in philosophical terms. Because Nazism
seemed to Levinas at the time to awaken "secret nostalgia within the German soul" and other "elementary feelings," the political movement "becomes philosophically interesting." He added: "These elementary feelings harbor a philosophy."\textsuperscript{35} But what philosophy?

Schematically put, Levinas understood Nazism as an assault on the modern subject, an extreme detranscendentalizing response to abstract, disembodied, "punctual" selfhood. Against the dominant strain of Western culture, which hypostatized man as potentially or essentially free of his contexts—his body and his ineffable temporality especially—Nazism took the contrary position and took it to its illogical extreme; for this reason Levinas could assert that "Nazism questions the very principles of a civilization"\textsuperscript{36}—principles informing not just its political ideology but its philosophical tradition through Descartes to Husserl. It is worth seeing in some detail how Levinas elaborates this argument, because its structure and its very fissures invite comment.

Western society, Levinas announced, had developed a "spirit of freedom" which involved "a feeling that man is absolutely free in his relations with the world and the possibilities that solicit action from him.... Speaking absolutely, he has no history."\textsuperscript{37} Especially noteworthy had been its persistent suppression of the temporalization of existence which, to anticipate, Bergson and Heidegger had shown to be definitional of existence and not an adventitious development. The transcendentalization of spirit reached its apotheosis in Christianity, as well as in the modern liberalism which Levinas seems to have viewed as its sublimation.

The cross sets one free; and through the Eucharist, which triumphs over time, this emancipation takes place every day. The salvation that Christianity wishes to bring us lies in the way it promises to reopen the finality brought about by the flow of moments of a past that is forever challenged, forever called into question, to go beyond the absolute contradiction of a past that is subordinate to the present.... This freedom, which is infinite with regard to any attachment and through which no attachment is ultimately definitive, lies at the base of the Christian notion of the soul.\textsuperscript{38}
And liberalism, even if it appeared to be more realistic than Christianity, jettisoning the exorbitant promises of eternal life to address only mundane concerns, only reiterated in modified language its inflated claims for the self’s autonomy and detachment.

If the liberalism of these last few centuries evades the dramatic aspects of [Christian] liberation, it does retain one of its essential elements in the form of the sovereign freedom of reason. The whole philosophical and political thought of modern times tends to place the human spirit on a plane that is superior to reality, and so creates a gulf between man and the world. It makes it impossible to apply the categories of the physical world to the spirituality of reason, and so locates the ultimate foundation of the spirit outside the brutal world and the implacable history of concrete existence. It replaces the blind world of common sense with the world rebuilt by idealist philosophy, one that is steeped in reason and subject to reason. In the place of liberation through grace there is autonomy, but the Judeo-Christian leitmotif of freedom pervades this autonomy.39

It is against this entire tradition that Hitlerism rebels.

Though anticipated in certain respects by Marxism,40 only Hitlerism makes the clean break with transcendental culture and philosophy. According to Levinas’s argument, Nazism wholly immanentizes spirit, anchoring the self without hope of liberation in its contexts, the body above all. “A view that was truly opposed to the European notion of man would be possible,” Levinas averred, “only if the situation to which he was bound (rinov) was not added to him but formed the very foundation of his being. This paradoxical requirement is one that the experience of our bodies seems to fulfill.”41 In the body, the subject claiming autonomy and sovereignty for itself finds its most implacable enemy and a concrete, insuperable barrier; it is there that hostility to the narcissism of transcendental thinking can take root, in a carnal soil impossible to erode:

The importance attributed to this feeling for the body, with which the Western spirit has never wished to content itself, is at the basis
of a new conception of man.... Man's essence no longer lies in freedom, but in a kind of bondage (enchainment). To be truly oneself does not mean taking flight once more above contingent events that always remain foreign to the self's freedom; on the contrary, it means becoming aware of the ineluctable original chain that is unique to our bodies, and above all accepting this chaining.\footnote{42}

It is only a few steps from the assault on the transcendental subject to its corporeal bondage, and from there to racial ideology: a politicization of the body confers legitimacy only on social forms based on the authenticity of consanguinity; these social forms then take on universal (that is, exclusivist) validity, which requires a Nietzschean ideal of war and conquest to bring about their realization. Levinas concluded: "[R]acism is not just opposed to such and such a particular point in Christian and liberal culture. It is not a particular dogma concerning democracy, parliamentary government, dictatorial regime, or religious politics that is in question. It is the very humanity of man."\footnote{43}

Besides Marx and Nietzsche, Levinas's article does not invoke any philosophers, despite the fact that Hitlerism as a philosophical phenomenon would presumably have philosophical representatives. If the article has any explicit target among philosophers, it is Nietzsche, the first (but not the last) thinker ever to make paganism an honorific term and concept. As Bataille noted in a response to the article, however, Levinas does not build any case against Nietzsche, so that the true philosophical target of the article must be sought elsewhere.\footnote{44} Levinas identified Heideggerian ontology as the latent adversary of "Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" in a letter to Critical Inquiry on the occasion of the essay's English-language publication in that journal, and there is an almost transparent formal similarity between the world-historical script that the article develops and Levinas's philosophical odyssey from transcendental phenomenology to ontology.

Heidegger's critique of Husserl, as Levinas had understood it in his dissertation and early writings, had been directed against precisely the hypostatization of "the European notion of man"—the subject whose autonomy, spectatorial distantiation, and sovereignty Husserl, returning to Descartes, had been concerned to secure, albeit in a more nuanced fashion. The purpose of the phenomenological reduction, after all, had
been precisely to sever all links between the self and anything that might have defined it, eliminating all alleged "contingencies" that did not ultimately impinge on the ultimate and unique necessity of the transcendental ego. With his investigation of "being-in-the-world," Heidegger contradicted Husserl, undermining the ego's sovereignty, immersing it in the world of life. In short, National Socialism's advent and Martin Heidegger's political decision compelled Levinas to politicize the distinction between Husserl and Heidegger.

It is easy to object, from a modern perspective, that Heidegger never anchored *Dasein* in the physical body and thus ought to be exonerated from any philosophical implication in biologically racist National Socialism, especially as Levinas interpreted its deep historical meaning. Yet according to the argumentative strategy of "Some Reflections," an antagonism to transcendental subjectivity seems to have Hitlerism as its ultimate consequence, and Levinas presents his case as if the one necessarily follows from the other. This conclusion depends on a number of less than fully intuitive leaps—for instance, from detranscendentalization to corporeality and then from corporeality to racial thinking. The fact that his argument may collapse on close inspection of its transitions, however, makes it even more revealing. In the key sentences—those linking a move against "the European notion of man ... possible only if the situation to which he was bound was not added to him but formed the very foundation of his being," to "the experience of our bodies"—Levinas does not even contemplate whether corporeality is the only response to the autonomy of the self or simply the most obvious one. This crucial failure to distinguish between hostility to the modern transcendental subject and advocacy of racial thinking obviates precisely the possibility of making a distinction that could have allowed Levinas to sever any possible connection between Heidegger and Hitlerism. Yet at the time, Levinas's needs appear to have been quite the reverse.

For these purposes, it is only necessary to understand that Levinas in his article located the main rupture in the history of culture between the transcendental, disembodied subjectivity that claimed independence of its contexts on one side, and all hostility to, even rage against it on the other—the selfsame rupture that he understood to have taken place between Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas's account of modern history,
then, needs to be seen as a projection onto history of the philosophical break between Husserl and Heidegger, between the autonomy Husserl accorded the subject and the existential situatedness preached by Heidegger—the Geworfenheit which Levinas saw fixing Dasein to its possibilities in the same way that Hitlerism fixed it to the body. Levinas even used the same word to designate the relationship.

The present argument does not entail the claim that Heideggerianism and Hitlerism are identical, only that Levinas saw them in that way, or at least closely associated or formally parallel—and that he also obscured the means by which they might have been distinguished, by holding that opposition to the traditional hypostatization of autonomy easily degenerated into racial thinking. Reading between the lines of “Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” it appears that Heidegger had turned onto a road which had Hitlerism as an ultimate or at least a possible destination. And Levinas had followed him down it.

CRISIS

But Levinas could not simply forget Heidegger’s breathtaking analysis in Being and Time and his subversion of Husserlian phenomenology in particular. The Heideggerian assault on the transcendental, humanist subject had not only been accomplished, it had been philosophically justified; rigor mortis had taken hold, resuscitation seemed beyond hope and wisdom, and Levinas did not even attempt it. The only way out of Heideggerianism seemed to be through it: “To reject it, it is first necessary to refute it.” Thus when Levinas wrote his first independent philosophical essay, “Evasion,” published in Recherches philosophiques in 1935, it had become a question of how to evade Heidegger, without at the same time avoiding him. “Evasion” is an essay that sketches the dimensions of a problem, one for which its author does not have a solution, or at least does not offer one.

Levinas’s proposition is remarkably simple, though it has radical consequences and permitted interesting phenomenological descriptions of different modes of human activity. Levinas named “the need for evasion” as “the fundamental event of our existence,” a slightly different way of saying that it amounted to a “fundamental project”
which allowed most of human behavior to be analyzed as the result of a single existential difficulty. Levinas understood this difficulty to be the fact of Being (not Nothingness):

The elementary truth that there is Being—Being that has substance and weight—reveals itself in a depth that corresponds to its brutality and its significance. The likable game of life loses its gamelike quality. It is not that the sufferings by which it is menaced renders it unpleasant, but that the content of the suffering is characterized by an impossibility to interrupt it and by a sharp feeling of being fixed (rivé). 47

Again, this rhetoric, and the term rivé more particularly, is identical to the one he used previously to describe Heideggerian Geworfenheit and Hitlerian corporeality. But the concept has changed from a breathtaking philosophical insight into a marker for unrelenting suffering.

Yet Levinas accepts Heidegger’s reformulation of the problem of Being as a philosophically sound criticism of what he called “bourgeois philosophy.” As Manning describes it, “Levinas criticizes or, to use Heidegger’s phrase, ‘destroys’ the history of ontology in the same manner and on the same basis as Heidegger. More than this, however, Levinas does this for the same reason and with the same intention as Heidegger.” 48 But if Levinas followed Heidegger in claiming that in penetrating to the level of ontology one reaches “the heart of philosophy... renew[ing] the ancient problem of Being as such,” 49 Levinas entered the Heideggerian problematic only to exit it through what he termed “excedence.” Levinas is not fundamentally interested in a fleeing of Dasein from itself, which has Heideggerian precedent, but rather the escape from Sein itself. Levinas, then, ultimately looked favorably on “the experience of a revolt” that Being inspired and that he thought characterized his generation and much contemporary literature. In the words of one commentator, “The debilitating relationship with absurd and irremissible Being that always traps the self would not have been conceived by Heidegger in its brutality and its tragedy.” 50 What Heidegger unearthed to address, Levinas addressed to escape.

By his lights, however, the yearning for evasion needed philosophical elaboration in order for its proponents to grasp the nature and
strength of the chains that bound them—and what it would take to slip them. For the specific forms that revolt commonly took were predestined to failure insofar as they misapprehended the contours of the problem, in the same way that a misdiagnosis leads to a faulty cure. Levinas construed the European Romantics as his main object lesson: they had, Levinas contended, understood their malaise as a lack, so that they mistakenly believed that profligacy, adventure, and travel might ultimately save them. But in all of their efforts, Levinas commented, “they do not yet bring Being itself into discussion, but submit to a need to transcend the limits of finite Being. They translate the horror of a certain definition of our Being and not Being as such. The escape that they recommend is a search for refuge. It is not a matter simply of getting out, but also of going somewhere else.” The Romantics and their progeny searched vainly for infinite experience without recognizing that the problem was not the insufficiency of one experience or another but a defect in the subject that did the experiencing, not a quantitative problem but a qualitative one. “The need for evasion,” Levinas wrote, “finds itself absolutely identical at every stop to which its adventure brings it, as if the well-traveled road could take away none of its dissatisfaction.” Being tracks one wherever one goes.

Most of the essay’s body comprises analyses of different human activities or states of being and how they relate to the more fundamental need for evasion—analyses of pleasure, shame and nausea worth quickly recounting. The search for pleasure seems to have been for Levinas the proof of the need for evasion and the prime example of misguided attempts to secure it. Pleasure could, of course, never secure a route of evasion because Levinas saw as the ultimate horror the mere fact of Being, not something done in degrees; reflection showed that Being meant superabundance and not lack or privation. Nonetheless, pleasurable activities had a circumscribed plausibility as a response to the need for evasion because they seemed, for instance in a moment of orgasmic false consciousness, to promise escape. “If it is a process which ... appears to be constantly surpassing what it has already provided, it founders precisely at the instant when it seems to offer definitive escape.... It develops with an increase of promises that become more and more rich as they come closer and closer to paroxysm—but these promises are never kept.” Despite all its efforts, ultimately consciousness
would have to admit the truth to itself: “It is a deceptive evasion ... because it is an evasion that fails.... [Pleasure] meets the exigencies of need but is always incapable of corresponding to their measure.”

Shame Levinas saw as the inevitable response to the failure of evasion, and he claimed to discern in Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s deeply cynical Voyage au bout de la nuit a similar insight. Levinas concretized shame in the phenomenon of nudity in which, he argued, one is able to hide neither from others nor, more importantly, from oneself. “One thinks first of the social aspect of shame,” he observed, “but this is to forget that its most profound manifestations are an eminently personal affair.” Shame discloses the fact of Being, described again in telltale terms: “What appears in shame is thus precisely the fact of being fixed (rivé) to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself in order to hide from oneself, the irremissible presence of the self to oneself.... What shame discovers is Being that dis-covers itself.”

Finally, Levinas provided a short discussion of nausea as the experience of need for evasion itself, what he called “the experience of pure Being itself,” and named it as the new mal du siècle. “There is in nausea a refusal to remain in it, and an effort to escape.... [O]ne is ... fixed (rivé) to oneself, gripped tightly in a narrow, suffocating circle: it is the experience of pure Being itself.” In this and in many other ways “Evasion” fascinatingly presages Sartre’s gripping analyses in Nausea and in Being and Nothingness, but with one crucial difference. For Sartre, nausea arose as an intimation of, and pleasure became a typically sought antidote to, the insight into extreme subjective autonomy, the gnawing abyss of nothingness that threatened the self that grasped its own freedom. Levinas saw the problem quite differently: the “fundamental project” in all of its guises seemed to be an attempt to escape not from nothingness but from a forever inexpungeable something.

“To the need for evasion, Being appears not just as an obstacle that one might clear, nor as a rigidity that ... demands an effort at originality, but as an imprisonment from which it is a matter of escaping.... It seems then that at the base of this need there is not a lack of Being, but on the contrary a plenitude. The need is not directed toward the total fulfillment of limited Being, toward satisfaction, but toward deliverance and evasion.”
Being is understood to have an imponderable substantiality and weight, hence evasion followed from the self’s need to achieve a state “otherwise than Being.”

But most importantly, in “Evasion,” written in 1935, the different philosophical stances had explicitly political dimensions, and they parallel exactly those outlined in “Some Reflections.” For though Levinas never names Husserl and Heidegger, it is clear in his discussion of idealism that he continues to accept transcendental philosophy’s vulnerability to ontological critique. “The deliverance idealism provides from Being”—i.e. ignoring it—“is based on its underestimation. It follows that at the very moment that idealism imagines itself to have gone beyond it, it is invaded by it from all sides.” Heidegger’s critique of Husserl remained undeniably valid, but the Heideggerian position that identifies the Seinsfrage only to submit to it has an explicitly political result: “All civilizations that accept Being, the tragic hopelessness that it comprises and the crimes it justifies, deserve the name of barbarism.”

This sentence seals the connection between Heideggerian ontology and Hitlerism.

The crisis that therefore gripped Levinas in the aftermath of the Nazi seizure of power and Heidegger’s support of it seems to have been the impossibility of choosing between a politically acceptable but philosophically bankrupt position, the Western humanism incarnated in the figure of Husserl, and a politically savage but unfortunately more philosophically attractive position represented by Heidegger. Thus, Levinas concluded: “It is a matter of leaving Being by a new route, at the risk of upsetting certain notions that seem the most evident to common sense and to the wisdom of nations.” What that route might be, Levinas did not at that point say.

JUDAISM AGAINST PAGANISM

After publishing The Theory of Intuition in 1930, Levinas began work as an administrator for the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an advocacy organization for Jews headquartering in France but globally concerned. It goes without saying that the 1930s were years of crisis for Jews worldwide, but particularly unprecedented disruption, whether rabid anti-
Semitism from within or immigration of Ostjuden from without, afflicted the French Jewish community, which for various reasons had been among the two or three luckiest in Europe in a relatively pacific century and a half since its emancipation. Levinas’s occupation placed him at the center of a network of information and advocacy, so that, as he later remembered, “Not everything in my thoughts related to the fortunes of Judaism, but my activity at the Alliance kept me abreast of the Jews’ ordeal, bringing me back without end to the concrete social and political problems that related to it everywhere.”

At the same time, Levinas recalls that Jewish study had slackened during his university and phenomenological years of 1925 until 1932. To an extent that one should nevertheless not exaggerate, his interest in conceptualizing Judaism philosophically after 1933 has the character of a return to an activity that he never wholly abandoned, much less renounced, but that had progressively lost importance to him. The return seems to have been overdetermined, for it followed in part, as he noted of all contemporary Jews, from the externally coerced acceptance of particularist identity, but also because of extreme internal needs for a supplement to the Heideggerianism that had afforded him a philosophically rich, but after 1933 politically and ethically compromised, position.

*Paix et Droit*, the Alliance’s monthly house organ, featured several articles Levinas wrote between 1935 and 1939 directed to the Jewish public, but they were unmistakably the product of philosophical consciousness and, though short, powerfully indicative of his concerns. The articles cover an impressive range of topics, from Maimonides and the issue of conversion to anti-Semitism and the Pope’s death. But they stem from a common inspiration and, in a way, argue one single point despite the diversity of their explicit subjects. They lent support to the Alliance’s “out of the ghetto, into the city” ideology—integrationist, yet nonassimilationist and non-nationalist—but also took the opportunities afforded by public comment to discern the metaphysical essence of anti-Semitism and to tout the originality of its counter-concept, Judaism. In these articles Levinas first unveiled and elaborated the positive route of evasion he would later integrate into philosophy.

Appearing alongside reports on the progress of German anti-Semitism, Levinas’s articles repeat the theory of Hitlerism surveyed above
and argue its effect on Jewish consciousness. “Judeo-Christian civilization,” he put it in one article, “is thrown into doubt by an arrogant barbarism installed in Europe’s heart. With a still unequaled audacity, paganism rears its head, upsetting values, confounding even elementary distinctions, erasing the limits of the profane and the sacred, dissolving those very principles which until now allowed order to be reestablished.” Under the impact of anti-Semitism and confronted by the survival of the pagan gods, the Jew was forcibly recalled to his identity, even externally fixed to it: “The pathetic fate of a Jew becomes a fatality. One can no longer flee it. The Jew is ineluctably fixed (rippedé) to his Judaism.”

Yet what seemed at first a “pathetic fate” turned out—on philosophical inspection or, perhaps more accurately, after philosophical invention—to be a precious one. For Levinas argued that precisely by returning to Judaism and “the certitude of its value, its dignity and its mission,” the Jew found the spiritual remedy that accommodated the fixity of Judaism but evacuated it of its constrictive nature—and, indeed, assumed the character of a universal ideal. In one article, for instance, Levinas looked to Maimonides, whose project had been the reconciliation of Judaism and Aristotelian philosophy and who, in The Guide of the Perplexed, had “for the first time ... stopped the clan of a reason which applied concepts borrowed from the world to what transcended it.” Levinas then instrumentalized this point in a political way: “[I]n the neatness of this distinction between thought that thinks the world and thought that transcends it consists the definitive victory of Judaism over paganism.”

If the circumstances required a reinterpretation of Judaism, it also entailed “strong” interpretations of Nazism and Heideggerianism as well and involved a return to a binary logic with a fraught history that pitted Jews against their pagan rivals. Qua paganism, Hitlerism constrained not just Jews but all humans to the despiritualized world of immanence; qua anti-paganism, Judaism represented not a historical, particularistic ethos but a transhistorical, universalistic ideal—for Jews and non-Jews alike. If “[p]aganism is a radical powerlessness to leave the world”—in short, to evade it—then “Judaism is nothing, in the final analysis, but anti-paganism. It is anti-paganism par excellence.” Here, then, is Levinas’s radically simple mode of evasion.
This conception necessarily resulted in a sacralized history in which both Judaism and paganism had to take on the suprahistorical roles. On the one hand, National Socialism could not be understood as another mere event, to be mastered by a secular historicism: “[D]espite all of the considerations on the economic, political, and social roots of National Socialism in whose light the racial persecutions are nothing but an accident in the torment of the modern world,” Levinas put it, “Jews have the obscure feeling that Hitlerism is like a renewal of their vocation and their destiny.” And that destiny recalled to Jews simply an awareness of the messianic doctrine of God’s radical exteriority to the historical process. Levinas asserted:

Diaspora is a resignation: a fundamental renunciation of a political destiny—a hope, certainly, but a hope in a supernatural event that would break and arrest terrestrial history and which only a divine power could accomplish. As an essentially religious fact, it is not a sociological category applicable to originary history.... To forget the religious essence of the fact of the diaspora is to violate the very meaning of Jewish history, to renounce a difficult parentage, which is nonetheless admirable because of the resources of love and abnegation on which it calls. This stance entails nothing more than faith in the existence of extrasytemic exteriority, one that cannot be interiorized except through its reduction.

To ask about the sources of this conception of Judaism is to pose a question that cannot immediately be answered. It is now known that Levinas first encountered Franz Rosenzweig’s masterpiece, The Star of Redemption, in 1935, leading Richard Cohen to argue that “Heidegger’s ontology permits Levinas to see beneath the representational character of Husserl’s phenomenology ... but the ethics and justice of Rosenzweig’s ‘Star’ permit him to see through the ontological character of Heidegger’s regrounding of phenomenology.” Indeed, this hypothesis has a good deal of initial plausibility since it was Rosenzweig who first formulated the hostility to Hegelian totality that has been so often repeated in the years since his death. “It is the critique of the idea of totality in The Star of Redemption that I purely and simply reprised.
It's the rupture with Hegel." Levinas once assessed his debt to Rosenzweig. Along with Rosenzweig, then, Levinas broke with the philosophy of immanence that had arguably dominated Jewish intellectual history and modern thought generally beginning with Spinoza.

Yet while the "correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas" remain undeniable, it is difficult (and perhaps impossible) to assess whether Rosenzweig actually provided Levinas with his conception of Judaism or whether Levinas developed the germ on his own, under wholly different and extremely demanding contextual needs for a mode of evasion, and slowly configured Rosenzweig as an important precursor. An equally plausible argument, in other words, can be made that Rosenzweig did not exert his full influence on Levinas until the years advanced, an influence that led him to assimilate Heidegger to Hegel when his original target had been the former.

The Star of Redemption proved irreplaceable when Levinas came to generalize his critique of Heidegger to the entire Western metaphysical tradition, but it is unclear what role it played, or needed to play, in the original evasion of Heidegger. In his articles in the 1930s, it ought to be noted, Levinas never mentions the word "totality," and in "Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," published before he would have read The Star of Redemption, he wrote that "Judaism bears this magnificent message," without specifying precisely what that message was. Rosenzweig's influence does become more plausible in the later 1930s, when Levinas's articles turned, as The Star of Redemption does, to a coordination of Judaism and Christianity as twin, if ultimately dissimilar, responses—to idealism in Rosenzweig's case, to paganism in Levinas's. All in all, however, this problem of Levinas's originality and Rosenzweig's influence deserves more historical attention.

But whether or not Levinas's Judaism needs to be absolutely distinguished from its predecessors, the philosophical and political context of its articulation certainly does. Levinas never mentioned Heidegger in his articles. But the interrelations between Heideggerianism, Hitlerism and Judaism remain easy to discern and formulate. Anticipating Hans Jonas, who has most famously alleged that "the essential immanence of Heidegger's thought" forces one to acknowledge its "profoundly pagan character," Levinas made this equation and made it the foundation of his later philosophy. "The being whose fate Heidegger ponders is the
quintessence of this world, it is saeculum," Jonas put it. "Against this, theology should guard the radical transcendence of its God, whose voice comes not out of being but breaks into the kingdom of being from without." Levinas too defined Heideggerianism explicitly in terms of paganism, and Judaism as its inverse: "I am thinking of one prestigious current in modern thought, which emerged from Germany to flood the pagan recesses of our Western souls. I am thinking of Heidegger and Heideggerians," he wrote in 1961. "The Sacred filtering into the world [in Heidegger's glorification of Being]— Judaism is perhaps no more than the negation of all that.... Judaism has not sublimated idols—on the contrary, it has demanded that they be destroyed." 

It does not matter that equating Heideggerianism—or, for that matter, National Socialism itself—with paganism would provoke debate today; it only matters that Levinas made those equations (or reductions) in the mid-1930s and adhered to them indefinitely. On the other hand, an equally contextually determined conception of Judaism, whether one calls it Rosenzweigian or Levinasian, furnished a radically re-transcendentalizing response to the pagan philosophy of immanence Levinas thought Heidegger to be proffering and Hitlerism to incarnate.

Yet Judaism did not restore the Cartesian cogito to its position of supremacy through a return to transcendental philosophy; rather, it preserved the existential situation of the self in the world but fractured the immanence of that world by positing something that it could not accommodate. The relationship of God to the system, of infinity to a breached totality, would serve as the template for the Other's relationship to the self. This innovation preserved what had been gained in Heidegger's revolutionary supersession of Husserl but allowed a claim to be staked for its ethico-political acceptability. Levinas accepted the heteronomous, dedistantiated subject against the Western hypostatization of autonomy; yet he subordinated the self not to the base circumsstantiality of an immanent world but to that which radically transcends it. Or, in Jacques Derrida's famous verdict, "God alone keeps Levinas's world from being a world of pure and worst violence." It also keeps it from being Heideggerian, which amounts to the same.
CONCLUSION: HEIDEGGER AND "THE JEWS" SINCE THE WAR

Though Levinas would not fully synthesize them until Totality and Infinity appeared in 1961, many of the essential raw materials he would need to construct his distinctive, anti-Heideggerian philosophy had all been assembled by the mid-1930s. A number of publications would appear in the quarter-century that intervened, and that many of them have attracted commentators who argue that Totality and Infinity existed in germ form by 1940, 1947 or 1951 should not come as a surprise. If it has to be insisted that the trajectory between the 1930s and the 1960s (and beyond) itself deserves historical reconstruction, one may still claim that Levinas’s future development would be predicated on, and to a previously unrecognized extent evolve within, the contours of the generative intellectual and political matrix reconstructed here.

By way of summary, it is useful to recall the adventures in Levinas’s writings of the 1930s of a single word, the French rive, which had evolving meanings and political implications through the course of the story, which one may recount because they come so close to approximating the whole in microcosm. In its first incarnation, it simply corresponded to Heidegger’s Geworfenheit, the apotitical fact of Dasein’s being thrown irredeemably amidst possibilities. It took on more ominous overtones when it referred to the pagan binding of selfhood to the body, a bond to a situation which like Geworfenheit could not be cut. Levinas began his move away in “Evasion” by articulating a rage against Being’s inescapable hold. Finally, in its association with the Jew Levinas secured the ideal of a self that continued to be bound to necessity—in this case, to its Judaism—but in that very binding left itself open to radically transcendent exteriority.

For Levinas had only achieved serenity by adverting to Judaism, and his little-known essay, “Being Jewish,” also of 1947, has a title that one might say encapsulates his supersession of Heidegger: if Heidegger had raised the problem of Being, Levinas neutralized what he believed to be its difficulties through modification to Being Jewish. In the essay, a contribution to a special issue of the journal Confluences on Sartre’s well-known Réflexions sur la question juive (or Anti-Semite and Jew), Levinas asserted that “Being Jewish is not just to seek a refuge in the world, but is to understand oneself in a place in the economy of Being.”
experiences of 1933 to 1945, for those who had survived, meant the end of idealism and the acceptance of the impossibility of subjective transcendence of certain contexts along its assimilationist master plot: “Hitlerian anti-Semitism’s recourse to the racial myth recalled to the Jew the irremissibility of his being.” But going beyond Sartre, who had argued that the Jew only existed as a product of anti-Semitic hatred, Levinas argued that the Jew in fact did have a positive identity; it is no surprise in light of the previous discussion to hear what that identity is. “[T]he Jew is the very entrance of the religious event into the world; better still, he is the impossibility of the world without religion.” The Jew is fixed to Being, but also definitionally and constitutively aware of the limits of its potentially totalistic implications—aware, that is, of the infinity that it can never accommodate and that it must therefore respect.

The Jew’s adventures in recent French thought certainly have ambiguous implications, from their very beginnings in Levinas’s work. Though one might well point to the inadequacies of any sweeping conclusion about Levinas’s Judaism, as well as the assumption of an Archimedean point possessing the true definition of Judaism against which all others need to be judged, it is nonetheless undeniable that Levinas inaugurates a trend for postwar France that relentlessly hypothesizes the Jew as model subject position and the Jews as a model community—a move which, however attractive, threatens to evacuate the original referent of much of its historical specificity. Gillian Rose has commented that “Levinas present[s] Judaism as unchanging and without a history whether internal or external, and as commentary, as law and as community,” and if this is so it is because of the historically specific circumstances in which his conception originated. Levinas, it is in retrospect becoming clear, originated and partly determined the contours of an “invention of tradition,” a new and at least partly essentialized understanding of Judaism that after thirty years’ delay found wide currency in post-Marxist France, especially among intellectuals.

Jewish identity, it is worthwhile to note in the end, never possessed, at least in Levinas’s formulation, exclusivist or even particularist implications; in fact, it could not. Levinas’s hopes for nonviolence depended not just on God, but on a definition of Jewish identity that made it a universal trait, a universal dimension of human identity, recoverable by phenomenological investigation. Motivated by partly
philosophical and partly political concerns, Levinas had himself reinterpreted an apparent particularism and thereby elevated it to a universal principle, creating an apparent paradox of which he himself soon became aware. Unable to escape Being, yet oriented toward what lay beyond it, the Jew had to become a universal ethical ideal: “[T]hereby,” Levinas put it in his 1947 essay, “the human soul is perhaps naturally Jewish.” He continued to adhere to this position forty years later, and presumably until his death. “To be a Jew,” he put it in an interview, “it is not a particularity, but a modality.” For only when each one recognized himself in the Jew, and the Jew in himself, would the threat of pagan violence be banished forever from the earth.

NOTES

* I thank Julian Bourg, Richard A. Cohen and Martin Jay for their assistance. I am responsible for translations unless otherwise acknowledged.
4. Levinas, “As If Consenting to Horror,” 488.
5. Levinas and François Poirière, “Entretiens,” in Poirier, Emmanuel Levinas: Qui êtes-vous? (Paris, 1984), 78–79. Other interesting postwar comments: introducing in 1949 the first edition of his collection Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas wrote that his essays on Heidegger’s philosophy “do not at all have … the dubious ambition … of arguing, after the years from 1939 to 1945, for a philosophy which does not always guarantee wisdom.” Levinas, En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger, 2d ed. (Paris, 1967), 5. In another interview, he said, “It is always with embarrassment that I awax my admiration for this philosopher. It is known what Heidegger was in 1933, even if it was for a short period and even if his disciples, among whom there are many estimable men, forget it. To me it is unforgettable. One can have been anything,


8. Levinas and Poirié, “Entretiens,” 74. Unfortunately, Heidegger’s lectures from Levinas’s Freiburg year have not yet been published—they have been scheduled for a long time to appear as Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 27, *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Frankfurt, forthcoming)—but those pre-1928 lectures that have appeared, notably *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, allow one to conjecture that Heidegger may have made clear to Levinas and others in Freiburg as he had in Marburg how he differed with Husserl, whom he rarely attacked explicitly or even mentioned in the text of *Being and Time* itself. Adriaan Peperzak calls Levinas “the first and best interpreter of Heideggerian philosophy, especially as it is represented by *Being and Time*.” Peperzak, “Einige Thesen zur Heidegger-Kritik von Emmanuel Levinas,” 373. See also the dehistoricized Klaas Huisingh, *Das Sein und der Andere: Levinas’ Auseinandersetzung mit Heidegger* (Frankfurt, 1988); and Jacques Colléony, “Heidegger et Levinas: La question du *Dasein,*” *Les Études philosophiques* 3, no. 3 (July–Sept. 1990): 313–31.


10. Ibid., 37.


17. Levinas and Poirié, “Entretiens,” 81. In another interview he said: “The work that I did then on ‘the theory of intuition’ in Husserl was thus influenced
by *Sein und Zeit*, to the extent that I sought to present Husserl as having perceived the ontological problem of being." Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 39.


22. Ibid., 119.

23. Ibid., 155.

24. Ibid., 156.


34. Peperzak states this without attribution; it may have been a personal communication. Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN, 1993), 4. Then, in late 1994 Levinas allowed the publication of the essay in a new volume partly composed of his *Jugendschriften*; see his *Les imprévis de l’histoire* (Paris, 1994).
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 65.
39. Ibid., 66.
40. Levinas’s general attempt to confer philosophical status on the phenomenon, as well as the specific content of his argument, deserve comparison with the much better-known definition of fascism as a radically anti-transcendental movement supplied by another Heideggerian, Ernst Nolte. The most important difference between the two lies in their different evaluation of Marx and Marxism, which Levinas saw as important precursors to Nazism, but which Nolte understood as expressions of the ultimate hypertrophy of transcendence against which fascism revolts. Still, this major distinction on when the reaction to transcendence began should not obscure their general agreement about the character of modern thought and life (which Levinas also specifically links to the bourgeoisie) and fascism as a detranscendentalizing response to it. Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York, 1966), pt. 5, “Fascism as a Metapolitical Phenomenon,” esp. 429–34 and 450–54.
42. Ibid., 69.
43. Ibid., 71.
45. Actually, Heidegger introduced some confusion into his account when he expressly stipulated that Dasein did not necessarily have corporeality even though it is situated spatially and has the experience of left and right. But he added in parentheses, “This bodily nature [of Dasein] hides a whole problematic of its own, though we shall not treat it here.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), 143.
47. Ibid., 375.


52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 383.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., 385.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 386, 375.

58. Ibid., 377, 379.

59. Ibid., 391.

60. Ibid., 392.


63. He said, for instance, “I never absolutely abandoned them, but in the beginning they did not have a consciously avowed influence on my philosophical studies.” Ibid., 79–80.


66. Ibid.

67. Levinas, “L'actualité de Maimonide,” 7. It is probably no accident that Levinas first connects Hitlerism to paganism in an article on Maimonides, who had presented the battle against pagan idolatry as the core principle of the Torah and the main sin against which Jews needed to guard themselves.

68. Ibid.


70. Ibid.


74. On this important subject, see Robert Gibbs, Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Princeton, 1992); Susan Handelman, Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas (Bloomington, 1991), 181–88; and esp. Cohen, Elevations.


78. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 107. In this sense, the dualism between atheist and theological phenomenologies which Dominique Janicaud posits does not magically appear in the 1960s, even if the dominance of the one begins to give way to the dominance of the other then. The tournant occurs for Levinas in 1934–35, not later. See Janicaud, Le Tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française (Combas, 1991), chaps. 1–2.


82. Ibid., 262. See also Levinas, "Existentialisme et antisémitisme," Les Cahiers de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle 14–15 (June–July 1947): 2–3, a report on one of Sartre's lectures on the Jews in which he makes a similar point.

83. Gillian Rose, "Shadow of Spirit," in Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 44. In a parallel vein, Eric Santner writes: "[M]uch poststructuralist critical practice views the figure of the mourner-survivor," i.e. the Jew, "as a kind of arch-trope not just for what it means to be a citizen of postwar and postmodern society but, more radically, for what it means to be a member of a linguistic community." Eric L. Santner, Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany (Ithaca, 1990), 9.