

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Summer 2021

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Review Essay

Kenneth Hart Green, *The Philosophy of Emil Fackenheim: From Revelation to the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, x + 395 pp., \$120 (cloth).

Philosophy, Revelation, and the Holocaust

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One of the many exciting provocations for readers of Kenneth Hart Green's new book is that the very title announces a paradox. The title is neither *The Theology of Emil Fackenheim*, nor even *The Philosophical Theology of Emil Fackenheim*. Rather, it places "philosophy" in direct relation to the subtitle's invocation of "revelation." But while the discipline of philosophy surely has much to say about God, it has relatively little to say about divine revelation. There is thus an interestingly insistent character to Green's title and work. How is it that Fackenheim can maintain a lifelong interest in divine revelation and yet be a philosopher? In what respect does his work remain within the province of human reason when speaking about God's call to the Jewish people? This question is only intensified when one remembers that Fackenheim taught in the Philosophy Department at the University of Toronto for over thirty years. His earliest publications dealt, first, with medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy, and then predominantly with German Idealism. However, teaching in a philosophy department, as Leo Strauss reminds us, is not the same as being a philosopher. We must therefore wonder what Green's

Fackenheim understands by philosophy in order to answer the aforementioned question.

Biographically, it makes all the sense in the world that Fackenheim would have a mutual interest in philosophy and revelation.¹ Born in 1916 in Halle, Fackenheim was part of the emerging German-Jewish community in the throes of deciding what its relation to its religious heritage was to be (Halle had a history of conversions from Judaism, but that history had long since subsided). In 1938, on the night of Kristallnacht, Fackenheim was arrested by the Nazis and placed in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp for a little under a year. After his release and emigration from Germany, through Scotland, to Canada, he served as rabbi for Temple Anshe Shalom from 1943 to 1948, during which time he received his PhD from the University of Toronto in 1945. He became a professor of philosophy at Toronto in 1948 and taught there until 1984, when he made *aliya* and emigrated to Israel. Fackenheim is thus an interesting figure insofar as his life and work remain situated on the border of philosophy and Judaism. Moreover, readers of *Interpretation* may perhaps find of interest Fackenheim's lifelong attraction to the work of Leo Strauss. According to Fackenheim, it was his encounter with Strauss's *Philosophy and Law*² that led him to an appreciation of the classical sources in philosophy (even if, in the end, Fackenheim felt that he had to reject their approach). From that point on, Strauss became something of a mentor to Fackenheim. His magnum opus, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*,³ is dedicated to Strauss and makes particularly interesting use of Strauss's texts.⁴ Given that Fackenheim's own intellectual trajectory involves an early rejection of classical philosophy's focus on eternal verities in favor of a Hegelian (and later Heideggerian) procession through history, Fackenheim emerges as a dedicated reader of Strauss who simultaneously rejects Strauss's prioritizing of the ancients as well as his apparent favoring of Athens over Jerusalem. While Green's text does not amount to a

¹ The information for this discussion comes from Emil Fackenheim, *An Epitaph for German Judaism: From Halle to Jerusalem* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

² Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

³ Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

⁴ The texts by Strauss that are referred to in Fackenheim's work are *Philosophy and Law*, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*," "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*," and "Why We Remain Jews." The latter three are all contained in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 181–233, 137–77, and 311–56 respectively.

straight comparison between Fackenheim and Strauss,⁵ it does, at moments, engage in a substantive conversation between the two.

Green's reading of Fackenheim is both impassioned and analytically rigorous—he is dedicated to showing the import of Fackenheim for Judaism and philosophy as well as engaging in a genuine and original confrontation with his thought. Most Fackenheim commentators discern a break in his thought occurring in 1967, when Fackenheim experienced the Six-Day War in Israel as perhaps initiating another Jewish Holocaust (thus leading him to accord a greater conceptual significance to the Holocaust in Germany). Green is, to my knowledge, the only commentator to discern a tripartite periodization in Fackenheim's thought: pre-1967, Fackenheim concerned himself with an existentialist figure of revelation as it conceptually shows itself in Judaism; between 1967 and 1981, Fackenheim both adopts a historicist framework for thinking about revelation in Judaism and makes speculation on the Holocaust central to his observations; in 1982, with the publication of *To Mend the World*, Fackenheim takes the Holocaust to be a rupturing event in the very history of divine revelation, necessitating an entirely new way of thinking about philosophy and Judaism. This is, I believe, a point specific to Green's reading of Fackenheim: "Between 1967 and 1982 [Fackenheim] designated [historical] discontinuities as 'epoch-making events,' but was not willing to designate them as 'ruptures'" (49). The Holocaust, for the late-period Fackenheim, was not simply a singular event—it was a "'tear' in the very fabric of being" (226). Unlike a figure such as Richard Rubenstein, however, Fackenheim did not believe that the entire religious and intellectual tradition prior to the Holocaust was now inaccessible as a result of Auschwitz.⁶ As Green states, "[Fackenheim] never ceased to believe that the defense of revelation is urgently needed, although he came to wonder whether revelation could still be defended in the terms which he so carefully probed and elaborated in his 'first [early] reflections'" (5). Revelation, then, remains a fundamental category of Fackenheim's thought, and Green is explicit on this point: "My leading argument is that the core notion of revelation, elaborated in Fackenheim's early thought, continued to operate in his later thought, unchanged in its basis" (6). The category of revelation, in fact, functions (as it were) as

⁵ For an engaged comparison of the two, see Sharon Portnoff, *Reason and Revelation before Historicism: Strauss and Fackenheim* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

⁶ An example of Fackenheim's dialectical approach to Jewish tradition is his late-period suggestion that, instead of focusing on Exodus, Jews should now take Esther as the central book of the Hebrew Bible. See Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Rereading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 62.

the narrow gate through which humanity can gain a foothold outside the historicism characteristic of the thought of the middle- and later-period Fackenheim: “what integrates the seemingly conflicting sides of Fackenheim’s thought is his unending search for revelation as a defensible modern actuality, as an unavoidable theological desideratum, and most significantly as what provides access to the truth which abides through and beyond history” (7). This access occurs, for Green’s Fackenheim, by means of the activity of *tikkun*, mending, as it was manifest both in the resisting, witnessing voices of those in Auschwitz and in the creation of the State of Israel: “Fackenheim’s notion that it is possible to surpass the ‘negative Absolute’ of radical evil through *tikkun* may in fact put him beyond the radical historicism that he claims to fulfill more consistently than Heidegger” (11). While Fackenheim surely rejects Strauss’s Platonic conception of truth as ahistorical, Green suggests that Fackenheim (through the immanent dialectic of history) attains something like a posthistorical conception of truth: “I wonder whether something eternal and transcendent did not manifest itself to Fackenheim, through the standards by which he measures what the doers of *tikkun* did, and why they did it” (10). Through the thickets of history, Fackenheim thus discerns a standard by which we can evaluate historical actions and deeds. We might say that that standard is *revealed* in and through such history.

Chapter 1, “What Is Faith?,” presents an overview of Fackenheim’s understanding of Jewish faith as it comes to occupy different places in the three periods of his intellectual career. His concern over faith is a distinctly modern one—that is, it addresses itself to the question of why one would choose to believe at all. For Fackenheim, this is not a question that premodern Jewish thinkers addressed, for the simple reason that they accepted the reality of God as based on scriptural authority. Questions concerning the reality of God are thus a product of modernity: “Whether God is ‘alive’... as opposed to being a mere principle, is for Fackenheim the great issue which causes the modern crisis of faith” (13). This question can be asked only when “the authority of revelation is no longer sufficient” (15). In good existentialist fashion, Fackenheim holds that faith in God (or, for that matter, in anything) is the product of a fundamental decision, a leap. The question emerges as to what causes our respective leaps: “In Fackenheim’s pre-1967 thought, what determines which leap each of us takes is not our historical situation so much as it is our individual human existential situation” (17). What, however, is the stuff out of which the individual makes such a leap? It is, to a great extent, reason. In approaching the fundamental questions, the early Fackenheim holds that it is reason that raises these questions for us, and leads us to the point at which

we decide whether faith is something that grants a kind of knowledge. This changes markedly after 1967. In his middle period, Fackenheim, in a historicist vein, adopts what Green calls a “midrashic framework” (22) in which certain fundamental (“root”) Jewish experiences (such as the revelation at Sinai) can be seen to motivate our faith-filled knowledge by means of the rabbinic stories/narrations that are given to us in tradition. The midrashic practice of free interpretation of a biblical text “allows an authentic theological response to the historical disaster for Judaism [which was the Holocaust]” (23). The concern over the Holocaust becomes radicalized in Fackenheim’s later period, where “Fackenheim came to doubt whether faith can or should be preserved at least in that form, whether the Jewish tradition as it had existed can be saved in the face of the Holocaust, which he thought had devastated and shattered everything received from the past” (23). From 1982 onwards, Fackenheim “was compelled to accept that what is truly knowable can be based only on what is immediately accessible to human beings either here and now, or in the recent memory of witnesses who can intelligently testify to a historic (‘root’) experience” (40). It is the witnesses, therefore, who—by virtue of their resistance to the radical evil of the Holocaust—bear some connection to the root experiences of the past; no other connection is currently possible. The knowability of Jewish tradition in the face of the Holocaust holds for the event of the Holocaust as well: “[The Holocaust] can only be portrayed in all of its factual uniqueness and historical specificity by those who witnessed or survived it. Eerily, the only thing that it resembles is revelation” (47). So revelation and faith occur in and after the Holocaust, but they do so in an utterly tenuous and ambivalent manner. Put differently, it becomes somewhat unclear who or what is being revealed.

Chapter 2, “Individual versus Collective, Rational versus Mystical,” takes on the question whether Fackenheimian faith occurs at the individual or collective level and whether it amounts to a rational or mystical religious situation. Fackenheim’s early thought is predicated on an existential, individual act of decision, “since commitment cannot be derived from any other source” (61). Leading up to the full midrashic framework of his middle period, Fackenheim holds that in making our existentially committed decision, “midrashim can help us make a better choice, and disclose to us how and why such choices are good or bad, because they show the outcome of past choices, illustrating what kind of lives have issued from great biblical figures and their rabbinic followers” (62). It remains true, however, that—in the early period—Fackenheim “struggles to ground faith in something ‘knowable.’ He would prefer this to be some form of revelation resembling philosophy, so as

to escape modern skepticism as manifested in radical historicism” (65). What counts as religious knowledge, for the early Fackenheim, is reason based. From this standpoint, the change and gradual deepening of Fackenheim’s thought in historicism is pronounced: “In his pre-1967 thought, [Fackenheim] implies that the contradictions in history and paradoxes of human life will be resolved ‘rationally’” (76). Fackenheim presents the resolution of these contradictions and paradoxes by means of Hegelian logic, “treating the tradition as a historical dialectic which culminates in a promised future that will reconcile every contradiction” (77). While the full reconciliation is not Hegelian, but instead “post-Hegelian” (insofar as it culminates in a “messianic future” [77]), the logic of progression leading to that future depends on a Hegelian conception of rationality. It is just this reliance on rational processes that the Fackenheim of 1967 onwards begins to question. Eventually, Fackenheim will argue that, contrary to his individually centered early thought, it is “the collective people [which is] the only place where the authentic faith-act of the individual, resisting radical evil and thereby transcending it *in history*, is possible” (90). The move toward history in his middle period marks the shift toward the collectivity of faith, and the awareness of the rupture of the Holocaust in his late period marks the shift toward individual faith as resistance in history.

Chapter 3, “Revelation as Possibility,” elucidates the view that revelation (for Fackenheim) amounts not simply to the supposed actuality of the biblical experience at Sinai, but rather to the continuing presence of God in the history of the Jews. Prior to 1967, Fackenheim’s view (echoing that of Franz Rosenzweig) was that the only two “decisive” events that have occurred, or could occur, in Jewish history are the revelation at Sinai and the coming of the Messiah (97). Once he begins to take seriously the Holocaust, however, he is no longer able to maintain this position (97). But regardless of the period in which Fackenheim thinks, he rejects the modern Orthodox view, which holds that Judaism is essentially characterized by the historical actuality of the Sinaitic revelation (107): “Fackenheim takes the contrary philosophic position: ‘Judaism stands or falls,’ not with the Revelation at Sinai as historical fact, but ‘at least with the possibility of revelation in principle’” (107–8). Put differently, revelation does not consist predominantly in the objectivity of a single historical event: “[Fackenheim] thinks that justifying faith through the personal or subjective dimension is the only genuinely valid way to defend any possible version of Judaism today that is concerned with grounding itself in truth rather than dogma” (108). To say that Fackenheim is concerned with the truth-claim of revelation *as opposed to* its dogmatic adherence is to hold that

Fackenheim believes that revelation can be held to for philosophical reasons: “And this claim to truth does not depend on any single piece of empirical historical evidence, because according to the tradition God manifested Himself on multiple occasions in ancient Jewish history...His presence was not dependent on any single event, but on a continuous history, which supports the belief that God wished and still wishes to make Himself known to man” (111). It is the philosophical concern with the truth of revelation that gets articulated by Fackenheim within the context of history. What is the truth of revelation other than its very occurrence? Revelation engages the fundamental questions concerning how one ought to live. In this respect, revelation points to a transhistorical character of humanity that subtends the movement of history: “Fackenheim, both in his youthful and mature reflections on revelation, affirms the permanence of human nature beyond historicism, based on the permanence of the ultimate questions...No human being can avoid confronting these questions in his own life; everyone needs to answer them one way or another...Revelation persists as a possibility because it continues to provide the only plausible answer to the fundamental and permanent questions” (120). Fackenheim’s philosophical concern over the truth of revelation points to the ultimacy of revelation beyond history.

In chapter 4, “On Authority, Tradition, and History,” Green tackles the question of the authoritative basis of Fackenheimian revelation: ultimately, “Fackenheim seems to argue that revelation does not receive its ‘authority’ from the historical actuality of any single event in the past”; thus “Fackenheim abandoned the basis of virtually all of medieval philosophy, and made history the philosophic ground on which he argued that revelation is possible as a uniquely human phenomenon, causing advances that history cannot fully account for or justify in any other way” (154). It is ultimately the movement of history—which evinces the continuing survival of the Jewish people—that serves as the authority for revelation. This does not mean, however, that there is no change in Fackenheim’s position on such authority: “Before 1967, he tends to stress ancient rather than modern events as most significant or formative, as if the historical ceased to count religiously at a certain point” (129). The focus on ancient events, of course, gives way when the Holocaust becomes a structuring factor of Fackenheim’s thought. The emphasis on history has consequences for the philosophical desire to find truth-claims in and about revelation. In particular, it means that “revelation can never be an abstract, transcendent, perfected knowing. It is filtered through its historical context as well as the human capacity and worldly state of its recipients: it unavoidably reflects their experience, intelligence, and limits” (133–34). In

marked contrast to his somewhat cognitive pre-1967 approach, Fackenheim's midrashic framework (of the middle period) "was an attempt to celebrate the mystery [of revelation] rather than penetrate it" (52). In sum, whereas the early Fackenheim believes that "experience in history alone is not proof of revelation" (148), the middle and later Fackenheim holds that, while revelation is ultimately indexed to something nonhistorical, it must traverse history in order to move beyond it. While the move to history as the authoritative basis for revelation rejects a Platonic-style philosophy of ahistorical, eternal verities, it simultaneously rejects the dogmatic adherence to certain actual events as that authoritative basis; Fackenheim thus substitutes a dogmatic historical actuality for a philosophy of history.

Chapter 5, "Divine Power versus Human Freedom," deals with the crucial issue of where human freedom (if such a thing exists) is to be located in relation to God. Green begins the chapter with a question that, one might surmise, has its basis in Fackenheim's reading of *Philosophy and Law* (if the answer he gives to it is different from Strauss's): "Fackenheim asks *why* modern philosophy mounted a systematic critique of religion. He discovered that its animus against religion is not so much because of religion's perceived antagonism to reason, but because it saw religion as inimical to human freedom" (156). If the modern age touts the freedom of human being (whether it be in its cognitive status as knowing subject or in its political status as liberal, individual self), its nemesis (for Fackenheim) would have to be the commandments and prohibitions characteristic of revealed religion. For the moderns, the existence of divinity places a radical check on the possibilities outlined by human freedom. Fackenheim's solution to this quandary (characteristic of the interpretive landscape of rabbinic Judaism) is that human freedom is an integral part both of the divine-human relationship and of the knowledge of revelation: "With regard to [the divine-human] relationship, and it alone, 'man either participates in that relation, responding to the presence of the divine power in his human freedom, or else he does not know it at all'" (161). Prophecy, for Fackenheim, is not simply "transmitting God's unmediated word" (164). Instead, "interpretation is essential, for if the Law were only law and did not aim at something beyond itself, there would be no need to reflect on its purpose. Our duty would only be to follow and perhaps apply it. In Fackenheim's view, God wants man to keep His law vital, by continually adapting and adjusting it to better reflect his core demands" (164). To say that our duty is not simply to follow the Law, but rather to reflect—and, therefore, to understand—its purpose, is to posit a philosophical understanding of divine law. For Fackenheim, it is part of the divine plan that we understand God's purposes in revealing God's

law to us. This understanding of divine law, to some extent, transcends the fact that such revealed law occurs to us always and only in the horizon—or, as Fackenheim calls it, the “cave”—of history: “Though he posits that the ‘cave of history’ is ultimate and unsurpassable, Fackenheim allows this seemingly transcendent ‘light’ to beckon, hoping to discover some content in God’s presence, some aspect of his being, albeit only revealed through history” (198). Whether Fackenheim’s conception of “the cave of history” is posited in the light of Strauss’s thinking of the second (historical) cave lying beneath the first (natural) cave, it is clear that both seem to hold open the possibility for transhistorical awareness of the most important things. For Fackenheim, this awareness occurs as a result of human freedom’s interpretive capacity when it comes to understanding divine law.

In chapter 6, “From Presence to History,” Green begins to pivot away from a consideration of all three periods in Fackenheim, and turn instead towards the post-1967 work (with the ultimate purpose of focusing on the final period in the rest of the book). Fackenheim eventually rejects the Buberian-Rosenzweigian existential conception of revelation as containing nothing other than God’s presence (200). It was the Six-Day War that shook Fackenheim’s thinking, such that he now attributed a content to revelation: “Fackenheim retrospectively concludes that...the Six-Day War in 1967...point[s] to a secular form of ‘salvation’...[and thus] manifested true revelatory power.... It confirmed for him the mysterious power of survival in Jewish history. It showed him that an event can occur which has an undoubted transcendent significance for those who experience it, because it seems to substantiate and ratify the interpretation of similar events in past Jewish history. It also convinced him that God can ‘speak’ unambiguously through an event that confirms Jewish history and tradition” (210). On the face of it, there is nothing particularly religious about the 1967 war—it was a (somewhat distant) relative of the secular Zionist establishment of the State of Israel. This shows Fackenheim the significance of history in general: “Once Fackenheim recognizes the theological relevance of secular history, he is compelled to deal with two massive secular historical facts which cast very long theological shadows: the Holocaust, and the State of Israel” (215). It is the 1967 war that leads Fackenheim to take secular history seriously and ultimately to give a priority to the Holocaust. In the middle period, Fackenheim speaks of the Holocaust as an “epoch-making event” (if not yet as a “rupture”); this switch from thinking the content of revelation in terms of epochality “shows how much his emphasis has shifted from presence to history” (223). Revelation now has a content other than divine presence—it deals with the very survival

of the Jewish people. But this realization has a dark aspect to it: Fackenheim sees the 1967 war (as a moment of secular history that points in the direction of theological concerns) to be irremediably connected to an analogous historical event—the Holocaust (insofar as the State of Israel is connected to the Holocaust). And about the Holocaust, Green says the following: “[Fackenheim] could not see it as anything but a negative revelation, a ‘rupture’ or tear in the fabric of being, if not in God Himself” (226). Thus begins Fackenheim’s late period.

Chapter 7, “Confronting Radical Evil as Rupture,” initiates an extended discussion of Fackenheim’s late-period thought and thus forms something of a unit with the next two chapters. The fundamental insight of *To Mend the World* is summed up by Green in the following manner: “For Fackenheim, the Holocaust poisons everything... [He] concludes that history can no longer be the ground for momentous events that manifest God’s presence or bring to light some new, categorical *affirmative* truth about the divine. At most a revelation of a different sort may occur in and through an historical moment, but this could only be a ‘negative’ revelation of radical and unaccountable absence of the divine in history which is no ‘mere’ absence, but something worse that had never before impinged on human understanding” (231). Fackenheim goes further than Adorno, who holds that the Holocaust is the historical and logical result of the perverse intermarriage of technology, capitalism, and fascism. And he goes further than Jean Améry, who holds that the Holocaust is part of a “logic of destruction.”⁷ For Fackenheim, the Holocaust was something like an apocalypse (in the literal sense of *apocalypsis*, an uncovering/disclosure) which revealed something utterly radical, if utterly new, about the nature and possibilities of human being. What is remarkable about Fackenheim’s approach, in *To Mend the World*, is that—in the sections that directly address the Holocaust—he forgoes any conceptual determination of it proceeding from a genus to a particular instance; rather, he simply narrates the horror and lets the witnesses speak in their own names. In doing so, he renounces that style of philosophy by which one attempts to conceptualize a given event. The Holocaust is so extreme, so singular, so evil, that to gain even a measure of appreciation for it, one must let one’s thought be penetrated by it. In Fackenheim’s own words: “that where the Holocaust is overcoming thought is not, and that where overcoming thought is the Holocaust cannot be—a conclusion forcing us to assent to a way of philosophical

⁷ See Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 206.

thought that *immersed in history, is fully exposed to it.*⁸ Letting one's thought be exposed to the horrors of Auschwitz is the only way one can begin to come to terms with them. For this reason, "[Fackenheim] resorts to what may be the only remaining valid form of speech...the speech of the witnesses whose testimony survived the Holocaust. Such speech, which dwells in a sort of 'protected' sphere, is a possible medium for divine presence or its significant absence" (237). What one discovers, upon listening to the witnesses, is that the Holocaust "reveals something about the nature of what is, as well as what is possible in our era" (242). It attains the status of a Heideggerian "ontological category" in which an event of being emerges (242). And yet, despite the horrors that occurred, there *was* resistance: "*Something* moved the strongest among the victims to act for the good...making them able to resist evil, and to avoid being reduced by radical evil—although every natural, moral, psychological, physical, and historical condition militated against it" (246). For Fackenheim, in addition to recognizing the evil, we must also be exposed to the remarkable fact that not everyone succumbed to the Nazi concentration camp: "However little consolation it provides, it is revelatory of good (whatever its source), and so has some power to reassure us in the post-Holocaust world" (248). This resistance, this witnessing, Fackenheim refers to as *tikkun*; it is the affirmative moment amid the otherwise unthinkable atrocities of Auschwitz. Fackenheim does not give overmuch credence to this mending—it does not redeem the destruction. At most, it amounts to "a novel 'ontological possibility.' It cannot be taken as a fully positive revelation. For Fackenheim maintains that nothing is 'divinely revealed' by this ontological possibility that preserves a connection with the God of history as traditionally conceived" (259). It is the positing of a negative revelation, while acknowledging the slender "ontological possibility" of *tikkun*, that constitutes the substance of Green's reading of late-period Fackenheim.

Chapter 8, "Diabolical Revelation and the Holocaust," attempts to think the question of revelation directly within the context of the Holocaust. If revelation is a permanent category of Fackenheim's thought, and if there could be no positive revelation of God in the Holocaust, then what precisely was revealed there? Green's Fackenheim pulls no punches: "If [God's absence during the Holocaust] can be called revelation, what it 'reveals' is that God's absence can shatter every moral restraint; that human responsibility grows with God's absence, even as it becomes more difficult to maintain; and that the human propensity for evil grows as God's presence recedes" (269). Were

⁸ *Ibid.*, 200; my emphasis.

this all that was revealed there, Fackenheim would be uttering a sentiment somewhere in the vicinity of Dostoyevsky's statement that if God is dead, then everything is permitted. In fact, Fackenheim says more: "[God's] power can be overridden or nullified by a historical, albeit nondivine, force which resides in man, but is not entirely under self-conscious human control" (271). Fackenheim terms this power, at different times, "radical" and "diabolical/demonic" evil. For those of us who shy away from the latter term—at least until Strauss's question "What is a demon?" has been answered⁹—Green's Fackenheim explains that evil is "diabolical" when it surpasses the Platonic determination of evil (i.e., in which evil is simply a perversion of the good). The metaphor of diabolical evil refers, in other words, to *positive* evil—it bears no relation, in itself, to the good; it is an absolute evil: "The unprecedented radical evil of the Holocaust represents...the negative absolute of history, which cannot be cognitively absorbed, subsumed, reduced, surmounted, synthesized, or escaped.... It is an absolute, because what it reveals about man and history is so extreme, it cannot be surpassed except in scale. Even the destruction of the entire human race by nuclear war would do no more than amplify the Holocaust's revelation about man" (299). To call it a "diabolical revelation" is simply the least inadequate way of referring to it (308). Moreover, this revelation reveals horrors not only about human beings, but about God as well (294)—for it seems, to Fackenheim, God may have been unable to prevent Auschwitz. This realization only strengthens the urgency of the modern crisis of faith to which Fackenheim has addressed his own thought throughout his career.

Chapter 9, "Negative Absolute and Fragmentary Transcendence," is Green's final word on what the *tikkun* of the witnesses ultimately amounts to. We are, at present, in a precarious theological space: "All that Fackenheim has opposed to [the evil of the Holocaust] is a 'revelation' that is not unequivocally divine. It is no more than a weak manifestation or faint echo of Godliness against a totality of unplumbable evil" (332). It is at this moment that the dialectical character of Fackenheim's thought rises to meet the occasion. Even if the revelation at Auschwitz is diabolical, does this not "keep...God's presence in mind" (338)? Even if the Holocaust is unredeemable, doesn't remembering it "force...on us the question of God's presence and His nature" (338)? Theologically speaking, we have not lost God even in the midst of radical, unsubsumable evil, *because that same evil calls us*

⁹ Leo Strauss to Erwin A. Gilkes, March 3, 1973, in *An Epitaph for German Judaism*, by Fackenheim, 283.

to what was burned in the flames. Put differently, the activity of mending leads to a standpoint (as it were) beyond that which is torn. Here is Green's summation of what Fackenheim *may* have been too wary (or traumatized) to say: "I would suggest that the very evidence for *tikkunim*, which Fackenheim presents as healing the Holocaust's rupture in Being, could also be used to confirm as eternal the very moral truths which Fackenheim thinks he must disregard in order to conform with radical historicism as required by contemporary thought" (356). As a good post-Hegelian and quasi-Heideggerian, Fackenheim renounces eternal moral truths, yet he allows for standpoints (witness and remembrance) that allow one a transhistorical (if not completely ahistorical) perspective upon which to view, reflect, and judge the Holocaust. A God that allows humans to raise the question about God's absence or lack of efficacy in the Holocaust is not a God that has totally abandoned us. But given that human beings freely participate in the divine-human encounter, they are also free to abscond from such an encounter into the diabolical. Green concludes his book thus: "It is Fackenheim's mature conviction that God's primary way of speaking to man today is in and through history. Yet the claim he makes about revelation in our era is that the Holocaust is *not* God's speech, but an unprecedented victory for Satan. If we choose aright, we choose to be against Satan. Our highest challenge, if we hope to receive the direct word of God again in history, is to repair ourselves and our world, so that God may enter it again" (375–76). It is our free choice, as participants in the divine-human encounter, to interpretively search for the meaning of God's revelation in order to never let the radical evil of the Holocaust happen again. By listening to the "revelation" of the witnesses, we arm ourselves in the battle against such evil.

Whether it be in the early existentialist phase or the two subsequent historical phases of Fackenheim's work, it remains true that he was decisively influenced by Strauss as concerns the relation of reason and revelation as dialectically productive of Western thought (370). Because of this, it makes sense at this point to revisit the question with which we started: How does Fackenheim understand philosophy? If this question seems a bit heady after witnessing Fackenheim's impassioned pronouncements about the Holocaust, it raises the very serious question as to what philosophy, itself, might contribute to an understanding of that event. Given the influence of Strauss on Fackenheim, it is appropriate to wonder whether Fackenheim, like his mentor, understands philosophy to be a way of life. While a complete discussion of Strauss's understanding of philosophy drastically exceeds the scope of this review, this much can be said: for Strauss, (1) philosophy is a way of life, and not

merely a discipline; (2) philosophy as a way of life cannot admit that another way of life is the right one; and (3) philosophy as a way of life is oriented towards contemplation of the most important questions.¹⁰ Does Fackenheim adhere to the idea of philosophy as a way of life? At times he seems to: when he asks who taught Socrates how to philosophize, his answer, “None other than Socrates himself,” could suggest that the philosopher embarks on a way of life that is not dependent on anything other than philosophical practice: “‘Philosophy is what philosophers are doing.’”¹¹ To be involved in a practice, however, is not the same as living a way of life (else all Doctors of Philosophy [PhDs] would be philosophers). To say that philosophy is a way of life is to say that its practice is not subordinate to any other activity. This is what Strauss means when he says that philosophy cannot admit the rightness of another way of life. Philosophy must attest only to its own activity.

Is there any sense in which Fackenheim subordinates philosophy to another activity? The obvious candidate would be theology. But we have already acknowledged that philosophers do care about God. Strauss’s invocation of “the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit deus* [what is God]”¹² shows that philosophy as a way of life takes quite seriously the question of divinity. What is it about theology—or concern with revelation more generally—that suggests that Fackenheim must have an alternative conception of philosophy? It is true that philosophers inquire into the *what-ness* of God—i.e., God as an instance of a species/genus. It is true that, from the standpoint of the “new thinking” of Rosenzweig and Heidegger (which Fackenheim adopts), inquiries into the *this-ness* of God are made—i.e., God as an event. Theology’s concern with revelation, however, leads it to inquire into the *who-ness* of God—i.e., the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And as Green informs us (circling back to the question of reason and revelation): “The God of reason and philosophy is a generalized conception about Being, most unlike the Jewish God who changed everything by telling a single man nothing but His name” (74). Fackenheim is clearly not concerned with the philosophical conception of God, and (despite his fascination with Rosenzweig and Heidegger) does not seem to comprehend God as a mere event. Always

¹⁰ Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis Of Modernity*, 122–23.

¹¹ Emil L. Fackenheim, “What Is Jewish Philosophy? Reflections on Athens, Jerusalem, and the Western Academy,” in *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 166.

¹² Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 241.

and throughout his career, he remains faithful to the personal God of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic tradition—this is so even (or precisely) concerning the absence of God in the Holocaust. It seems, therefore, that Fackenheim’s conception of philosophy at least coexists with his theological impulses.

Green helps us precisely in this matter: during a discussion of the relation of human freedom to divine power, Green asks whether it is “philosophically comprehensible...that divine Presence destroys, restores, and elevates human freedom, like the three-fold movement in a Hegelian dialectic, showing divine grace and sanctifying human dignity” (175). Fackenheim, not being averse to talk about miracles (175), “draws away from mysticism [i.e., mystical union between God and humans] at the last moment, gives a theological response to a philosophical question, and uses the [Hegelian] dialectic of history to defer a decisive philosophical answer until redemption” (177). Fackenheim thus begins with the philosophical question as to how there can be human freedom in the face of divine power and utilizes a Hegelian dialectic in the service of explicating God’s grace. Philosophy is used in the service of theology. In a central passage,¹³ Green makes explicit how philosophy functions for Fackenheim. What Fackenheim has shown, in this example, is that “his approach is to explore the question *theologically*, employing philosophic reasoning in aid of faith” (178–79). Rather than construe philosophy as an independent way of life, Fackenheim views it as a helpmate to theology. This is an interesting move for someone so influenced by Strauss in that it suggests a more pervasive influence (concerning this issue) of two other teachers of Fackenheim: Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson.¹⁴ Maritain and Gilson both come from a tradition (the major representative of which is Thomas Aquinas) that views philosophy as a crucial handmaiden to theology. Strauss elaborates: “in Christianity philosophy became an integral part of the officially recognized and even required training of the student of the sacred doctrine.”¹⁵ That Fackenheim’s conception of philosophy amounts to a kind of Jewish Thomism¹⁶ fits perfectly with his lifelong interest in the revelation

¹³ It is, in fact, the central paragraph of the central numbered chapter in the book.

¹⁴ See Emil L. Fackenheim, *Epitaph for German Judaism*, 103.

¹⁵ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 19.

¹⁶ Given that Fackenheim was so deeply influenced by *Philosophy and Law*, it is worth while to consider Strauss’s later reflections on that text as concerns his “having to travel on the way by means of a Jewish Thomism” in it. Whether Strauss’s reflections do complete justice to the text in question is yet another matter. See Leo Strauss to Gershom Scholem, June 22, 1952, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler), 728.

of God to the Jewish people. In yet another twist, one might suggest that it was precisely the *question* of Judaism that motivated him through the trials of his life and thought—i.e., not doctrinal or traditionally observant Judaism, but a genuinely philosophical relation to the possibilities of Judaism in our time kept Fackenheim afloat. Whether this would have happened had Fackenheim construed philosophy as a way of life—whether the fragility of this conception of philosophy could have withstood the horrors of Auschwitz—is a sobering question with no immediate answer. It is to Green's credit that he has not simply produced a groundbreaking work on Fackenheim, but has additionally led us to reflect on the fundamental question of philosophy as a way of life in all its seriousness and urgency.