

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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In 1985, Emil Fackenheim delivered a lecture at Claremont to pay tribute to Leo Strauss, to whom he had dedicated his best-known work, *To Mend the World*.<sup>1</sup> After recalling Strauss's dramatic impact on his intellectual and religious life, Fackenheim reflects on Strauss's "self-restraint" in discussing Nazism and the Holocaust. The reason for this reluctance, according to Fackenheim, was Strauss's Platonism as reflected in his autobiographical Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*: "It is safer to try to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low. In doing the latter, one necessarily distorts the high, whereas in doing the former one does not deprive the low of the freedom to reveal itself fully for what it is." Fackenheim responds:

This is clearly Platonic: You understand the perverse state of the tripartite 'soul' in terms of its healthy state. Perversity and chaos come in many forms, and you recognize them for what they are. It seems to me that there are limitations here. The limitation is that there is one low that cannot be understood, or does not fully reveal itself, if looked at from the standpoint of the high. That low is Nazism and especially the Holocaust. I think Plato—and maybe I should say both Athens and

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<sup>1</sup> Fackenheim's lecture was delivered on March 26, 1985, at the Faculty House of the Claremont Colleges for the Claremont Chapter of Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honors Society. *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982). The lecture was published as "Leo Strauss and Modern Judaism," *Claremont Review of Books* 4, no. 4 (1985), and subsequently republished in *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Michael Morgan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 97–105.

Jerusalem—is not adequate when it comes to confronting the diabolical evil that is the Holocaust. . . . I fully agree with Strauss that the high has to be understood in its own terms; that if it is understood in terms of the low, it is necessarily distorted. But if all the low is indiscriminately viewed in the light of the high, Auschwitz becomes just one “tyranny” among others. It will be remembered in Plato’s *Republic*, the ultimate political perversion is tyranny. But Plato did not and could not conceive of the Holocaust because it had not yet happened.

One student who attended the lecture was Kenneth Blanchard Jr. Blanchard’s analysis appears in a new collection of essays, *Emil Fackenheim’s Post-Holocaust Thought and Its Philosophical Sources*, edited by Kenneth Hart Green and Martin Yaffe. Fackenheim’s criticism that Strauss, like Plato and Hegel, failed “to take evil sufficiently seriously” appears to be part of a broader attack on Strauss’s sympathy for classical political rationalism. Fackenheim not only considers Strauss naive when it comes to evil, but also views history rather than nature as our ultimate and best guide to understanding the world. The Holocaust, for example, exposes the meaning of “transcendent evil; it constitutes a unique rupture in the historical continuity of human life and thought.”

Blanchard ably defends Strauss against these charges while showing their depth and seriousness. His analysis points to a common theme of all the essays in the volume, namely, their focus on uncovering the philosophic basis of an issue rather than simply paying homage to Fackenheim or defending his position. In other words, their authors are more concerned with exploring the permanent features of an issue than seeking a simple resolution.

The volume’s editors, Green and Yaffe, have pioneered a new approach to the study of Judaism and of revelation, following the trail blazed by Leo Strauss. Green has already collected Strauss’s work on Maimonides and written insightfully on Strauss, while Yaffe has collected Strauss’s work on Mendelssohn, translated Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, and written extensively on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.<sup>2</sup> This new collection follows this work and extends it. Many of the central themes of Strauss’s work are highlighted and analyzed in depth, including the tension between reason and revelation as well the relation between ancient and modern philosophy. In

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<sup>2</sup> Yaffe’s book *Emil L. Fackenheim: Philosopher, Theologian, Jew* (Leiden: Brill), which he coedited with Sharon Portnoff and James Diamond, appeared in 2008. Kenneth Hart Green has recently published a detailed account of the development of Fackenheim’s thought, *The Philosophy of Emil Fackenheim: From Revelation to the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). See Jeffrey A. Bernstein’s review in *Interpretation* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 503–18.

addition, Strauss argued that access to premodern thought, whether revelation or classical political rationalism, is difficult for moderns because they must first make their way through compelling arguments on behalf of historicism. Because Fackenheim was so profoundly influenced by Strauss, his work constitutes an important response to Strauss both in its consideration of historicism and in its defense of revelation. Green and Yaffe's volume emphasizes the "philosophical sources" of Fackenheim's work, that is, his credentials as an interlocutor who recognizes that an adequate defense of revelation must take into account the challenge of reason. Thus, the dialogue between Strauss and Fackenheim presents a unique exchange between two thinkers who share substantial common ground, yet draw different conclusions.

This volume will certainly help restore and fortify Fackenheim's status as a serious defender of revelation. Fackenheim's position is easy to misrepresent, since he does not wholly reject historicism but moves through it on his way to defending revelation as a permanent possibility. Thus, it is easy to misrepresent his view by presenting him simply as a historicist who misread medieval and ancient philosophy in order to establish the superiority of the moderns. Further, any attempt to grapple with the Holocaust opens one to the charge of exploiting the memory of the disaster in order to promote an intellectual or political project, particularly on behalf of revelation. This volume fills out the picture of Fackenheim as a serious thinker and student of philosophy and shows the inadequacy of all such charges.

To begin with, the claim that Fackenheim simply rejects ancients and medieval philosophy ignores the fact, as Benjamin Lorch points out in his essay, that Fackenheim "regard[ed] Maimonides as the 'greatest' and 'wisest of Jewish philosophers' and devot[ed] the first part of his philosophical career of the study of medieval and Jewish and Islamic thought" (19). As Lorch goes on to show, Fackenheim's inquiry concerns whether Maimonides's treatment of Aristotle "provides a model of serious engagement between Judaism and philosophy"; Fackenheim concludes that such a model is inadequate for revelation's encounter with modern philosophy, particularly that of Kant, Hegel, Shelling, and Heidegger, and also in light of the Holocaust (24).

Martin Yaffe's essay focuses on "the Kantian thread" that runs through all of Fackenheim's work and connects it to his early work that follows Kant's philosophical approach on the problem of evil as a perversion of the good. Like many Jews, Fackenheim was deeply moved by the events of 1967. Barely two decades after the Holocaust, the Arab nations threatened to destroy the nascent state of Israel, which happened to be populated in large part by

survivors of the Second World War. In an unlikely victory, Israel defeated its neighbors in a matter of days. After the war, Fackenheim abandoned Kant's account of radical evil in favor of a theological approach, that is, an approach that moves from God as a mere idea to God as a creator or commander, with whom we have a relationship. Reading *To Mend the World* carefully, Yaffe notes that Kant appears in two significant examples: in Adolph Eichmann's defense of mass murder, and in Kurt Huber's explanation for his (heroic) resistance to Nazism by inspiring the White Rose resistance movement. Eichmann invokes Kant as justification for his decision to put his obligation above self-interest and opportunism. Of course, in doing his duty to the state, he was obliged to ignore another Kantian maxim on the inherent dignity of every human being. That Eichmann and the Germans more generally invoked Kant while ignoring his idea of progress casts grave doubt on the idea of moral progress. This combination of the rejection of humanity and the embrace of a diabolical evil constitutes an unprecedented and unique breach in history and reveals an unanticipated possibility for humanity. Quoting Elie Wiesel, Fackenheim suggests that at Auschwitz "not only Man died, but the Idea of Humanity as well" (42). Huber's example of resistance despite impossible odds takes on meaning as an effort to "mend" this rupture, which Fackenheim identifies as "tikkun," invoking a Kabbalistic solution to the Nazi horror. Yaffe subsequently considers whether Fackenheim's theological turn is consistent with Kant.

Paul Wilford continues the focus on the problem of evil while illustrating Fackenheim's profound debt to Hegel. Wilford begins by recalling the pre-modern attempts to grapple with the problem of evil; for Thomas Aquinas, the existence of evil constitutes the greatest challenge to belief in God and to the "intelligibility of the world" (52). Nonetheless, the book of Job and the Psalms suggest the possibility of "resolute faithfulness in the teeth of calamity" (52). According to Wilford, Fackenheim believed that such faith must be subjected to the experience of history in order to remain compelling. Such experience provides vital evidence for our quest to understand our situation and respond to such questions as "What kind of whole do we inhabit? What kind of home is possible amid such disorder? How can we face evil and yet stay with this world, stay with a God of history?" (53). However, even if we accept the claim that history provides our bearings, we cannot wholly abandon philosophy, since we need some way to sift through historical experience to avoid following "trivial fads or fashions" (54). Although Judaism had resisted history since the destruction of the second Temple, this was an "understandable mistake," but one that is no longer possible in light of the Holocaust. To respond

to the question of evil then involves responding to the deeper question of meaning. The Holocaust forces Jews to grapple with history as part of revelation; to do so, they need a modern guide. That guide appears to be Hegel, but Fackenheim argues that Hegel's thought falls short; any new guide "that will move beyond Hegel, must do so by first addressing Hegel" (54). Wilford's essay explores Hegel's effort to synthesize reason and revelation and shows how such efforts focus on a reinterpretation of Christianity, and despite their failure—Fackenheim argues that Hegel would not have been a Hegelian after the Holocaust—nonetheless provide Fackenheim with the fundamental framework for his own account of the historical development of Judaism. The concept of revelation as an ongoing phenomenon reflects Fackenheim's own efforts to synthesize reason and revelation whereby the historical account is mediated by philosophical reflection. Traditional Judaism assumes that there is no history "of any significance between Sinai and the Messianic days" but that view "cuts off [the believer's] own history from world history, reduces himself to a wordless monk, and confines the present effectiveness of the God of all history to Jewish history" (67). Following Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, Fackenheim embraces the "new thinking" that understands experiences that force one to confront the limits of reason or elicit surprise as the means to understanding the shock of an epoch-changing event.

Martin Kavka begins his essay with the assertion, "we are too historically sophisticated today to think that Mendelssohn or Heschel or Levinas had, or David Novak or Leon Kass has, uncovered Judaism in its pristine and timelessly true form" (118–19). Sympathetic to historicism, Kavka goes on to show how this belief in progress is rooted in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as presented in Fackenheim's account of that work. Fackenheim's analysis of the Holocaust and the rupture with history is rooted in Hegel's account of the dialectical relation of our conceptual world and our experience. Kavka allows for the development of Fackenheim's thought, "yet his method was always and everywhere Hegelian, for it was that method that allowed him to endow life with the authority to determine thought, and to leave abstraction behind" (124). In a highly creative turn, Kavka shows how Fackenheim criticizes the Jewish theologian Samson Raphael Hirsch for attempting to borrow from Hegel to defend revelation, only to have Fackenheim's own thought fall victim to a similar defect.

Jeffrey Bernstein confirms the depth and breadth of Fackenheim's philosophical education in his essay on Fackenheim's debt to F. W. J. Schelling. Though Fackenheim did not write extensively on Schelling, he remarks that

Schelling “has been a great concern of mine all my life.” Bernstein offers a whirlwind tour of Schelling’s thought to explain his profound impact on Fackenheim. In Schelling’s view, philosophy has always remained confined to a horizon of “negative philosophy,” that is, it begins from abstract principles and ascends to the idea of God. For Fackenheim, Schelling is the first to recognize this horizon and call for a philosophy that begins “positively” with existence as it plays out historically: “If negative philosophy makes use of logic and conceptuality to ascend to the idea of God, positive philosophy would historically narrate the different periods of existence as they emerge from God as the absolute existence” (146). If Schelling’s analysis is correct, then a new possibility for the harmony between philosophy and religion opens up in which philosophy plays an important and positive role in “synthesizing reason and existence, idea and fact” (147). Bernstein shows that Fackenheim follows this path, first discovering that the culmination of negative philosophy, which presents God as a mere idea, leads to a kind of crisis: “negative philosophy cannot attain the ground that gives it meaning” and, recognizing this limit, philosophy is forced to reflect on its “existential setting” and on God as a living reality. But here, as Bernstein notes, Fackenheim begins to separate himself from Schelling because of the dramatic discrepancy between the world as existing “because an absolute Existent has willed it” and the world as we find it, full of meaninglessness and evil (151). The failure of Schelling’s philosophy to resolve this discrepancy, according to Fackenheim, appears to suggest that philosophy is to blame for the failure to harmonize reason and revelation.

Kenneth Hart Green examines Fackenheim’s debt to Franz Rosenzweig, whom Fackenheim considered “the leading and most powerful Jewish thinker since Spinoza” (159). While Rosenzweig does not directly confront Heidegger’s position, namely, that “every historical transcendence and every claimed access to the eternal is a false escape from the inexorable fate of human historicity,” Rosenzweig nonetheless offers “the fundamental clue” on “the possibility of the transcendence of history in the midst of history” (160). If philosophy and revelation require at least some glimpse of the eternal, then the fate of both hinges on finding some way to escape the cave of historicity. Specifically, their fate requires our willingness to confront the false confidence of modernity in historical progress and the superiority of secularization. Rosenzweig claimed that the revelation of eternity had already occurred at Sinai and had henceforth established the dimensions of faith. He was confident therefore that nothing else revealed in history could alter this framework. The suffering of the Jews merely confirms this framework.

Every attempt to alleviate this suffering, such as the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, is an impious betrayal of that revelation. Yet the Nazis' attempt to annihilate the Jews makes this position largely untenable, since it reveals the possibility of the complete destruction of the Jews and, with it, their faith. According to Green, the example of Rosenzweig inspired Fackenheim to search for the "revelation beyond history, occurring in history." This revelation must depart from the tradition in light of the Holocaust but can nonetheless remain open to the possibility of revelation, that is, to a "trans-historical moment of history" which can be experienced only as a people in history (166). The subsequent part of Green's profound essay explores the elements of the tradition that Fackenheim employed, such as the Lurianic concept of divine contraction, to "revitalize" revelation as meaningful possibility in light of the Holocaust.

Steven Kepnes's essay is easily the most critical attack on Fackenheim's thought as a whole. Kepnes argues that Fackenheim's career can be divided into two distinct phases, his early studies of philosophy and his post-Holocaust theology. The meaning and content of this transition from philosophy to existential experience and history is motivated, Kepnes argues, by Fackenheim's encounter with Martin Buber and his response to Kant. Specifically, Kant's division of thought into the *phenomenal* world of reason and science and the *noumenal* world of God, freedom, and the thing in itself suggests that reason has no role in theology. This division makes it difficult to accept arguments based on tradition or religious authority and thereby undermines theology (186). Buber's response, which Fackenheim claims makes him "the most profound spokesman of our time," is to accept Kant's account and find a new path to the divine through the I-Thou relationship (187). The notion that contemporary religious belief, that is, belief mediated by Kant's analysis, can be preserved through relationships that move beyond the phenomenal world to an ordinarily inaccessible reality, is the essence of Buber's response. But the emphasis on religion as a dialogical relation with God abandons the foundations of traditional Jewish thought and "it remains unclear how, if God's revelation can include neither theological dogmas (oneness, eternity, anti-idolatry) nor law (mitsvot, and a system of laws, i.e., halakha), it could serve as a philosophy of revelation for Judaism" (188). Fackenheim has undermined one of the central sources of creativity of the West and of the Jews to reflect on their role as a nation of priests and a holy nation. In short, Kepnes argues that Fackenheim has unwittingly contributed to the decline of Jewish thought.

Waller Newell sets out to explain Fackenheim's response to Martin Heidegger and his extraordinary claim that Heidegger "engaged in no less startling an enterprise than the Judaization of the entire history of Western philosophy" (203). Surprisingly, Fackenheim agrees with much of Heidegger's analysis, beginning with his claim that Hegel failed to end the debate between reason and revelation by synthesizing them within the dialectic of Spirit. Nor does traditional metaphysics offer an alternative, as Heidegger shows, since it merely projects onto the world an imaginary permanence and completion that ignores the finitude of all things. That there is no truth about the good, the just, or the holy means that reason's judgments about being are incomplete and unsatisfactory. We must, it seems, decide between worldviews without the benefit of philosophy. The efforts of Hegel, Kant, Marx, and Nietzsche to discover transcendence within history, for Fackenheim, have failed, and he turns to Heidegger to find some way out of historicism. Like Strauss, Fackenheim argues that Heidegger's critique of philosophy is more consistent and compelling than Buber's; nonetheless, Heidegger's political judgment is so badly flawed that it raises questions about his account of being. The cause of this misjudgment is the rejection of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, or the high and the low, so that Nazism appears to be hardly distinct from other modern regimes "confronted by the 'pincers' of global technology" (216). Newell challenges Fackenheim's account of Heidegger while simultaneously explaining its basis and attraction.

The volume concludes with Sharon Portnoff's essay on Elie Wiesel. This is fitting in several ways: first, since Fackenheim believed the Holocaust represented a breach in Western thought and history, he placed great import on survivors like Wiesel, whose testimony provides firsthand access to an unprecedented catastrophe. In addition, Wiesel remained a pious Jew who, in contrast to Fackenheim, had according to Portnoff "more faith in God and more recognition of the need for faith" (256). Finally, Wiesel and Fackenheim were lifelong friends and interlocutors who struggled to make sense of the Holocaust: "Does genocide indicate that the Jewish God does not exist or has chosen another people? Is the Jewish God not strong enough to resist the assault of the other nations? Or, rather, does lethal antisemitism indicate that Jewish persecution is solely a human—and not a divine—problem?" (256). To address these questions, both authors turned to the study of revelation, specifically the story in Genesis, where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. For Wiesel, Abraham is forced to choose between faith and despair, but neither option makes sense; indeed, according to a midrash, Satan tries to persuade Abraham that the test is meaningless and Wiesel says

that Satan wields the weapon of truth. In choosing faith, Abraham chooses a relation with God, that is, he chooses an experiential over an intellectual truth. For Wiesel, the point of the story is for the reader to “relive it” and reflect on the question of God’s presence in the midst of suffering. Fackenheim, following Wiesel’s suggestions, sees Abraham’s choice as analogous to the problem raised by the Holocaust, namely, how “to inform contemporaneous Jewish experience with the Jewish past meaningfully” (281n59). But Fackenheim does not follow Wiesel’s suggestion that the past contains “no permanent content”; rather, he argues that the past cannot provide a sufficient basis for the future. The Holocaust has effectively destroyed the hope that Jewish life can be sustained merely in reflecting on and preserving its past. Kant had rejected the notion that the story of Isaac’s binding has a moral teaching because God’s command to murder Isaac is immoral. Fackenheim suggests that the lesson resides in the willingness of the text to “move on” without resolving the experience. In this regard, the Torah provides a model for post-Holocaust thought, insofar as it shows that the Holocaust has similarly revealed a new teaching rooted in the imperative of survival rather than self-sacrifice.

To return to our original question about Fackenheim’s relation to Strauss, the difference between them cannot simply be reduced to Fackenheim’s decision to embrace revelation over reason. While this certainly is a difference, Green and Yaffe’s book demonstrates Fackenheim’s willingness to pursue the argument through the thickets of modern philosophy. Nor is the difference simply that of Fackenheim’s preference for modern thought over ancient thought, since Fackenheim’s choice reflects his view that the Holocaust cannot be accounted for in terms of ancient thought. Rather, the difference appears to lie in their political meaning of the extreme or exceptional case. Fackenheim’s view is that not only is the Holocaust exceptional in its cruelty and barbarism, but it is unique such that we must reconsider philosophy and revelation in its wake. In other words, the emergency situation or extreme case takes precedence in our understanding of political life and we must take our bearings from it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argues for a more moderate position, one that does not ignore the extreme and hence is not, as Fackenheim suggests, “naive.” He sees clearly the barbarity of Nazi tyranny. Nonetheless, Strauss takes his bearings from the normal or usual situation. This allows him to see the weaknesses of liberal democracy while preferring it to more extreme regimes. In short, Strauss’s position is rooted in an older or premodern rationalism that is characteristic of Socratic political philosophy.

Green and Yaffe's volume helps readers to grasp the major trends and issues in modern Jewish thought. The collection provides an account of the reformulation of the reason-revelation question in modern philosophy as well as the challenge presented by the Holocaust to both camps. By restoring the dialogue between Strauss and Fackenheim, Green and Yaffe further expose the ancient-modern divide and show its enduring relevance to the reason-revelation debate.