

Article

Paganism as a Political Problem: Levinas's Understanding of Judaism in the 1930s

Michael Fagenblat 

Department of History, Philosophy and Jewish Studies, The Open University of Israel, Raanana 43107, Israel; michaelfa@openu.ac.il

Abstract: In response to the rise of neopagan fascist political theologies in Europe in the 1930s, the young Emmanuel Levinas developed a novel conception of the theopolitical role of Judaism. The existing scholarly consensus maintains that (1) Levinas responded to the rise of pagan Hitlerism by opposing it to a Jewish conception of transcendence and (2) this putative contrast involved a critique of Heidegger's thought, which Levinas identified with pagan Hitlerism. By focusing on under-examined occasional pieces Levinas wrote in the 1930s, I offer a significantly revised understanding of Levinas's position in the 1930s. The argument shows how Levinas describes Judaism as a way of 'being riveted' that does not resort to transcendence, as does the Greco-Christian West, but rather affirms the immanence of existence while breaking with its disposition to paganism. This places Levinas's conception of Judaism on the same plane as paganism and within the terms of Heidegger's philosophy. From this perspective, a new way of understanding Levinas's theopolitical view of Judaism as "the anti-paganism par excellence" takes shape.

Keywords: paganism; political theology; Levinas; Heidegger; Judeo-Christianity; 1930s

"Because we lack a theology, we constantly admit an implicit one that is nourished by the current ideas of the century, to which we adapt, after a fashion, our Judaism."

—(Emmanuel Levinas [1937] 2005)



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1. Introduction

The publications of the young Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) between 1933 and 1939 constitute one of the first Jewish philosophical responses to Nazism. The threat posed by racial antisemitism and the political spirituality of fascism motivated Levinas to retrieve a new understanding of the significance of Judaism—for the Jews themselves, of course, but also for the West. The West, for Levinas, is Greco-(Judeo)-Christian civilization, which is in crisis in the 1930s on account of the collapse of its Greco-Christian metaphysical legacy. The rise of Nazism is a political expression of this crisis, which exploits the exhaustion of the Greco-Christian metaphysics of the West, and thus, calls forth its concealed Judaic philosophical element.

The coherence of Levinas's early understanding of the significance of Judaism for the West can be pieced together from occasional pieces addressed to very different readerships. The Catholic non-conformist intellectuals who read his still insightful article on the philosophy of Hitlerism in *Ésprit*, the Jewish educators and lay-leaders who read his concisely luminous columns in *Paix et Droit*, and the avant-garde philosophers who read "On Escape" and related writings, were each presented, in phenomenological fashion, with an *aspect* of the whole: an entire, even if still emerging and fluid, conception of the significance of Judaism for the intellectual destiny of the West. This conception can only be understood if one moves across the various points of view Levinas occupies to examine the thing itself. Two features of his shifting points of view consistently accompany him. One consists in fixing on the *political* significance of Judaism for the crisis besieging the West. In the

1930s, Levinas approaches Judaism in terms of political theology, not (secularized) moral theology.¹ The meaning of being Jewish is approached as a distinctively political rival to the “pagan” political theology that correlates with “the philosophy of Hitlerism”.² The second permanent feature of Levinas’s thought in the 1930s is his characterization of the political crisis as a function of a deeper intellectual crisis. It is against the background of a sweeping critique of Western philosophy, in particular its tendency to metaphysical idealism, that Levinas depicts the significance of Judaism in the 1930s. This critique is most profoundly articulated by his teacher Martin Heidegger who, on that basis, was motivated to reject liberalism and, in 1933, join the Nazi Party and advocate for an alternative. Before 1933, Levinas had been deeply persuaded of the philosophical merits of this critique (Levinas [1930] 1995, 1932). After 1933, he began to employ a version of this critique of Western idealism for two related purposes of his own, namely, to diagnose the intellectual roots of the political crisis and to offer a Jewish response that takes such a critique into account.

Diagnostically, Levinas argues that traditional Western metaphysics lacks the resources to tackle the philosophical challenges presented by the rise of National Socialism. Economic, political, and historical factors alone do not explain the rise of National Socialism. Beneath the material causes of its upsurge lies a metaphysical crisis dividing Western civilization against itself, like a *Gigantomachia* within the heart of contemporary Europe. The Greco-Christian history of the West is animated by the spirit of freedom, which enables people to break from the chains of material existence and cleave to higher, abstract, transcendent ideas, whether of God or Truth, whether through faith or reason. From the classical Greeks through Christian metaphysics to contemporary French and German neo-Kantianism, the Greco-Christian heritage of the West sought to break free of the concrete ways of being (history, the body, the land). The traditional Western appeal to transcendence, however, relies on Greco-Christian forms of dualism such as spirit/matter, mind/body, abstract/concrete, universal/particular. Intellectual traditions from romanticism and historicism through Nietzsche to Heidegger had exposed the falsity of this spiritual ambition (Levinas 1933; trans. Levinas 1998). Metaphysical dualisms had collapsed, and the West now lacked the philosophical resources to defend the values of liberty and truth that were historically sustained by belief in transcendence. The political crisis of the 1930s is symptomatic of the exhaustion of this tradition. The appeal of racism and Hitlerism to a spirituality of concrete immanence is expressed by the ultimate value they attribute to the elemental sense of embodied, historical, landed existence. This is why Levinas describes the political theology of Hitlerism as “paganism”—an entirely contextual artifice that has nothing to do with non-Western “pagan” cultures, since his concern in these writings is entirely focused on the crisis within Europe. The unique contribution of Judaism to this intellectual crisis consists in providing a theological alternative to transcendence concealed within Greco-(Judeo)-Christian civilization. Judaism provides an alternative to paganism as a political problem.

The sweeping critique of Western metaphysics also takes the project of Jewish modernity into its orbit, which it thereby undermines. Emancipation, secularization, and assimilation sought to integrate Jewish life into the unfolding Western enlightenment, based first and foremost on the metaphysical possibility of separating the Jew from his or her Judaism. Levinas rejects this possibility on the grounds of his critique of Western metaphysics, and in this respect accepts the Hitlerian determination of the inescapable identity of being Jewish. Instead of challenging Hitlerism by appeal to the metaphysics of the enlightenment that separates the rational, free human individual from its accrued determinations (historical, cultural, religious, geographical, even biological), he adopts a version of the critique of this metaphysics, which he applies to liberal and secular vision of Judaism. Levinas thus defends a neo-Orthodox construal of the meaning of Judaism according to which Judaism bears a unique theopolitical mission concealed within, yet essential to, the viability of Western civilization. The political–intellectual crisis of the 1930s is thus not only a time of the greatest threat that has faced Jews; it is also a time in which the political–intellectual

resources of Judaism must be revealed from the Greco-(Judeo)-Christian West in which they have been historically concealed. Where the danger grows, there lies the saving power.

Levinas's novel view of the distinctively Jewish contribution to Western thought is formally similar to positions he adopts after the Second World War and indeed lays the basis for them, but the conception itself differs markedly from his later views. Let us nevertheless note the formal similarity between his account of Judaism before and after the war. It rests on the historiosophical conviction according to which Judaism constitutes a singular philosophical contribution to the self-understanding of the West that the West itself has failed to understand. Both before and after the war, Levinas figures Judaism as a way of being whose philosophical explication stands within yet apart from the Western history of being, a conceptual stance that invests philosophical Judaism with the capacity to critique the West from inside the logic of its own historical unfolding ([Lapidot Forthcoming](#)). Through phenomenological analyses of the meaning of "Judaism" Levinas formulates a philosophy whose conceptual grounds at once articulate with the history of being as it has been thought from Plato to Heidegger and yet yield a different sense of being. Judaism, through its philosophical explication, is thus inscribed into the history of being, even as this inscription interrupts that history. Formally, the gesture recalls strategies used by Jewish thinkers such as Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig. It is nevertheless closer, not only formally but also genetically and substantively, to Heidegger's account of the "history of being" as the internal other to the history of Western metaphysics. This proximity obtains even though Levinas traces the "other history" concealed in the history of the Greco-(Judeo)-Christian West to its Judaic element, whereas Heidegger—strangely enough—assimilates the Judaic to "the Judeo-Christian" (e.g., [Heidegger 1989](#), pp. 126, 210, 411; [Heidegger 2012](#), pp. 100, 165, 326), which he characterizes as a Roman distortion of the primordial truth of an archaic Greek tradition concealed within the history of the West. This formal continuity in Levinas's conception of the concealed significance of Judaism for the West, which has not yet understood the Judaic element concealed within its own heritage as Greco-(Judeo)-Christianity, should not give one to think that Levinas holds the same substantive conception of Judaism before and after the war. On the contrary, after the war Levinas reduces the religious element of Judaism to ethics—"everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression" ([Levinas \[1957\] 1997](#), p. 17)—in the 1930s he argues that the Christianization of the Bible and the secularization of Christianity mean that "the moral mission of Judaism is virtually complete" and it is "the religious part that now remains to be played out" ([Levinas 1935c](#), p. 4). The focus here is on the distinctively religious vocation of Judaism, irreducible to its moral mission but, the young Levinas argues, essential to its political significance for the West.

Several illuminating studies have analyzed the development of Levinas's philosophical thought in the 1930s ([Abensour 1997](#); [Critchley 2015](#); [Hansel 2006, 2022](#); [Moyn 1998, 2005](#); [Rolland 2003](#)). Yet the role of Judaism and the theopolitics of being Jewish in his thought during these years has not been sufficiently clarified. While it has been noted that Levinas characterizes being Jewish as a mode of "being riveted," which is the central concept he develops in his phenomenological work ([Levinas 1935a](#); trans. [Levinas 2003](#)), the way "being Jewish" *modifies* the pagan way of being riveted has not been adequately understood. This modification determines the fundamental opposition Levinas develops in the 1930s between pagan Hitlerism and Judaism, thereby investing the latter with its unique theopolitical mission in the West. [Moyn \(1998\)](#) and [Hansel \(2006\)](#) both commented on the antithesis Levinas establishes between Judaism and pagan Hitlerism, but neither delved into the mystical theopolitics that drives this distinction. The decisive concept, overlooked in these studies, is that of creation, which Levinas deploys in an innovative way to account for the uniquely Jewish way of opposing paganism. On this view, belief in creation does not refer Jewish existence to a transcendent divine Will but, beyond natural and political forms, to the mystery of being itself.

2. Toward a German Understanding of Jewish Spirituality

Levinas developed his conception of the new role of Judaism in the theopolitical consciousness of the West on the basis of his diagnosis of the metaphysical–political crisis besieging Europe in the 1930s. This diagnosis draws heavily on the Nietzschean and Heideggerian critiques of the metaphysical idealism that dominated Western philosophy from Plato to contemporary German and French neo-Kantianism. Without saying so, Levinas adopts Nietzsche’s idea “that God is truth; that truth is divine” and that “the flame lit by the thousand-year-old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato’s faith” no longer lights the Western way (Nietzsche 2001). In keeping with Heidegger’s critique of Christian theology and Western idealism, Levinas takes it for granted that the “death of God” is a way of signaling the pervasive collapse of metaphysical values, in particular those of truth, reason, and freedom. The role of Judaism, as he begins to see it in the 1930s, consists in responding to the political crisis that emerges from this sweeping critique of traditional Western metaphysics.

The crisis is first broached in a curious article Levinas published in a Lithuanian journal in 1933 under the title “The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Philosophy”. Spirituality here refers not only to religious significance but to the entire cultural domain of human spirit in which meaning and truth are pursued, from art to science—*Geistigkeit* (Levinas 1933, 1998, 10n.2). The contrast Levinas here proposes between “French” and “German” spirituality consists in a taxonomy of cultural forms, not their history (Kant, for example, stands between two Frenchmen, Descartes and Brunschvicg; whereas Pascal anticipates the German turn to the concrete). Despite the historical cross-fertilization of these two cultural forms, a distinction has emerged between the empirical–rational culture Levinas calls “French”—in which data like facts and sensations only attain meaning by their place in a rational order of ideas—and another he identifies as “German,” which finds spiritual meaning *in* concrete experience and elementary sensations. The difference between “French” and “German” spirituality provides a taxonomy of cultural forms for the philosophical difference between, on the one hand, theories of meaning that abstract from concrete existence and, on the other, ways of grounding meaning in concrete experience itself.

Spirit, and this is typical of French culture up until now, is pure thought, beyond imagination, sensations and passions. The highest degree of spirit is found in the theorizing of a mathematician or physicist. Immersed in exact science, a scientist forgets his concrete individuality and seeks intellectual, mathematical forms which are beyond the senses. (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 2)

Despite the sensualism of “French culture,” the French do not regard the sensual as a site of truth and meaning.

A Frenchman does not philosophize when he is writing pornography. Most of the time he is satisfied with a happy epicureanism which takes pleasures for what they are: the blind content of consciousness. Such pleasures are experienced passively and do not reveal anything. In a German novel of the same sort, by contrast, spiritual and physical elements are mixed together. The sexual tribulations of mediocre personalities reveal metaphysical realities. (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 5)

Whereas the French separate the experience of concrete existence from their understanding of truth and meaning, the German understanding of spirit unites them. In the German view, concrete ways of finding meaning and truth are not accidents that allow us to know universals or ladders to be kicked away when we ascend from a subjective to an objective point of view. Rather, concrete experience grounds the space of meaning, giving it coherence and unity; to abstract from it is to distort the very way meaning matters.

Instead of separating the body and the spirit as did Descartes, Germans begin with concrete mental existence. [...] The sphere of the vital and everything that expresses it in psychological life make up the essence of spirit. Man is the concrete “I,” worried about his fate and anxious before death [...] This uneasiness

and these experiences of our senses and emotions form the whole tragedy of human existence: love, hate, passions and disillusionments all go to make up one dramatic whole. It is this drama which expresses the spirit. (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 4)

According to “the German” mentality, as Levinas parses this taxonomy, meaning and truth inhere in existence itself, in the lived body, historical life, concrete praxes. Knowledge is embodied. Understanding takes place through emotions, intuition, action, not theory, reflection, abstraction. “Understanding the spirit of man does not mean knowing the soul of man by reason, but rather living without trying to escape from life. It implies wanting to know disillusionment, sorrow and joy. This kind of knowledge is the true life of the human spirit” (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 4). Levinas traces this cultural genealogy from German Romanticism to Nietzsche, Simmel, and Dilthey, before it is polished by the philosophical tools of phenomenology, in particular by Heidegger. According to this new conception, meaning and truth are found in the concrete sense of being itself.

The forces connected with biological life, sexual restlessness, and the fear of death, are not physical phenomena. They are dark, but not blind. The originality of this view is that, for it, the contents of consciousness, the impressions, sensations and whims, are “directed towards something” and reveal the metaphysical meaning of human destiny. Modern German phenomenologists (Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger) in their beautiful analyses point to the so-called intentionality of all the content of consciousness. They underline the spiritual importance of the elementary data of consciousness. (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 5)

At issue is the genealogy of a new experience of meaning and truth.³ The ‘German’ way of finding meaning and truth in elementary data like pain, pleasure, fear, desire, and so forth, manifests not only as an intellectual tradition but as popular sentiment or cultural ethos: “belief in the spiritual importance of the elementary psychological data is not purely philosophical. It has widespread roots in the German soul” (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 5). Metaphysics and cultural anthropology go hand in hand. The metaphysical dualism of “the French” correlates with their dualistic approach to the body, just as the nondualism of “the Germans” correlates with their ways of finding meaning and truth in the body. And thus, as for the spirituality of the sexual, so for the spirituality of the political. The rise of National Socialism correlates with a distinctively German philosophical critique of Western dualism, which it seeks to overcome by finding spiritual meaning in the vital, elementary forces of political identity. “It is no coincidence that extremist political parties, which are presently so strong in Germany, are enchanted with this notion of spirit” (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 6). This enchantment with the elementary forms of the spirit is the great temptation to which the Germans run the risk of yielding. “They do not trust reason because reason opposes their vitality,” Levinas says, noting how this recourse to the truth of elementary experience readily leads to “a perversion of the German ideal” (Levinas 1933, 1998).

This taxonomy provides the template for Levinas’s diagnosis of the metaphysical grounds of the political crisis of the 1930s. The “idealism” that dominates Western metaphysics, with its commitment to the freedom of thought that makes it possible to elevate the mind to abstract truths of reason, has been undermined by philosophies that find ultimate meaning and truth in concretely embodied, historical existence. And yet the values of the old metaphysics, in particular the freedom of thought, the disinterestedness of truth, and the rationality of justice, are indispensable to the essence of civilization. The political crisis facing the West consists in the need to maintain its values (liberty, autonomy, universal dignity, etc.) in the wake of the exhaustion of its metaphysics (ideality of meaning, universality of truth). Levinas’s position and his entire philosophical project is constituted by his commitment to Western values despite his rejection of Western metaphysics. His critique of Western idealism in the name of a more elementary conception of the spiritual also alludes and is indebted to Émile Durkheim’s sociological approach to the spiritual (Caygill 2002, pp. 9–13, 31–35). Whereas modern liberal interpretations of the Third Republic viewed the ideal of fraternity as an ideal to be accomplished on the basis of the equality and

liberty of rational individuals, Durkheim argued that the republican ideals of liberty and equality were an outcome of a fraternity that required vigilant educational and sociological cultivation (Caygill 2002, pp. 7–11). Levinas studied Durkheim closely in Strasbourg, under the tutelage of Maurice Halbwachs, and later acknowledged how Durkheim's sociology inspired his concrete, phenomenological approach to metaphysics (Levinas 1985, p. 17). Like Durkheim's sociology, phenomenology views the elementary forms of experience as the very grounds of meaning and truth, which it analyzes through the micro-structures inhering in such forms, such as their implied temporality and sociality. Like Durkheim, Levinas sought to vindicate the French political ideals of liberty and equality by grounding them in a prior facticity of elementary experience instead of relying on the metaphysical magic of "the fact of Reason" to guarantee their validity. The conclusion to "On Escape" makes this point explicit:

the value of European civilization consists incontestably in the aspirations of idealism, if not in its path: in its primary inspiration idealism seeks to surpass being. Every civilization that accepts being—with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies—merits the name 'barbarian'". (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 73)

Consequently, the only path open for us to satisfy idealism's legitimate demands without nevertheless entering into its erring ways is that on which we measure without fear all the weight of being and its universality. [...] It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident". (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 73)

This remarkable passage, which anticipates so much of Levinas's distinctive contribution to European thought in the decades to come, also shows how, in his view, the Jewish alternative to Greco-Christian transcendence can vindicate the "legitimate demands" of the Western heritage without relying on the obsolete idealist metaphysics on which it rests. Levinas thus accepts the narrative of the decline of Western metaphysics but remains committed to its axiological "aspirations," in particular, the idealist conception of the universality of truth and human dignity. Because human beings are "riveted" to the immanence of their concrete embodied and historical existence, "a new path" must be charted to defend the values of the enlightenment without relying on the idealism that underpins it. This is why Levinas makes no appeal to 'transcendence' in the 1930s but instead explores the prospect of an immanent "excedence" within existence (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 54). To get out of being by a new path is to overcome the perils of immanence that accompany the German understanding of the concrete spirituality of being, exemplified by the identity politics of fascism and the new racial antisemitism. But this new path must forgo the heritage of Western idealism espoused by "common sense and the wisdom of the nations," a Jewish idiom whose unmistakable implication is that Judaism might attest to the path of "excedence" that can find a way of escaping, without transcending, the barbaric disposition of "being riveted". Judaism thus comes to play a decisive role in salvaging Western values from the ruins of Western metaphysics.

Like a Trojan horse, Judaism enters into the philosophical terrain of the German understanding of spirituality in order to critique its political implications from within. For the remaining years of the decade he proceeds in two directions. The first consists in diagnosing the philosophical appeal of the so-called German understanding of spirituality over traditional Western alternatives, thus making metaphysical sense of the political appeal of fascism among "the crowd of the perplexed" (Levinas 1935b; trans. Levinas 2008, p. 94). The second consists in arguing that Judaism is uniquely positioned within the Greco-(Judeo)-Christian heritage of the West to escape the barbarism to which the German understanding of spirituality is disposed. By adopting a German understanding of the concrete immanence of the spiritual, Judaism is able to defend French ideals of liberty and equality without relying on the metaphysics of Greco-Christian idealism. This means that Judaism is closer, metaphysically speaking, to paganism than Christianity, even if,

from an axiological and civilizational point of view, it stands with Christianity against the menace of political paganism. This is why Judaism, not Christianity, is “the anti-paganism par excellence”.

3. The Crowd of the Perplexed, or the Spiritual Attraction of Pagan Hitlerism

The so-called “German understanding of spirituality” can lead to perversions of the conviction that meaning and truth are to be found in the elementary experience of being. Levinas identifies such perversions in the forms of Hitlerism and paganism. The two are in fact entwined, the “grandeur” (Levinas 1939, p. 3) of pagan spirituality lending its appeal to the “frighteningly dangerous” (Levinas 1934; trans. Levinas 1990, p. 64) phenomenon of Hitlerism.

Despite the vulgarity of its adherents and its wretched phraseology, Hitlerism is “philosophically interesting” (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 64), for it refuses to disengage from the way meaning is enacted through elementary ways of being. Levinas approaches racial and historical identitarianism as a perversion of the elementary truth of being historically embodied. In being a distortion of the elementary truth of being historically embodied, such identitarianism is nevertheless “closer,” as it were, to this truth than theories that locate the truth of meaning in its abstract ideality. Hitlerian racism cannot be adequately critiqued by appealing to abstract ideals like rationality, equality, and universality, since its origin lies in intuitions that are more fundamental and, crucially, more integral to human existence than such abstractions. Tracing such phenomena “back to their source, to intuition” (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 64), Levinas finds that a philosophical account of Hitlerism would reach all the way to meaning-structures that are essential being as such, that is, to the very possibility of meaning, knowledge, and truth. These intuitions, which Levinas specifies as the sense of embodied and historical existence, cannot simply be subordinated to the universal claims of reason. Consider the body:

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. The biological, with the notion of inevitability it entails, becomes more than an *object* of spiritual life. It becomes its heart. The mysterious urgings of the blood, the appeals of heredity and the past for which the body serves as an enigmatic vehicle, lose the character of being problems that are subject to a solution put forward by a sovereignly free Self. Not only does the Self bring in the unknown elements of these problems in order to resolve them; the Self is also constituted by these elements. Man’s essence no longer lies in freedom, but in a kind of bondage [*enchaînement*]. 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.

From this point on, every social structure that announces an emancipation with respect to the body, without being committed to it [*qui ne l’engage pas*], is suspected of being a repudiation or a betrayal. The forms of a modern society founded on the harmony established between free wills will seem not only fragile and inconsistent but false and deceitful. The assimilation of spirits loses the grandeur of the spirit’s triumph over the body. Instead, it becomes the work of forgers. A society based on consanguinity immediately ensues from this concretization of the spirit. And then, if race does not exist, one has to invent it! (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 69)

Hitlerism is a distortion of the legitimacy given by German spirituality to the primacy of embodied, historical intuitions. Its racism is a perversion of primary human intuitions, which it suffuses with pseudo-scientific claims that divide the human species into distinct “races”. It finds embodied, historical intuitions to be the source and ultimate significance of value, but exploits such intuitions in the service of the ethno-racial state. Critics of

fascism, ethnonationalism, and racism should nevertheless be wary of misconstruing such developments as though they derive purely from ideological manipulation, as liberal critics often do, for they thereby fail to account for the unassailable intuitions that underlie such political developments. The veil of ignorance that lights the path toward the liberal state blinds its citizens to the most essential features of their own humanity, as more recent critics of liberalism have since argued. This is *the* problem Levinas diagnoses at the root of the crisis besetting the post-Enlightenment West (Critchley 2015, pp. 30–63).

“On Escape” elaborates further on the phenomenological intuitions at the source of the political crisis of the 1930s. The essence of being oneself does not consist in being able to transcend one’s material conditions but in “being riveted” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, pp. 64, 66, 72). For the self *is* only in virtue of being assigned by the body to itself. Ontologically prior to the reflective activity of consciousness, where Husserl grounds the origins of meaning, and prior even to Dasein’s thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) in the world, where Heidegger finds the pre-reflective opening of the horizon of meaning, an inescapable sense of being riveted at once constitutes the identity of the self and overwhelms the free acts of the mind. The essay argues that freedom of thought is weighed down by the movement of being riveted to oneself. Its flights of cognition and imagination, its knowledge of realities beyond the sensory, are grounded and united by the weighty movement of being inescapably embodied and historized. Being riveted is not just a fact but the very movement of being. It is not an accident befalling the experience of meaning but the essence of the experience of being. Affective ways of being in pain or pleasure, illness or nausea, are indicative of how the contents of mind are riveted to the concrete unity of embodied, historical existence. The idealities of consciousness, the intentional objects of reason, faith, desire, imagination, and so forth, appear against the opacity of the concrete unity of embodied, historical existence, as though from a black hole, then disappear back into the dark inescapability of being me. The idealist, liberal self who is able to free itself from its embodied, historical existence is a myth fabricated on the basis of its own opaque ways of being, where untold magnitudes of one’s mental life are compounded into the opaque ways of being riveted. The aspiration, quintessentially Western, to free humanity from elementary existence by cleaving to abstract idealities, whether through reason or faith, amounts to a denial of being riveted to one’s embodied, historical existence.

According to a diagnosis still pertinent today, modernity brings about the condition in which transcendence has lost authority. Whether because God has died, truth has been reduced to a naturally evolved adaptive fiction, reason has been historicized, objectivity has been unmasked as hegemony, or freedom has been debunked as an illusion, the very idea of a transcendent authority to which human beings ought to be bound has “bled to death under our knives” (Nietzsche 2001, sct. 125, p. 119). Within this void the brute affirmation of adhering to the facticity of being this body with this history becomes the basis for value. The concrete self, hitherto cast into the shadows, emerges as the sole value remaining when the metaphysical clouds of modernity have disappeared. Hitlerism and racism flourish amid the ruins of transcendence, for unlike the idealistic appeal to truth, reason, and freedom, they can at least claim to be founded on the concrete intuition of being. In affirming the adherence of spirit to body, in time they gain a metaphysical advantage over the Western tradition which, from Plato through Christianity to contemporary idealism, separates spirit from body and denies the concrete grounds of meaning and truth. By contrast, the political promise of Hitlerism holds forth the possibility of *uniting the spiritual grounds with the spiritual goals of existence*. Its purely immanent horizon is sustained by the value it finds in the spiritual grounds of being riveted. Enfolded in its dark recesses is the “soul’s principal attitude towards the whole of reality and its own destiny,” which “predetermine or prefigure the meaning of the adventure that the soul will face in the world” (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 64). Although its scientific pretensions are “absurd and ridiculous,” “unworthy of refutation” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 4), the “philosophically interesting” (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 64) features of the phenomenology of being riveted nevertheless hold forth the prospect of uniting the spiritual grounds with the spiritual goals

of existence. In other words, the philosophy of Hitlerism exploits the intuitions of being riveted, as though the collapse of universal ideals vindicates the biological and historical claims of certain groups of humans more than others. While there is philosophical merit in accounting for the primacy, the constitutive role, and even the inescapability of being riveted, the weightiness of which doubles down on existence, so that *being oneself is having to be oneself*, the articulation of this primary facticity in the form of Hitlerism betrays the incoherence of an arbitrary application. In place of the transcendence and universality of truth, to which a free mind ought to assent, in the philosophy of Hitlerism truth amounts to the assertion of will through the expansion of power (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 71). Fatalism and barbarism thus lurk in the phenomenology of being riveted. Having repudiated traditional Western metaphysics and established “widespread roots in the German soul” (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 5), it has now lent credibility to the populism of “extremist political parties” (Levinas 1933, 1998, p. 6).

4. Against the Pagans

The political populism of the new German understanding of spirituality has produced a “crowd of the perplexed” (Levinas 1935b, 2008, p. 94), as Levinas diagnoses the problem some months later in a brief column commemorating the eighth centenary of the birth of Maimonides. Here, for the first time, the philosophy of Hitlerism stands opposed not only to the idealist trajectory of Western philosophy but also, as “paganism,” to “Judeo-Christian civilization” (Levinas 1935b, 2008). “The Judeo-Christian civilization is put in question by an arrogant barbarism established in the heart of Europe. With an audacity as yet unsurpassed, paganism has reared its head, reversing values, confounding elementary distinctions, effacing the limits of the profane and the sacred, dissolving their very principles which, till now, permitted the restoring of order” (Levinas 1935b, 2008, p. 91). Hitlerism, we saw, exploits the collapse of transcendent values by spiritualizing the immanence of being riveted. It is therefore not to be mistaken for materialism or even atheism but, rather, for an immanent spiritualism that Levinas identifies with paganism.

Paganism is neither the negation of the spirit nor ignorance of a unique God. The mission of Judaism would be a small thing if it only came to teach monotheism to the peoples of the earth. This would be to instruct those who already know. *Paganism is a radical incapacity to break out of the world.* It does not amount to denying spirits and gods but in situating them within the world [...] Pagan morality is only the consequence of this terrestrial incapacity to surpass the limits of the world. In this self-sufficient world, closed in on itself, the pagan is enclosed. He finds the world solid and well established. He finds the world eternal. (Levinas 1935b, 2008, p. 94)

In thus characterizing Hitlerism as paganism, Levinas’s diagnosis converged, on the one hand, with some of its leading advocates and, on the other hand, with important Christian thinkers who, like him, denounced it. Rosenberg’s *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* envisaged National Socialism as a renunciation of Germany’s Christian heritage and a return to its pagan roots, a view shared by Himmler and Goebbels, among others. Nietzsche’s work proved particularly useful for this abuse of “pagan” antiquity. Alfred Bäumler, especially in *Nietzsche, The Philosopher and the Politician* (1931), defended biological racism on the basis of a naturalistic construal of “the Will to Power” and likewise endorsed a Nazi return to pre-Christian Greece.

In response to this aspect of the spiritual character of Hitlerism there galvanized a newfound alliance “against the pagans”; not only Christians and Jews but “Judeo-Christian civilization” stands, defiantly hyphenized, against the politics of neo-paganism.⁴ After a decade of anti-modernist sympathy for fascism, Pope Pius XI finally denounced Italian fascism as “an ideology which clearly resolves itself into a true, a real pagan worship of the State—or “Statolatry” (Pius XI 1931, article 44). In the ensuing years, the Pope condemned the fascists’ way of dividing universal humanity into nations and races, inveighed against Mussolini’s monumental building projects for their exaltation of the material world, and

denounced the fascists conception of history as a cyclical process that was now returning Rome to its pre-Christian origins (Baxa 2006). Levinas's critique of Hitlerism as paganism develops each of these points in phenomenological fashion. In a later column that pays homage to Pius XI following the Pope's death, Levinas characterizes paganism as an exaltation of the immanence of natural existence. Paganism, he writes, locates the spiritual

in everything related to the natural development of the being who delights in his nature; the cult of earthly power and greatness, the legitimacy of force to assert itself as force, to love and hate spontaneously, to ride a horse, hunt, joyfully wage war; the gift of finding oneself emphatically installed in the real. Notions that relate to what has been called, since Nietzsche, the 'morality of the masters,' and which, more than 'free thought' or atheism, are disburdened of religious anxiety. Such notions perhaps lack neither grandeur nor elevation. In the face of them, the message of Judaism is a paradox and a folly. (Levinas 1939, p. 3)

The necessity of opposing paganism does not prevent Levinas from acknowledging its spiritual "grandeur" and "elevation". Just as Hitlerism is "philosophically interesting," so paganism likewise mobilizes the merits of a philosophical development that cannot simply be ignored or set aside. It too affirms the spiritual power of being itself, which is not to be subordinated to alienating abstractions but, on the contrary, is to be affirmed, enjoyed, and endured. But the Greco-Christian tradition, "Platonism for the masses," has traditionally opposed this image of paganism by seeking to the transcendence of being. Since Plato inaugurated the quest for "the good beyond being," the tradition of Western idealism has distanced itself from spiritual naturalism. Christianity incorporated this distance into its understanding of monotheism. In "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," this distance is identified with the "spirit of freedom" (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 64) that marks the truth of the Greco-Judeo-Christian West. By freely cleaving to truth through reason (the Greco-philosophical way), faith (the Christian way), or repentance (the Jewish way), pagan fatalism is defeated. Soon, however, Levinas will differentiate between the Jewish way of opposing Hitlerism and the Greco-Christian way.

"The Contemporary Relevance of Maimonides" founds the critique of pagan metaphysics on the idea of creation. Maimonides's defended the idea of creation against the Aristotelean doctrine of the eternity of the world, according to which the natural laws of existence are immutable or, as philosophers today put it, "causally closed". The pagan doctrine of the eternity of the world is thus interpreted as implying not only natural but also moral and political fatalism. The point was made by Levinas's newfound friend and colleague Jacob Gordin, whose seminar on medieval Jewish thought Levinas attended in 1933-34 and whose essay, "Actualité du Maïmonide" (Gordin [1934] 1990), Levinas was likely responding to when he published his column some months later with an almost identical title, "L'actualité due Maïmonide" (Levinas 1935b, 2008). For Gordin, following in the tradition of Hermann Cohen, on whom he wrote his doctorate in Berlin before fleeing for Paris in [1934] 1990, Maimonides' defense of creation correlates with a post-Kantian defense of the moral freedom of human individuals who are otherwise constituted by the deterministic laws governing their empirical nature. As Gordin put it:

The doctrine of Aristotle (and the Arab Aristotelians) of the providence of 'species', with its naturalist distortion of the problem of individuality, is merely a consequence of the acceptance of the eternity of the world. On the other hand, individual providence, with its ethical idea of individuality, is only possible if we admit that the world was created from nothing (ex nihilo) [. . .] The idea of the absolute creation of the world is a guarantee that nature—"matter"—will not swallow up man, that the world is indeed adapted to the historical process that transfigures it as a messianic process realizing freedom and justice. The personality of man and his freedom are threatened by the nature that tends to enslave them; if we want to affirm them, we are obliged to admit that the world was created by a force other than nature. Maimonides' philosophical struggle against the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of an uncreated world turns

into a struggle for the messianic and humanistic meaning of monotheism. [. . .] Henceforth, the creative act is no longer understood as a cosmological event, but as a unique, absolutely singular, ‘historical’ act, an act that presupposes history. (Gordin [1934] 1990, pp. 132–33)

The doctrine of the eternity of the world can only be reconciled with the “general providence” that applies to natural laws and natural kinds, not with “individual providence” expressed in relation to the particularities of historical and moral existence. It is as if Aristotle’s idea that non-Greeks (*barbaroi*) are natural slaves is the moral correlate of his metaphysical belief in the eternity of the natural world (Pol. 1.2, 1252b5-9; 1.6, 1255a28-b2; 3.14, 1285a19-21). Like Gordin, Levinas interprets Maimonides’s defense of creation as a critique of the pagan way of spiritualizing the laws and structures of natural existence, as if divinity expressed itself in the form of eternity. Moral and political beliefs correlate with the metaphysics that underlines them; anthropology recapitulates metaphysics. Belief in creation, which is predicated on belief in the freedom of the divine Will, is expressed historically in relation to the particularities of political and moral existence, for example, through miracles or reward and punishment.

And yet, although Levinas adopts a similar position to Gordin, he does not correlate belief in creation and its metaphysics of a transcendent Will with “the ethical idea of individuality” (Gordin [1934] 1990, pp. 132–33). Such a position can be found in Levinas’s work after the war, after Levinas turns to the “transcendence of the Other” as a way of escaping the immanence of being riveted (Fagenblat 2008). But in the 1930s Levinas does not take the path of transcendence, which he associates with the “idealist” metaphysics of the West. Although he too finds the contemporary relevance of Maimonides in his critique of the fatalism implied by the doctrine of the eternity of the world, he does not correlate Maimonides’ defense of creation with the idea of a free moral *individual* but with the freedom inhering in the world itself, as if creation were an immanent event within the world.

In this self-sufficient world, closed in on itself, the pagan is enclosed. He finds the world solid and well established. He finds the world eternal. He tailors his actions and his destiny to the world.

The sentiment of Israel with regard to the world is entirely different. It is imprinted with suspicion. The Jew does not have the fundamental basis in the world that the pagan has. Within a milieu of complete confidence in things, he is eaten away by a mute unease. What appears as the imperturbability of the world to those one calls healthy spirits, comprises for the Jew but the trace of the provisional and the created.

From Maimonides’ defense of creation, then, Levinas retrieves a “sentiment” concerning the world as a whole that is strikingly different to Gordin’s emphasis on “concrete humanity, possessing, in its individuality, an absolute value” (Gordin [1934] 1990, p. 140). The sentiment of creation consists in a way of being phenomenologically attuned to the elemental condition of being without glorifying its natural givenness.

Judaism thus joins Christianity in opposition to the spiritual immanence of paganism, but without taking flight in the transcendence of Greco-Christian metaphysics, as the neo-Kantian retrieval of Maimonides still does. Its opposition to paganism does not rely on the idealist tradition through which human freedom rises above existence, whether through reason or faith. Judaism does not embody a way of transcending being but, rather, a way of exceeding being while remaining riveted. The “spirit of freedom” it upholds against pagan fatalism is temporal, not eternal; its way is concrete, not idealist; more “German” than “French”. For to be Jewish is to be riveted to Judaism, as Hitlerism has brutally insisted. Hitlerism, then, not only exploits the German understanding of spirituality by mobilizing it for barbaric purposes; it also elicits a German understanding of Jewish spirituality. The “incomparable ordeal” that Hitlerism foists on Judaism, Levinas writes later that year, consists in coming to terms with Jewish facticity. “The pathetic fate of being a Jew becomes

inevitable. One can no longer flee it. The Jew is ineluctably riveted to his Judaism” (Levinas 1935c, p. 4). This formulation, appearing in the October issue of *Paix et Droit* in a column devoted to “The Religious Inspiration of the ‘Alliance’,” is striking for the unmistakable link it establishes between being Jewish and the phenomenological analysis of “the fact of being riveted to oneself,” which appeared in “On Escape” in December of the same year (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 64; Rolland 2003, pp. 74–77).

Judaism, no less than Hitlerism, amounts to a German understanding of spirituality. But whereas Hitlerism distorts the facticity of being riveted into pagan spiritualism, which glorifies in the givenness of natural existence, Judaism modifies the sense of being riveted by attuning to the contingencies of creation. Judaism and paganism are thus united in finding the spiritual in the concrete. But whereas paganism exalts the self-sufficiency of natural existence in order to spiritualize moral and political hierarchies, Judaism provides a way of extending the givenness of natural existence without denying the concrete reality of being riveted. In this, consists the “new path” it offers, satisfying the moral and political ambitions of the West without relying on its obsolete metaphysics.

Christianity long misconstrued this Jewish spirituality of immanence, which it viewed as Israel’s carnal defiance of Christ (Levinas 1938; trans. Levinas 2021, p. 4). Its adoption of Greek metaphysics mistook the Jewish way of being riveted for stiff-necked carnality without considering that there is a way of loosening the binds of immanence without fleeing for transcendence. This is precisely the “new path” of “excedence” that the West must take after the ruin of transcendence and the death of God. It is the path of Judaism. Political theology, no less than philosophy, must come to terms with “all that is weighty in being” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 54), but Christianity, no less than idealism, cannot do so. Since to be is to be riveted, the truth of being demands a new way of “excedence” (Levinas 1935a, 2003), not the Greco-Christian way of transcendence. This is the way of Judaism. Forced into unconcealment within the Greco-(Judeo)-Christian West by the distortion that pagan Hitlerism has brought to it, Judaism’s way of being anti-paganism must come to the fore. Hitler thereby plays an essential role in Levinas’s understanding of Judaism’s anti-pagan spiritual vocation. Like Haman the Amalekite, he brings the essence of Jewish destiny from out of its concealment among the nations and thereby helps reveal the unique theopolitical contribution of Judaism to the crisis assailing the Greco-(Judeo)-Christian West: “the reality of Hitlerism reveals the full gravity of being Jewish” (Levinas 1935c, p. 4).

5. The Anti-Paganism Par Excellence

“Judaism is only a religion” (Levinas 1935c, p. 4), Levinas declares in the same column of October 1935 in which he claims that “Hitlerism reveals the full gravity of being Jewish” (Levinas 1935c).

The context is the 75th anniversary since the founding of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), where Levinas worked. The AIU had from the outset defined Judaism as a religion, but the new *Zeitgeist* called for a revisionary retrieval of the meaning of this assertion. When the AIU was established in 1860, its goal was to facilitate the political and civil emancipation of Jews throughout the world. By defining Judaism as a religion and not as people, Jewishness could be privatized, tension with national identity could thus be mitigated, and on that basis the claim for full political and civil rights could be advanced. Though many of the activities of the AIU focused on education and welfare for Jews, its definition of Judaism as a religion facilitated not only the political emancipation of Jews but also their assimilation (or “de-judaisation,” as Levinas calls it); in a secular age a purely religious identity is one that can be renounced or de-Judaized. Seventy-five years after the establishment of the AIU, Levinas proposes that racial antisemitism has belied the possibility of “de-judaisation”, thereby riveting Jews to Judaism but also, as Levinas perceived matters, affording a transvaluation of what it means to claim that “Judaism is only a religion”. The claim now no longer points to the emancipatory possibilities of free adherence to faith or assimilation but to the religious quality of Jewish existence as such. It

is through the ordeal of being riveted to Jewishness, Levinas argues, that Judaism “regains its original meaning and purity” (Levinas 1935c).

Hitlerism brought an end to the nineteenth century attempt to transform Judaism into a secular fact whose religious significance could be affirmed or denied by Jews in virtue of being rational and autonomous individuals. It demanded coming to terms with the limits of emancipation, secularization, and assimilation. But if Hitlerism put an end to the possibility of “de-Judaization,” it also put its value in question. It did so by reawakening consciousness of the unavoidably *religious* significance of being Jewish. This amounts to a “German” understanding of Jewish existence, whose spirituality or religious quality inheres its concrete existence, not its abstract ideals: “great pains are never blind,” Levinas says of racial antisemitism, much like in German spirituality the elemental is “dark but not blind”. Racial antisemitism, he adds, “is also enlightening [*une lumière*]” (Levinas 1938, 2021). In riveting Jews to Judaism, Hitlerism reawakens a concern for the religious significance of Judaism, indeed its “mystical meaning,” which now bursts forth from the dark facticity of being Jewish (Levinas 1938, 2021).

This explication of the religious quality of Jewish existence implies that Judaism does not rest on a theology, as Christianity and Western idealist traditions might imagine, but is instead a way, like the German way, of accessing the elementary spirituality of Judaism within Jewish existence itself. This view of Judaism is also consistent with Durkheim’s conception of ‘the elementary forms of religious life’. Levinas’s debt to Durkheim is palpable, as Caygill rightly emphasized (Caygill 2002, pp. 10–13). Just as Hitlerism is described in the Durkheimian sense of an “elementary” spirituality, so Judaism is described in the Durkheimian sense of a “religion,” which refers to a concrete form of elemental spiritual solidarity that can, with the rigor of phenomenological hermeneutics, be explicated in philosophical form. Durkheim himself had tried to show how liberty and equality are derived from, generated, and grounded in, fraternity, and not in abstract principles that found or legitimize fraternity (Durkheim 1969). Levinas approaches Judaism in similar fashion, as a religious form of elementary historical existence that bears “resources of love and abnegation” (Levinas 1935c) amenable to phenomenological explication in political form. Heidegger’s thought likewise stands behind this way of retrieving the religiosity of Jewish existence. His emphasis on the “pre-theoretical” as the matrix and ground of theoretical reflection provided Levinas with the phenomenological tools to explicate the religious quality of (Jewish) existence. In his intervention into a famous lecture delivered by Jean Wahl in December [1938] 2021, Levinas argued that Heidegger’s thought banishes the traditional idealist notion of transcendence and with it the very idea of theology, yet for this very reason leads to a “more profound” way of approaching the religious quality of existence itself. “Existence,” Levinas wagers, is “a reality that if not theological is at least religious” (Levinas [1937] 2005). Durkheim and Heidegger both point to the prospect of explicating the religious quality of existence, prior to its abstraction in the theoretical form of a theology. Indeed, Levinas viewed the method of phenomenological hermeneutics as a more rigorous way of pursuing Durkheim’s approach to religion (Levinas 1985, p. 16). “Judaism is only a religion,” then, because ‘religion’ can now be understood not as a system of theological beliefs but in a “German” and Durkheimian sense, according to the “spirituality” inhering in its elemental existence. Judaism is religious in the sense of being an elemental form of social existence structured around the sacred, or what Levinas emphatically designates as “the mystical” (Levinas 1935c). Whereas the AIU had defined Judaism as a religion in order to advance civil rights of Jews in a secular age, in the post-secular context in which assimilation had become impossible, as it appeared in Europe in the 1930s, the mystical meaning of this definition finally became apparent. The “true spirit” of the definition of Judaism as a religion does not consist in enabling Jews to renounce their way of being riveted by assimilating but on the contrary in exhibiting the religious elements in their very existence.

We thus approach the center of Levinas’s view of Judaism in the 1930s. It consists in depicting Judaism as a way of *modifying* the condition of being riveted that escapes the

descent into barbarism that constitutes the Hitlerian way of being riveted. This means that Hitlerian spirituality and Jewish spirituality, paganism, and Judaism, as Levinas describes them in the 1930s, are at once politically most hostile and also metaphysically most intimate. It is by placing Judaism on the same plane as paganism, in the elementary interstices of existence itself, that Levinas finds the source and unity of its unique vocation, within the West and beyond it. This is what Levinas will later mean when he describes Judaism as “a category of being” (Levinas 2009, p. 75). Like paganism and in light of Hitlerism, being Jewish is an adherence of the spirit to embodied historical existence. Unlike Hitlerism, it does not mistake this adherence for a value in itself but takes its way of being riveted as a point of departure toward another way of being—the way of Judaism rather than paganism. Being Jewish therefore demands a return to Judaism.

Being riveted, then, describes a condition that is not entirely ‘neutral’ or ‘indeterminate,’ since it is disposed to self-glorification, and yet *it can be modified*. It can be modified as paganism, which exalts in its immanent spirituality, or as Judaism, which intervenes into its elementary ways. Paganism and Judaism stand for two opposing ways of modifying the facticity of being riveted to one’s own embodied historical facticity. Judaism modifies the facticity of being riveted in three ways that distinguish it from paganism. (1) Judaism modifies the concrete sense of being historical into what Levinas calls, for the first time, “holy history” (Levinas 1935c, p. 4). It does so by diasporizing history, which prevents the Jewish way of being historical from resolving into a national spirit, as does the pagan way of being riveted to history. (2) Through its daily life of religious ritual, Judaism modifies the elementary concrete ways of being embodied. The “peculiar physiognomy” (Levinas 1937; trans. Levinas 2005, p. 287) of Judaism amounts to a completely different way of embodying the sense of being riveted to that pursued by paganism; the latter glorifies the natural body, the former interrupts its spontaneous spiritualization. (3) Judaism’s affirmation of creation is also best interpreted as a way of modifying the sense of being riveted to elementary existence. As we noted, Levinas’s recourse to creation does not amount to an affirmation of a transcendent Will, external, free, and thus able to act morally, but to a “sentiment” of “the trace of the provisional and the created” within the world. Levinas’s early recourse to creation is, then, best understood as a modification of the immanent spiritualism of pagan naturalism. These three modifications of being riveted set Judaism in essential opposition to paganism and yet on the same plane, since both are ways of understanding the spirituality of the concrete, elemental sense of being. This is why, more so than Christianity, which integrates elements of pagan spirituality while attempting to transcend its adherence to the immanence of being, “Judaism is the anti-paganism par excellence” (Levinas 1939, p. 3). Let us then see how Levinas adumbrates the anti-pagan religious elements of Jewish existence as diaspora, ritual, and the attunement to creation.

6. Diaspora, or the Anti-Pagan Way of Being Historical

Until Hitlerism, the secular age presented Jews with only two viable options: emancipate as individuals, whether religious or atheist, and receive full civil rights among the nations; or emancipate as a nation, but then detach from the nations where you reside and build a state for yourselves, as the Zionist movement was proposing. The latter option, however, runs the risk of modifying the condition of being Jewishly riveted in pagan fashion. Since being Jewish means finding spiritual meaning *in* concrete existence, the prospect of Jewish nationalism amounts to spiritualizing Jewish existence in the form of a state. The dilemma motivates Levinas to find the religious inspiration of collective Jewish historical existence in the experience of Diaspora, “the central fact, the fundamental fact of Jewish history” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 4). Levinas thus seizes on the facticity of Diaspora as the “more ancient vocation” of being riveted to Judaism (Levinas 1935c). “By proclaiming that Judaism was only a religion, it [the AIU] demanded of the Jews more and not less than Jewish nationalism, it offered them a task more worthy than de-Judaization” (Levinas 1935c).

The Diaspora is “not a sociological category applicable to ordinary history” but “essentially a religious fact” that places Jewish existence on a different trajectory to the history of

the nations (Levinas 1935c). Perhaps we here detect the first influence on Levinas of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, to which he was introduced by Jacob Gordin in 1935, and so too his proximity to Hermann Cohen, Gordin's theopolitical guide. Rosenzweig, Cohen, and Gordin himself, notably in his essay "Actualité du Maïmonïde," all invest Jewish diasporic life with a messianic role in orienting the course of universal history, which is Christian history in secular form. In view of the 'German' understanding of spirituality, secular nationalism, founded on the concrete spirituality of historical existence, risks becoming a pagan form of political existence. Being Jewishly riveted to the religious quality of historical, elementary existence must therefore avoid interpreting itself in pagan fashion. Hitlerism, marking at once the ineluctability of being Jewish and the temptation of pagan political theology, calls on Jews to embrace the fate of Diaspora as their authentic way of being riveted to their own history. The religious essence of Jewish history thus demands "a renunciation of Jewish nationality," "a renunciation of one's own political destiny," a political "sacrifice [. . .] without reserve" (Levinas 1935c, p. 4). The religious quality of being riveted to Jewish history requires a complete rejection of Jewish nationalism. Its form as Diaspora attests to its anti-pagan vocation.

Judaism is an adherence to history no less than the spirituality of Hitlerism. Its religious quality finds meaning and truth in its historical existence, neither in the kingdom of heaven nor in the life of the mind. Diasporic existence does not transcend history but exceeds it. It provides a way of being riveted to history without denying the bond between history and homeland or sanctifying it. It rivets the Jew to historical existence, but as "holy history" it is not, like the pagan way of being riveted to history, "installed in the real". Without transcending history, it defers the unity of history and homeland for another time. It does not seek to transcend the elementary unity of history and homeland but establishes another historical trajectory for it, inhibiting the disposition to "statolatry" that comes with the ruins of transcendence, when being riveted historically exhibits a value in itself.

The renunciation of one's own political lot that comes with the facticity of Diaspora does not amount to a renunciation of Jewish politics. Secularism had presented a choice between individual emancipation, whether religious or atheist, and collective nationalism in the form of Zionism. Hitlerism, having brought de-Judaization to an end, points Levinas to a form of Jewish collective existence that actively collaborates to advance the messianic course of history. Levinas says little about the messianic course of history or the collaboration he envisages between the diasporic Jews and the nations in which they live. He argues that being riveted to a different way of being historical makes being Jewish "the ferment" of history, a way of awakening a "concern for the good [*inquiétude du bien*]" (Levinas 1938, 2021, p. 4) within history that cannot be accomplished by the state. The position, recalling Cohen's more than Rosenzweig's, anticipates the ethical account of subjectivity defended in *Totality and Infinity*. Here, however, Diaspora is an essentially collective mode of Jewish spirituality whose renunciation of Jewish nationalism does not seek to withdraw from the world, as though the ghetto were the only alternative to the collective modality of Jewish existence. Diaspora thus amounts not only to "renunciation" but to "an active resignation" that is "not fully accomplished as long as Judaism remains folded in on itself" (Levinas 1935c, p. 4).

Even so, Diaspora involves sacrifice. The Jews must sacrifice their own political lot if they are to play their authentic role in history. "A sacrifice that current events make particularly difficult, a sacrifice we do not want, a sacrifice that we disdain. But a sacrifice that borrows its meaning from the holy history it prolongs. It is therefore only an unblemished sacrifice if we participate every day in this history through religious practices or at least through knowledge and love of Judaism and solidarity in suffering with it (Levinas 1935c, p. 4)." Jewish politics is a sacrifice not only in the sense that it renounces, through messianic deferral, the unity of its own history and homeland but also in the sense of an offering made to the nations, a way of collaborating with them.⁵

The Holocaust will be, for Levinas, one sacrifice too many. After the Second World War, the "difficult path" (Levinas 1935c, p. 4) of diaspora, requiring a "difficult sharing" (Levinas

1935c), will be completely reoriented by the founding of the state of Israel, reemerging as the “difficult freedom” of Judaism that is no longer essentially diasporic but now seeks its prophetic–messianic orientation within the history of nation states. In the 1930s, however, the concrete spirituality of collective Jewish historical existence testifies against the pagan spirituality of being enrooted in place. The Jewish way of being riveted historically restores the spirit to its proper dispersal throughout creation.

7. Jewish Ritual, or the Anti-Pagan Way of Being Embodied

No less than secular determinations of being Jewish fail to accommodate the new reality imposed by Hitlerism, so liberal or reform interpretations of Judaism fail to accommodate the new climate of German spirituality. Levinas’s claim that Liberal Judaism views the religious qualities of Judaism as expressions of ideas rather than elementary concrete data is likewise founded on his emerging conception of Judaism as an elemental anti-pagan form of religious existence. The reduction of Jewish religiosity to “ethical monotheism” is a case in point; that later Levinas will move in this very direction should caution against a hasty identification of “ethics” with the Reform tradition of “ethical monotheism”. In the 1930s, he argues that the essence of Judaism lies not in its transparent moral teachings but on the contrary in its opaque “religious part”. “Since Christian peoples adopted the Decalogue and the precepts of our prophets, the moral mission of Judaism is virtually complete. But the religious part that now remains to be played thus regains its original meaning and purity (Levinas 1935c, p. 4).” Elsewhere, the critique of Liberal Judaism is made explicit:

Instead of insisting on the originality of its religious destiny, it [Judaism] too often interpreted it in the vague terms of a so-called liberalism in which it was made into a pale image and as a substitute for the Christian religion. It locked up the mystery of its existence and its persistence within the narrow limits of a moral mission which, in a world that had been evangelized for nineteen centuries, no one needed any longer. (Levinas 1936, p. 12)

Levinas rejects Liberal Judaism’s reduction of Jewish ritual to subjective feeling, its attempt to explain ritual by appeal to its instrumental value, and its employment of rational criteria to distinguish between practices that are worth preserving and superstition. Indeed, by rationalizing religion, Liberal Judaism excludes itself from the mystery that Judaism safeguards through its daily life of ritual and liturgy. Here too the mystical meaning of Jewish ritual coincides with its vocation as the anti-paganism par excellence. For Levinas, Liberal or Reform Judaism is an expression of German-Jewish idealism, according to which the truth of the data of experience, including religious experience, refer to abstract ideas that never coincide with their empirical modes of access (bodies, brains, practices, objects). By contrast, the new post-idealist German understanding of Jewish spirituality finds the spiritual meaning of Judaism in its concretely embodied existence. Precisely here, in the flesh, carnal Israel encounters paganism on its own terms. Accordingly, rather than trace the ideational content of ritual to a subjective or social function, Levinas examines its impact on the elementary, pre-reflective flow of natural life, exactly where paganism finds spiritual meaning.

It is necessary above all else to search for the original essence of the ritual in an accurate description of its execution. It appears, from the beginning, as an inconvenience that troubles the natural attitude that we take in regard to things. Are not prohibited meats, in fact, good to eat? Does not the sun cast its rays upon the work of men on Saturday as much as on a weekday? Is prayer spontaneous in Hebrew?

Everywhere the ritual inserts itself between reality and us. [...] Food is not merely a thing to consume; it is “kosher” or “taref.” [...] The seventh day does not dawn like all the rest; it remains impervious to the concerns of the week. Before accomplishing such an elementary gesture as eating, the Jew pauses to

give a blessing. Before entering into the house, he stops to kiss the “mezuzah.” All this happens as though he did not step with both feet into the world that offers itself to him, as though, in the world where technology has cleared a way for us without resistance, the ritual constantly marked a pause, as though it interrupted for an instant the current that constantly connects us to things. (Levinas 1937, 2005, pp. 287f.)

In place of the kind of rationalizations offered by Liberal Judaism, an “accurate description” of the act or “execution” of Jewish ritual affords direct phenomenological access to the anti-pagan thrust of Jewish existence. Jewish ritual acts to interrupt the natural flow of existence and thereby modify the sense of being riveted in the opposite way to its pagan glorification. Through its daily life of ritual Judaism enacts a critique of the spontaneity of the pagan way of exalting in natural existence.

At bottom, the world never appears to the practicing Jew as a natural thing. Others feel themselves immediately at home (chez soi) there, immediately at ease. The environment in which they live is so habitual to them that they no longer see it. Their responses are instinctual. Things are always old acquaintances; they are familiar, everyday, and profane. For the Jew, by contrast, nothing is entirely familiar, entirely profane. To him, the existence of things is something infinitely surprising. It strikes him as a miracle. He experiences wonder at every instant at the fact—so simple and yet so extraordinary—that the world is there. (Levinas 1937, 2005)

Whereas paganism spiritualizes nature, legitimizing the passions and earthly powers and installing itself in the real, thus cultivating a morality of masters, Judaism, through its practices, embodies the very opposite phenomenological movement. Its “peculiar physiognomy” amounts to a counter-embodiment to pagan morality (Levinas 1937, 2005, p. 287).

The Jewish way of embodying the spiritual disrupts the sense of being riveted to the natural spirituality of the body. Without abstracting from the body, as the Greco-Christian tradition inclines to do, Jewish ritual affords an anti-pagan way of being spiritually embodied. It embodies the distance within the very existence to which the Jew is riveted. This distance within existence is precisely where Levinas finds the mystical meaning of Judaism. Despite his wellknown hostility to mysticism later in life, the young Levinas finds it indelible in the religion of Judaism. His neo-Orthodox critique of Liberal Judaism, coinciding with the anti-pagan vocation of being riveted to Judaism, culminates in an account of the mystical sentiment to which being Jewish is riveted.

The ritual is precisely the behavior of one who, amid the racket of our everyday action, perceives the mystical resonance of things. If it stops us at the threshold of the natural world, it is because it introduces us into the mystery of the world. It touches the sacred face of things. From that moment on, the ritual occupies the place in the universe to which it returns. It is not an unimportant gesture to which we give an ordinary subjective meaning. Nor is it a purely preparatory exercise. It is efficacious and transitive, it is work, it accomplishes—it is an event. (Levinas [1937] 2005)

Jewish practice is not founded on subjective feeling nor instrumental purposes but seeks, rather, to cultivate contact with the sacred face of things. Unlike the pagan way of being in touch with the sacred, the Jewish way consists in “touching and not touching” (מִטֵּי וְלֹא מִטֵּי), as Jewish mystics, whom Levinas does not cite, put it. In this way, while touching the mystical resonance of things, their aspect or “face”, Judaism does not touch the mystical source or essence of things. Accordingly, it does not master existence, install itself in the real, or generate a sense of belonging, entitlement, and familiarity. The Jewish mystical is an anti-pagan mysticism that rivets the Jew to the mysterious distance within existence, without laying hold of the mystery itself. This phenomenology of touching without touching the mystery of existence rests on the idea of creation, which likewise links Jewish monotheism to its diasporic history and its ritually embodied life.

8. Creation, or the Anti-Pagan Way of Being Riveted to Existence

On several occasions, Levinas casts the Jewish belief in creation in opposition to the pagan philosophical belief in the eternity of the world. Levinas, however, gives this classical antinomy, which Maimonides advanced in proto-Kantian fashion (Levinas 1935b, 2008, p. 94), a novel and surprising interpretation. Levinas thinks of creation in phenomenological terms that point entirely to the immanent sense of the conditional and the provisional, an existence that is never given, always gifted. Belief in the eternity of the world, we saw, implies a morality that is incapable of extracting the human from its enclosure in natural laws, consigning humanity to a fatalism that naturalizes political difference and social hierarchies as though these expressed immutable laws. Maimonides' defense of the possibility of creation supplies a critique of the fatalistic naturalism of pagan morality. For Levinas, however, the possibility of creation does not motivate belief in an external Will able to intervene in the natural course of the world. More modestly, it motivates an acknowledgement of the provisional, unenclosed quality of existence itself. The idea of creation does not point Levinas to the transcendence of a Will but to the creative openness within the world—"the trace of the provisional and the created" (Levinas 1935b, 2008, p. 94) that belies the pagan sense of a destiny built in to the eternal laws of being. Creation is a "sentiment" through which one attunes to the sense of the contingency of the world, like a *Befindlichkeit* that discloses 'being as a whole'. It does not point to an event prior to and outside of the world but to the affective disclosure of the groundlessness of the world itself. Creation, for Levinas, is the monotheistic way of asking the question "why is there something rather than nothing?". It is a way of attuning to being as such, which appears without ground, and therefore, without the grounds on which to assert oneself, claim one's entitlements, establish one's place in the world—"a mute unease" that healthy pagan spirits fail to understand on account of being firmly installed in the world. The sentiment of creation involves an attunement to the "sense of the contingency and insecurity of the world, an anxiety of being where one does not belong [*inquiétude de ne pas y être chez soi*]" (Levinas 1938, 2021). It modifies givenness into gift, permanence into the provisional, mastery into a momentary grace. Creation is an attunement to the unappropriable. It undermines pagan morality without reverting to an external spiritual force.

The sentiment of creation is essentially linked to the Jew's anti-pagan way of being ritually embodied. For Jewish ritual consists in a daily vigilance over the mystery of creation, which never coincides with knowledge or mastery of nature.

The belief in creation—the basis of Judaism—is nothing other than this wonder. It is not an abstract dogma of theology. Present in each of the surprises that the Jew daily experiences in the face of the world, it prevents him from seeing in nature a purely natural reality. The Jew suspects that at the basis of this reality, dazzling with light, there is an unresolved enigma. He experiences the world as a mystery. His most familiar gestures extend into the supernatural. (Levinas 1937, 2005)

Despite this unusual reference to "the supernatural," Levinas never refers creation to a Creator, as though the enigma of creation enshrouds the very idea of a Creator. It is a matter, rather, of approaching the concept of creation from its immanent sense, which suspends reference to an event or agent prior to and outside the existing world while still eliciting a creaturely sense of dependence and unentitlement, gratitude and praise for 'I know not what'. The sentiment of creation thus brings "suspicion" and "mute unease" to the morality of the masters who glorify in their sense of belonging to being. It understands that the mystery of the world is not tailored to human ambitions but exceeds and decenters them. Through the attunement of creation, Jewish monotheism attests to a spirituality inhering in existence that is essentially anti-pagan. Creation correlates with the diaspora of the divine throughout existence itself.

9. The Judaic Event, or the "New Path" within the West

Levinas's phenomenological approach to Judaism has ontological implications. Being riveted to Judaism is a way of accessing the spiritual or religious qualities of existence itself,

otherwise than paganism. Through its diasporic and ritual existence, Judaism accesses the “mystical resonances” of being itself. The conclusion to *On Escape* calls this “new path,” the way of “excendence” that does not transcend but nevertheless escapes being, “an event that breaks up existence in the very accomplishment of its existence” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 73, emphasis added). We have seen how Judaism, as the anti-pagan way of being riveted, is this event. Its ritualized, diasporic attunement to the mystery of creation is “efficacious,” Levinas says, “it is an event” (Levinas 1937, 2005, p. 288, emphasis added). By being riveted to Judaism, Jewish existence provides a way of coping with “all that is weighty in being” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 54), eschewing the metaphysics of Western idealism and Christian theology without degrading into barbarism. The “difficult path” (Levinas 1935c, p. 4) of Judaism thus coincides with, or points to, the “new path” that the West must follow in the wake of the collapse of its idealist metaphysics—“at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 73).

Like pagan Hitlerism, being Jewish finds the grounds and ultimate horizon of spirituality in elementary existence, but by being riveted to Judaism it testifies to the event of distance within being. In this way, Judaism stands opposed to the pagan sense of being enclosed within the concrete, of spiritually coinciding with natural existence, of being bound by facts of nature. Within a “German” understanding of the concrete spirituality of being, Judaism attests to a way of inhabiting the distance within the concrete, to a morality that interrupts the flow of elemental existence, to the unappropriable within existence, the unoccupiable. To be Jewish is to be riveted without being fatalistically bound to blood and soil.

Long after the 1930s Levinas continues to characterize Judaism as a religion of concrete existence through which the event of “excendence” comes to pass. To be sure, after the war Levinas relinquishes the word ‘excendence’ and embraces, instead, the language of ‘transcendence’. The distinction, however, is more terminological than substantive. The ‘transcendence’ of ethics does not involve recourse to a higher existence or a more true reality. As was the case before the war, when Judaism was placed on the same plane as paganism and thereby reclaimed its concealed vocation within the Greco-(Judeo)-Christian West, Judaism, as “ethics”, provides a way of escaping the concrete conditions of existence without transcending them for the sake of abstract idealities like truth and faith.

If Judaism is attached to the here below, it is not because it does not have the imagination to conceive of a supernatural order, or because matter represents some sort of absolute for it [. . .] in the name of spirit, one can choose not to flee the conditions from which one’s work draws its meaning, and remain here below. And that means choosing ethical action. (Levinas [1951] 1997, p. 100)

10. Excendence and Transcendence

The decisive difference between excendence and transcendence requires further clarification. For on the one hand, as we have seen, Levinas unfolds the concept toward the event of Judaism, whose “difficult path” coincides with the “new path” of excendence—“an event that breaks up existence in the very accomplishment of its existence” (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 73). Judaism’s anti-pagan ways accomplish the event of excendence, providing an escape from being within the concrete movement of being riveted. Yet on the other hand, the path of excendence unfolds as much from Heidegger’s thought as it does from Judaism, giving rise to the distinctively Heideggerian climate of Levinas’s construal of Judaism.

In Heidegger’s major publications from the 1920s—*Being and Time*, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, “The Essence of Ground”—and so too in the winter semester of 1928–29 at the University of Freiburg, *Introduction to Philosophy*, which the young Levinas attended, along with his older friend Jean Wahl, a distinction is consistently maintained between “ontic” and “ontological” transcendence. Ontic transcendence posits a separation between the subject and object of experience and thereby elicits elaborate attempts to explain or overcome the separation in which subjects find themselves, whether through thought (e.g., Descartes),

knowledge (e.g., Kant), faith (e.g., Kierkegaard), or empathy (e.g., Husserl). Encapsulated in Heidegger's critique of ontic transcendence is his critique of the epistemological biases of modern Western philosophy, the correspondence theory of truth, the reification of meaning in the form of intentional content and, more broadly, his sweeping critique of Western idealism, Christian theology, and indeed philosophy since Plato.⁶ Throughout this history, Heidegger argues, transcendence is understood ontically, as a *term* where thinking, knowing, believing, desiring, and so on terminate in the guise of God, a supreme or highest being, a first cause or creator, or else as supersensible reality, the thing in itself, the intentional object, the truth of a proposition, the good beyond being, and so on. The seminar Levinas and Wahl attended included a lengthy discussion of why

the traditional [i.e., ontic] concept of transcendence [. . .] is not original, but rests on presupposed determinations that have not been clarified, such as 'subject' [. . .] Moreover, it remains narrowly confined to knowing, and knowing is in turn conceived as theoretical, and the latter once again as investigative. Transcendence here means: Climbing out of the subject and over to an object. The transcendent is the object, that toward which we go out, that to which we relate".

(Heidegger [1928] 2024, p. 234)

It is this ontic conception of transcendence that Levinas has in mind when he notes, in "On Escape," how "modern sensibility wrestles with problems that indicate, perhaps for the first time, the abandonment of this concern with transcendence" (Levinas 1935a, 2003, p. 51).

Yet Heidegger's critique of ontic transcendence always advanced with an eye toward retrieving a different, ontological understanding of transcendence (Dreyfus; Moran). In contrast to ontic transcendence, in the 1920s he sought a more primordial sense of ontological transcendence that describes how being itself is opened, exposed, and disposed to meaning. In this view, as he said in the seminar Levinas attended, "transcendence does not mean going out to an object; the subject is already outside, and it is only outside alongside beings insofar as it itself is disclosed" (Heidegger [1928] 2024, p. 235). In the previous summer, he had linked this notion of transcendence to the original meaning of the word: "Transcendere means to step over; the transcendens, the transcendent, is that which oversteps as such and not that toward which I step over (Heidegger [1927] 1988, p. 299)." For Heidegger, then, transcendence is not a term but the way the space of meaning is opened through the finite temporality of being in the world. It does not mark the distance between two separate beings but the way being itself is opened to meaning and surpasses—transcends—any given, definitive meaning. Transcendence, then, is the way meaning irrupts as being-in-the-world, which happens in virtue of Dasein's pre-theoretical way of understanding its finite possibilities for being. This is why, in his pioneering 1932 article, "Martin Heidegger and Ontology," Levinas wrote that for Heidegger, "Transcendence is an event [*événement*] (*Geschehen*) of existence" (Levinas 1932; trans. Levinas 1996, p. 18), before elaborating:

The act of taking leave of oneself to reach objects—namely, this relation of subject to object with which modern philosophy is so familiar—has its basis in a leap accomplished beyond "be-ings" [*étants*] understood in an *ontic* sense toward ontological being; this leap is accomplished by Dasein's very existence and is an event [*événement*] itself of this existence, not just a phenomenon added to it. For this leap beyond be-ings and toward being—which is ontology itself, the understanding of being—Heidegger reserves the word "transcendence". This transcendence conditions the transcendence of subject to object—a derived phenomenon from which the theory of knowledge issues. The problem of ontology is for Heidegger transcendental in this new sense. (Levinas 1932, 1996, trans. slightly modified)

Notably, in the seminar Levinas attended in Freiburg, Heidegger explains that the priority of ontological over ontic transcendence means that the natural sciences cannot provide the grounds of meaning, since they always presuppose the transcendence of being-in-the-world, whose historicity lays them open for investigation (Heidegger [1928] 2024,

pp. 229ff.). This sense of ontological transcendence is the source of Heidegger's rejection of fatalism, determinism, and biological racism.

Levinas returned to the question of transcendence in his response to Wahl's celebrated lecture on "Subjectivity and Transcendence," delivered in December [1937] 2005 to an esteemed audience and printed with written responses by Karl Jaspers, Karl Löwith, and Martin Heidegger, among others (Moyn 2005; Wahl 2016). By then, Levinas knew well of Heidegger's political involvement with the Nazis and had consequently decided to abandon the book he had begun to write on the thinker he called a "genius" in 1932 (Levinas 1932, 1996, p. 11). Despite his "stupor and disappointment" (Levinas 1988; trans. Levinas 1989, p. 458), as he later recalled it, in [1937] 2005 he nevertheless defends Heidegger's notion of ontological transcendence against Wahl's reading, and thus, as Kevin Hart observes, we still see Levinas here "as a young man in full flush of enthusiasm for Heidegger" (Wahl 2016, p. 10). Wahl had claimed that Heidegger's thought secularizes theology. Levinas contests this interpretation on the grounds that theology relies on an ontic conception of transcendence, which is precisely what Heidegger's approach attempts to overcome by accessing a more original, ontological sense of transcendence.

The great interest of Heideggerian philosophy consists in showing at the base of man's *ontic* adventure that there is something more than a relation of "a being" to "a being," namely, the understanding of being, ontology. [...] fundamental transcendence is accomplished not in the passage of one "being" to another, but from "being" to Being (de l'« étant » vers l'être) (trans. mod.)."

Throughout the 1930s, then, Levinas retains Heidegger's distinction between ontic and ontological transcendence, which is arguably not the case after the Second World War (Moyn 2005, pp. 182–87). Levinas's critique of the Greco-Christian West as a history of "idealism" rests on its characterization as a tradition in search of ontic transcendence. Whether in the name of truth or God, whether by means of reason, freedom, or faith, the metaphysical and anthropological dualism of the Western Greco-Christian tradition is founded, for Levinas, on its commitment to ontic transcendence, which is precisely what the new philosophical climate contests. More strikingly, this defense of Heidegger's account of ontological transcendence, clearly distinguished from ontic transcendence, points to his own way of conceiving the elementary religion of Judaism in these years. As we noted, Heidegger's exclusion of theology on account of its ontic conception of transcendence nevertheless affords a "more profound" way of approaching the religious element of existence itself—"a reality that if not theological is at least religious" (Levinas [1937] 2005, 1996). This religious element in existence itself manifests, we have seen, in pagan or Jewish fashion. Both sense the concrete religious or spiritual element in existence itself. The pagan modification naturalizes the spirituality of existence, makes itself at home there, correlates its own ways of being historical and embodied with natural existence itself. The Jewish modification denaturalizes the religious quality of existence, maintaining, by being riveted to Judaism, the distance and the foreignness that inheres in being riveted to the religious mystery of existence itself. But then, did not what Levinas calls "excedence" already appear in Heidegger's thought as the transcendence of being (Heidegger [1927] 1962, p. 62), explicitly distinguished from the ontic transcendence of beings (*Seiendes*)? After all, the Judaic event, like the event of the transcendence of being (*Sein*), consists in the self-surpassing of existence and thus, within the concretely religious sense of existence, a rejection of naturalism, fatalism, and territorialism.

Levinas, I suggest, does not view Heidegger's thought as representative of pagan or Hitlerian thinking but on the contrary as an ally in his own discovery of Judaism's anti-pagan essence. It is none other than Heidegger who made it possible to disclose the religious character of existence itself as a Judaic event. Behind Levinas's idea of religious exigency of "excedence" lies Heidegger's notion of the spiritual quality of ontological transcendence, on the basis of which Judaism enacts its anti-pagan way of being historically embodied by breaking up existence in the very accomplishment of its existence, without recourse to a theology or metaphysics of a separate, free, rational subject, whether

human or divine. It is perhaps for this reason that Levinas never connects Heidegger's thought to Hitlerism, despite the many opportunities for doing so (Fagenblat 2018). It therefore seems necessary to revise the widely held interpretation of Levinas's early thought according to which Judaism figures as a religious transcendence in contrast to the pagan–Hitlerian–Heideggerian spirituality of immanence (Moyn 2005; Hansel 2006; Critchley 2015). Moyn's pioneering study is representative. Moyn proposed that before the war, for Levinas, "Judaism is, very simply, the religion of transcendence" (Moyn 2005, p. 191) which, moreover, stands against "the pagan philosophy of immanence that Levinas thought Heidegger was proffering in theory and Hitler was mobilizing in practice" (Moyn 2005, p. 192). Moyn's view, that "the interrelations between Heideggerianism, Hitlerism, and Judaism, as Levinas appears to have seen them, are surprisingly simple to discern and formulate," (Moyn 2005, p. 191), remains widely shared.

Quite the contrary seems to me the case, however. Levinas discovers in Judaism a religion of ex-cendence, which precisely separates it from the Christian religion of transcendence and all metaphysical recourse to ontic transcendence. This is also why, further, Levinas does not identify Heidegger's thought with Hitlerism, which he associates, rather, with the Nietzschean "will to power" (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 71), just as he associates paganism with the Nietzschean idea of "the morality of the masters" (Levinas 1939, p. 3). Ironic as it *seems*—in light of Heidegger's commitment to Hitler, if not Hitlerism, and of his turn to pre-metaphysical 'pagan' Greek thought—Levinas's understanding and deployment of Heidegger's consistently distinguishes it from Hitlerism and paganism, as he understands these terms. Heidegger's account of ontological transcendence—the transcendence of being, the transcendence of the world, and the transcendence of Dasein—survives Levinas's critique of Western idealism, even though the latter is inseparable from a critique of ontic transcendence. Heidegger's thought thereby features crucially in Levinas's way of thinking the Judaic event of extending the immanence of nature, history, and embodied existence. Judaism's anti-pagan vocation does not set itself against Heidegger's thought but on the contrary deploys a Heideggerian account of the spirituality of being in order to critique the pagan way of being riveted. Despite Heidegger's Nazism, his assimilation of the Judaic to "the Judeo-Christian," and his rejection of the ontic idea of a transcendent God, the Creator whose causal power and free will transcend the world, it is Heidegger's way of accounting for the transcendence of being that stands behind Levinas's account of the Jewish way of ex-cendence. It is the transcendence of being that gives Levinas access to the religious quality of existence itself, which the Judaic event discloses. In the 1930s, Heidegger's account of ontological transcendence supplies Levinas with the resources for thinking Judaism as the anti-paganism par excellence, able to contest the pagan way of adhering to being without reverting to an abstract realm of reality.

After the war, as Moyn shows, Levinas will turn to the concept of *revelation* to argue that subjectivity is founded in its relation to the "transcendence of the other," now described ontically in terms of the "separation" between self and other. The shift from creation to revelation correlates with the fundamental transition Levinas's thought seems to undergo in relation to Heidegger's thought. Before the war, Levinas accepted, indeed insisted on, the primacy of being over beings. After the war, he turns to a more ontic conception of transcendence "expressed" or "revealed" in the face of the Other. Having defended Heidegger's notion of ontological transcendence in the 1930s, after war he shifts to an interpersonal notion of transcendence that is closer to Wahl's position (Moyn 2005, pp. 177–87).

Throughout the 1930s, however, creation, not revelation, determines Levinas's understanding of Judaism, which is consistent with his view of Judaism as less about the morality of interpersonal relations than the mystery of being. Levinas then strips the concept of creation of its investment in ontic transcendence. Creation does not mark an external power and freedom that transcends existence but the self-surpassing of existence itself, the event or happening of its ex-cendence; creation as the "transimmanence" of being, to use a phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy. In the event of creation, without a trace of the creator, Levinas rediscovers how the happening of being escapes the fatalism of being riveted. To be sure,

the sentiment of creation is of a distinctively religious quality, which distinguishes it from the anxiety of being. The contingency of creation attunes one to “the mystical” rather than “the nothing”, as is disclosed in the fundamental anxiety of being. The sentiment of creation thus elicits humility rather than resoluteness, a sense of the unappropriable and the gifted rather than the authentic and destined. Within the transimmanence of creation, the anti-pagan vocation of being riveted to Judaism takes shape as a fraternity without nationalism, an embodiment without self-sufficiency, a history without sovereignty, a mysticism without mastery.

11. Coda: An “Ethnos-Under-God”?

In an unpublished paper written a few years before his untimely death in 1987, Steven Schwarzschild diagnosed a widespread problem in modern Jewish thought, namely, its becoming Heideggerian. The mark of this Jewish Heideggerianism, Schwarzschild proposed, is its Jewish way of finding “transcendence within immanence,” leading to “Jewish parallels to Heidegger’s German folkism”. Schwarzschild’s ultimate target was Jewish ethno-nationalism: “present-day Jewish proclamations of the centrality of Israel (people or land or both)” in Jewish thought, expressed in “the paradoxical coalition of Israel’s “Religious Parties” (and Gush Emunim) with the Right-wing secular, militant nationalists of the former Likud government” (Schwarzschild [1986] 2024, pp. 31, 44). In Schwarzschild’s view:

a basic philosophical misstep was taken in the beginning of the present [twentieth] century by vitalists and other “realists” and by their Jewish compeers, due to their desire to overcome what they regarded as the abstractness, formalism, and empty universalism of Kantianism in general and of Marburg neo-Kantianism in particular. One of the results was that they stipulated the ethnos as a central operator in history and culture. We have seen how even the “ethnos-under-God” can turn into an “ethnos-without-God” and how such a Godless ethnos then assumes the role of a real, living God on earth: a Leviathan, a Moloch whose every need and wish may become an imperative and to which everything else—the people themselves, other nations, other values and institutions—must be sacrificed. Contrary to this tendency, I contend that the methodological, universalist, critical rationalism of neo-Kantianism defies these dangers. (Schwarzschild, p. 48)

The debate is between approaches to Jewish faith founded on the authority of universal reason, answerable to the universal claims of science and morality and thereby determining the contents of Jewish faith in light of universal norms, as neo-Kantianism allows modern Jews to think, and those who understand the ultimate significance of Jewish faith as it is revealed and grounded in the concrete life of Israel’s historical existence. Schwarzschild’s concern is that Jewish Heideggerianism lends philosophical support to Judeo-ethno-nationalism, providing it with philosophical legitimacy through its “new concrete realism,” whose mantra he parodies: “where there had been reason, let there be the people” (Schwarzschild, p. 15). Modern Jewish philosophy would thereby be complicit in defending the notion of an “ethnos-under-God”, and thus, lending credence to the widespread traction of Judeo-ethno-nationalism among contemporary Jews. Sounding a warning call and even an accusation across the field of modern Jewish philosophy, Schwarzschild argued that exalting the spiritual significance of the concrete life of Israel is liable to repeat the terrible mistakes of the very philosopher who forged the path toward the spirituality of the concrete, for “Heidegger and Heideggerianism are of one solid piece: he became a Nazi and remained a German ethnicist for reasons that are inherent in his basic philosophy” (Schwarzschild, p. 11).

The young Levinas embraced this “turn to the concrete,” as Schwarzschild calls it (Schwarzschild, p. 31); indeed the phrase “*vers le concret*” was popularized in France by Levinas’s friend Jean Wahl (1932), whose attempt to secularize ontic transcendence Levinas critiqued in the name of a concrete existence he calls “religious”.⁷ Exactly opposed to Schwarzschild, then, who follows Cohen and Cassirer in seeking a Judaism of reason founded on the universal, transparent reflection of reason, Levinas follows Heidegger and

Rosenzweig in his search for the religious quality of concrete Jewish existence. Instead of calling for a return “back to neo-Kant” (Schwarzschild, p. 49), as does Schwarzschild, Levinas’s wager is to go where the danger grows, to a Jewish interpretation of the new ‘German understanding of spirituality’ in which the disposition of elementary existence to descend to barbarism is confronted on the same plane, contrasting the pagan morality that naturalizes being riveted with the anti-pagan way of being riveted to Judaism. He did so, however, while sharing in the very concerns that troubled Schwarzschild, namely, that the phenomenology of being riveted is readily disposed to barbarism, to the glorification of blood and earth and the politicization of identitarianism as statolatry. Accordingly, Levinas insists that the Jewish turn to the concrete calls for a “sacrifice of its nationality [. . .] without reserve” (Levinas 1935c, p. 4), lest Jews too, like the crowd of the perplexed who follow Hitler, become disciples of the pagan god Thor, “who only offers men an earthly lot” (Levinas 1935c).

As we noted, however, the Holocaust was one sacrifice too many for Levinas. He therefore came to terms, reluctantly, with the founding of the state of Israel. As he wrote to his friend Maurice Blanchot in May [1948] 2010, the prospect of a Jewish existence that would be “young, rerooted in the soil, ‘healthy’ as they say, concrete, patriotic” (Levinas 1948; trans. Levinas 2010, p. 646)—precisely the terms in which he described the “grandeur and elevation” of pagan spirituality (Levinas 1939, p. 3)—could be embraced only *on condition* that the prophetic heritage of Israel safeguards it from the pagan temptations of blood and soil. “When we say that the regime of Israel will be founded on the prophets, *the spirit adheres* so tightly to these words that the unctuous tone, by which one usually plugs up the fissure between these words and thought, is no longer so perceptible” (Levinas 1948, 2010, p. 647, emphasis added). This “adherence” recalls, by way of contrast, the immanent spirituality of Hitlerism, which in [1934] 1990 was described as an “*adherence to the Self [that] is of value in itself* [. . .] an adherence that *one does not escape*” (Levinas 1934, 1990, p. 68; emphasis in original). In [1948] 2010, after the sacrifice of the Jews without a nationalism of their own, it is a matter of adhering to the prophets in order to escape the spontaneous paganism of being riveted. Unfailingly concrete, the essentially religious ground of Jewish existence will henceforth have to navigate the political temptations of its inescapable path: entitlement, appropriation, identitarianism, the exaltation of blood and soil, statolatry, to mention only the obvious. By 1951, in “The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel,” the religious ground of being Jewish is woven into the existence of the State of Israel: “Religion and religious parties do not necessarily coincide. [. . .] The State of Israel [. . .] will be religious or it will not be at all” (Levinas [1951] 1997, p. 219). Anticipating Schwarzschild’s concerns, the religious quality of Jewish existence, whose historicity is now bound up with the State of Israel, is no longer exalted in the name of “mystery” but as “prophetic morality,” “Justice as the *raison d’être* of the State: that is religion” (Levinas [1951] 1997, pp. 219, 220).

It can hardly be doubted that ‘religion,’ Judaism, has here been, if not territorialized then at least mobilized in the service of a state. “Frighteningly dangerous,” as Levinas said of Hitlerism in [1934] 1990? Perhaps this even explains why, after the Second World War, after the sacrifice of Jewish nationalism was deemed inadmissible, Levinas insists, despite the grave misgivings he had in the 1930s about reducing Judaism to ethics, that the essentially religious quality of Judaism consists in the mission of prophetic justice, modified by the anti-pagan text par excellence, the Talmud (Levinas [1951] 1997, pp. 219–20). Might the centrality of “ethics” and the “Talmud,” both of which only enter his understanding of Judaism after the war, be explained by his earlier view of Judaism as an existential alternative to the political problem of paganism?

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Notes

- ¹ Although beyond the scope of this article, keeping this point in mind is also indispensable for a coherent interpretation of Levinas's account of Judaism after the Second World War, when it is most often identified with "ethics". The fact that before the war Levinas adopts an anti-statist construal of the theopolitics of Judaism, whereas after [1948] 2010 he enlists his understanding of Judaism in support of the state of Israel, evidently marks a major shift in his determination of the essence of Judaism. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Levinas replaces his political interpretation of Judaism with an ethical one. Even when he argues that Judaism places ethical demands on subjectivity that transcend the political, a political conception of Judaism is at work (on this see [Lapidot Forthcoming](#)).
- ² Levinas does not use the term 'political theology,' which comes from [Schmitt \(\[1922\] 2006\)](#), for whom it refers to secularization of divine authority in the form of the modern state. Whereas Schmitt argues that the fascist state legitimately bears the authority of Christian monotheism in secular form, Levinas's analysis suggests that the fascist state consists in the secularization of a pagan spirituality, as we will see. In order to mark the difference between Levinas's account of pagan political theology, which is instantiated in a fascist state, and his anti-statist construal of Jewish anti-paganism, I refer to the latter as a "theopolitics" rather than a political theology. This distinction is borrowed from Samuel Brody, who reads Martin Buber's Jewish alternative to Schmitt in these terms: "where political theology deploys the power of the divine in the service of the authoritarian state, theopolitics denies any possibility of truly legitimizing institutional human power" ([Brody 2018](#), p. 4). Buber's Jewish theopolitics, however, is anarchistic, whereas Levinas's anti-statist account of Jewish theopolitics in the 1930s is diasporist.
- ³ Despite its still too theoretical character, Husserlian phenomenology belongs to this genealogy inasmuch as it finds valid eidetic structures throughout the entire domain of meaning and not only in logical or formal propositions. And yet Husserlian phenomenology remains too French, as it were. When he lectured at the Sorbonne in 1929, Husserl even framed his project under the title *Cartesian Meditations* in 1929, which Levinas co-translated in 1931. By that time, Levinas had already "the deeply intellectualist character of Husserl's intuitionism" in his prize winning thesis on *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* ([Levinas \[1930\] 1995](#), p. 155). The title of that book encapsulates its ironic thesis. Despite Husserl's way of locating the intuition of essences in concrete life, the method he develops, relying as it does on the spontaneous capacity of consciousness to free itself from the flow of concrete existence by way of reflection, amounts to no more than a *theory* of phenomenological intuition. To understand eidetic intuition properly one needs to turn to Heidegger, for whom the fundamental intuitions of being that give phenomena their specific, concrete character are temporal and historical ([Levinas \[1930\] 1995](#), p. 156).
- ⁴ For a longer historical context, see [Sebban \(2012\)](#).
- ⁵ Levinas never imagines other nations emulating the Jewish way of being riveted to history by adopting diasporic existence for their own. Other nations must find their own way of excending their own experience of being historically riveted. The distance crossed by the Jews from history to holy history can be crossed by the gentiles in their own fashion.
- ⁶ Although not available to Levinas, Heidegger provides a particularly succinct formulation, composed at the very same time (1936–38), in *Contributions* §110, "The *ιδέα*, Platonism, and idealism". In this section "the origin of 'transcendence' in its various forms" is traced back to Plato's determination of the *ιδέα* a common, separate being, which amounts to "Transcendence in the 'ontic' sense': one being surpassing all others. . .". Ontic transcendence is here distinguished from "Transcendence in the 'ontological' sense," which is closely linked to "Transcendence in the sense of the 'fundamental ontology' of *Being and Time*," where "its original meaning" is retrieved, namely, transcendence as "the surpassing as such" through which Dasein is exposed to "the open realm of beings" (pp. 169–70). Since I am here arguing that Levinas's concept of "excendence" is another way of saying what Heidegger meant by *ontological* transcendence, note too that Levinas's description of pagan spirituality as a way of being *enclosed* should not be understood as a reference to Heidegger's thought, in which ontological transcendence is precisely a way of being *opened*.
- ⁷ Wahl, by the way, rejected the move. "I would not willingly accept the idea that existence is by itself a religious reality," he wrote in reply to Levinas. "For me religion has the nature of a response. And existence has first of all the nature of a question. There are responses to this question other than religious; every engagement, every risk, every decision, need not necessarily receive a religious qualification." A few years later, Hitlerism revealed to him too that he was riveted to being Jewish. In 1942, he was arrested, tortured, and imprisoned for being Jewish, before escaping to the U.S.A. for the remainder of the war.

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