

“Esau I Hated”: Levinas on the Ethics of God’s Absence

“To ask...if God can be exposed in a rational discourse which [is] neither ontology nor faith...is to doubt the formal opposition... between the God of the philosophers...and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

“Jacob I loved; but Esau I hated”

Esau grew up in the absence of God. Jacob, his brother, did not. There is no hint in Genesis of either an explanation or justification for this. There is no sense that there is, or ought to be, a *reason* for the Deity’s open affection for the second brother and unlimited disdain for the first. And in this unapologetic and inexplicable mix of divine favor and anger, presence and absence, the two brothers live out their lives. In this respect, Jacob and Esau’s world seems to be ours. Our world is one in which some persons live—or, at least, are convinced they live—in God’s personal presence. For others, this is an absent and alien experience. But unlike the biblical brothers, many feel compelled to explain and justify these opposing experiences to others, and to do so in terms of *ontology*: a broad-gauge picture of what the world is really like. Theodicy frames itself as just such an ontological justifying—an ethics of God’s apparent absence in the face of tremendous suffering.

We often say suffering is “senseless” then immediately set out to *make* sense of it. Traditional theodicy seeks to make sense of suffering by situating even our most pointless pains within a good God’s purpose. The avalanche that buries a village, the agony of an uncle whom cancer is eating alive, the slaughter of millions in the camps, or the hanging of a single child “with the face of a sad angel,” only *appears* senselessness: this is theodicy’s claim. Granted, *we* see no reason for suffering

(“*Why!*”). But while humankind finds such things reason-less, God does not. We look from within the suffering; God looks upon it; and from this special altitude an order and importance can be assigned to each human agony. Viewed with or through God’s vision, the sensibleness of suffering can be seen.¹

Emmanuel Levinas objects to traditional theodicy. But his objection to theodicy is decidedly untraditional. His objection to theodicy is so untraditional that God’s existence is incidental to it. He claims the primary problem with theodicy is not evidential but ethical. The primary problem with theodicy is not that its claims are false, but that its claims are offensive. In the following, I’ll first exposit the specifically ethical nature of theodicy’s offense of failing to acknowledge suffering. Second, I’ll exposit Levinas unusual account of the suffering which theodicy fails to acknowledge. Third, I’ll show that Levinas’ accusation cuts both ways—i.e. I’ll show how Levinas’ ethical objection to theodicy and its positive claims for God’s existence serves equally well as an objection to the negative existence claims of atheism. For atheism, too, has an overlooked “atheodicy” that may fail to acknowledge suffering and so may similarly offend.

I’ll then shift focus from the theoretical to the practical, and consider the insights gained regarding theodicy and its offenses, not as ideas considered but as a strategy lived. I’ll do so by considering the biblical figure of Esau, whose remarkable reaction to God’s malicious absence involved no consolation, sense of grievance, or resentment of his brother Jacob, God’s beloved. Finally, I’ll conclude that, when set against the unusual “atheism” Levinas accepts, the brothers’ eventual *rapprochement* demonstrates a deep spiritual affinity between atheist and theist. It also suggests an ethical limit to the way theist and atheist preach to one another, and so pre-figures a positive change in our own current God-centered disputes.

Theodicy

In the traditional disputes we are used to, the first and foremost objection to theodicy is to the accuracy of its ontology. That is, in settling the question “*Is there a Good God, or not?*” the advocate of theodicy’s primary error is that she chooses the one disjunct (“God exists”) when she should have chosen the other (“God does not exist.”). And in choosing the former she makes a *descriptive* mistake. We are familiar with how this back-and-forth goes. To those denying God’s existence suffering’s senselessness seems decisive evidence against the existence of the very God needed to make sense of it. The atheist points out that it is not the presence of God that makes sense of suffering; on the contrary: the presence of suffering only makes sense given the ontological absence of God. In this classical counter to theodicy’s hopes, suffering takes its place in the argument as a premise in the rebuttal of a propositional claim. Agony is evidence of theodicy’s ontological inaccuracy.

Levinas occasionally speaks this way.² But his ethical objection to theodicy, which is the subject here, is not an objection to its accuracy. Levinas’ primary objection is not evidential but ethical. That is, Levinas insists theodicy’s offensiveness does not center upon the falsity of its propositions and the false hopes they engender. The problem is not that the theodicy, as we say, “gets our hopes up” then lets us down because the conjunction “God exists and cares” isn’t true. Theodicy’s first damage is not mere disappointment. Rather, Levinas believes the problem has to do with a special kind of consolation for suffering which theodicy offers, and a special ethical danger inherent to the way theodicy offers it.

So: if being untrue isn’t theodicy’s ethical offense, what is?

The first step towards answering this question is to not see theodicy as its defenders and objectors typically see it: as simply a set of claims about the world.³ Providing an alternative to the typical view requires a distinction: the distinction between propositional and performative theodicy.

In Michael B. Smith's wonderfully-titled "On the possible 'offense of contradicting the despair of those going to their death,'"⁴ Smith notes Levinas' doubts that theodicy is, or can be, *merely* a description of (a God-inclusive) reality; for the very recourse to description is performing other, extra-descriptive work, whether or not this work is consciously willed by the describer. I'll call this extra work the *performative* aspect of theodicy. Performatives are of course not unique to this context. We often find ourselves describing a bit of the world while also doing something else—for instance, describing *and* eliciting pity ("My knee hurts."), making a rueful confession ("That is indeed my best paper."), etc. Here, the 'performative' aspect of theodicy means this: when I say, "There is a God who makes sense of suffering," I am rendering an observation about suffering *and* doing something by making this observation.

So what, exactly, am I doing when I say, "There is a God who can make sense of suffering"? Granted, theodicy offers itself as a description. But what is theodicy's extra-descriptive work?

Levinas says I am *consoling*. He suggests that, performatively speaking, theodicy is the recourse to descriptive activity in the service of an attempt to console. Theodicy seeks to handle suffering's senselessness by giving it a significance or sense. Theodicy is agony seeking understanding.

But then, what is wrong with that? Why is consolation offensive?

The first and most common thought is that theodicy expresses the weakness of the human spirit that needs it. And giving way to the need for consolation may degrade the spiritual strength and existential rigor required to live life without it. It is easy enough to find an atheist publicly expressing thanks that they are not like the Christians too weak to carry on without promises of post-mortem re-imbursements. And the aim of criticism of those who need consolation is often to praise by proxy those who purport to do without it—namely, themselves. Nevertheless this suspicion of theodicy and its hopes often seems justified. There seems something lacking in the very need for such hope. Levinas himself concedes “a humanity which cannot do without these consolations may not be worthy of them.”⁵

But this need for consolation isn't the primary ethical offense of theodicy. On the contrary: Levinas says in the same passage that “Prophecy and ethics in no way exclude the consolations of religion.”⁶ And if ethics in *no way* exclude consolation, then the consolatory function of theodicy alone cannot constitute his ethical objection to it. Levinas also declines to take up another obvious problem with theodicy: that it is an offensive consolation because its consolation might fail, in the way it fails for Ivan Karamozov, who is not set at ease but instead further appalled by the vision of a great Harmony emerging from a history of individual screams. No, for Levinas, what is wrong with theodicy is *not* that theodicy's consolation fails to get the facts right. Nor is it that, even getting the facts right, it could nonetheless fail to console.

Instead, Levinas' ethical claim is that theodicy's recourse to describing suffering is already a failure to acknowledge it. Something about the response to senseless suffering by describing the world in order to make sense of it risks making acknowledging the agony of others difficult, even impossible.

Levinas' ethical offense of Theodicy is this: theodicy inhibits the acknowledgement of suffering. This claim presupposes a specific picture of what suffering is. What is it?

Levinas offers us an especially direct and careful analysis of suffering in two essays, "Transcendence and Evil" and "Useless Suffering." In the former essay, Levinas lists suffering's key features. It is repulsive, "unsynthesizable," and "unjustifiable." Understanding how these features interact explains how and why it not only does but *ought* to repulse us. The repulsiveness of suffering is not, for Levinas, merely the primal universal desire to avoid suffering physically; it is not like recoiling from a sharp edge, a hot stove, or the prospect of death. Suffering evokes not merely a 'natural' but a *normative* repulsion. Suffering involves a different, deeper, moral form of recoiling. "All evil...refers to suffering" for "suffering is itself an evil."⁷

To what faculty is suffering repulsive? What aspect of human beings does it repulse?

Levinas speaks of suffering's normative repulsiveness as a normative repulsiveness to (an essentially Kantian) reason. This discord between suffering and reason, he argues, can be taken in at least two different ways: in terms of the repulsiveness of suffering to comprehension and the repulsiveness of suffering to justification.

The first sense in which conscious reason can't *handle* suffering is quite literal. Consciousness sets out to cope or come to grips with suffering; but in doing so our conscious self is already responding to a prior sense that we are helplessly in its grip. Thus the very pretense to *prebend* suffering, built into the drive to comprehend it, is a kind of phenomenological or practical contradiction.⁸ The normative repulsion of comprehension is neither a "conscious[ness] of reject[ing suffering]" nor "a symptom of [a conscious] rejection..." Rather, the undergoing of

suffering is itself “a backward consciousness...operating not as a ‘grasp’” but as a being-grasped; not as a comprehension, but “a revulsion” of, and rebuke to, the prehensile powers of consciousness.⁹

Second: suffering also defies our ability to give reasons for it—where “give a reason for suffering” means to make sense of it, discover a use for it, or justify it. This is not to say we do not, or ought not, give reasons or justifications for allotting some specific bit of suffering (e.g. prison), or that we cannot belatedly “make the best of it.” It is to say there is something originally unjustifiable about suffering itself. Suffering *as such* inherently resists being justified, even when we fall to justifying it in particular cases—a point of great import, since theodicy purports to do precisely this for every case.

In support of suffering’s unjustifiability Levinas makes two claims. First: suffering isolates us. Second: suffering demands something from us. That is: suffering is made up of isolation and demand. These two—the *isolating* and *imperative* features of suffering—combine in the following way. As to isolation: my suffering can be undergone by no one but me. Bodies are, as Levinas puts it, “regimes of separation.” My body is separate site of suffering; I am, *qua* body, condemned to this inescapable and discouraging discreteness. But this physical isolation is also a normative isolation. For the very fact that I alone, as an isolated body, must undergo my suffering means that I labor under an imperative or command that applies to no one else. My suffering demands something of *me* that it demands of no one else. And what it demands is that I *bear* it (“You! Handle this! Bear this!”).¹⁰ No one else can respond to the demand suffering makes upon me; I, and only I, am addressed by, and under the authority of, this utterly particular order. So I am not only alone as a body but am also singled out by what I and only I *must* do. I am imperatively isolated. Agony is imperative isolation.

The imperative isolation imposed by agony explains why and how suffering is repulsive to reason and reasoners. Suffering repulses us as reasoners—as those who seek justifications—because it systematically violates our reason-based sense of what is just. For our justifications or reasons, no matter what their content, appear as general or impartial principles. Part of why a principle has imperative authority to any one person is that it has authority over more than one. It governs justly by not governing just me—is, as we say, “nothing personal.” The laws we most often call ‘fair’ strike us as fair for just this reason. However, suffering’s isolating imperative governs or imposes upon only one, yet despite this loses none of its power. Hence its power defies the impartial/general structure intrinsic to imperative legitimacy; and so its power appears illegitimate.¹¹ And so suffering seems to institute—or, from the ontological point of view, indicate—that we live, love, and labor under the auspices of an arbitrary, illegitimate, and inescapable power.¹² Levinas speaks of this as the “aimed-ness” of suffering—as a “malignance” which constitutes its “resistance to theodicy.” He describes the sense that suffering chooses or targets me, “as though it sought me out” as a sense of “election in persecution” and “quiddity,” “a setting apart...a distinction in pain” which puts us “beyond the community of the common.”¹³

In short: suffering’s imperative nature, coupled with how we usually think about the legitimacy of imperatives, ensures that each time someone is forced to bear suffering, this forcing seems not merely unfortunate but illegitimate and unfair. Agony exerts an authority that is at once unchallengeable and unacceptable. Suffering thus transcends the status of mere pain, understood as a physical or natural event. It is “a concrete and quasi-sensible manifestation of the...unjustifiable.” Suffering is, as a relentlessly oppressive imperative, “precisely an evil,” whether it is mine or yours.

This, then, is the quasi-moral mode of sense which suffering cannot make, and why it can never be made to make it. In this way Levinas explains the persistence and poignance of the unusual

interrogative agony evokes. The “*Why!?*” expresses the unjustifiability of being-singled-out for and by this agony; yet the isolating and imperative nature of agony is not incidentally but *essentially* this unjustifiable singling-out. And as the Jewish Levinas is well aware there appears, even in the most persistent Christian purveyors of theodicy, a residual recognition of the impossibility of giving this ‘Why?!’ a sensible answer. For at the very center of Christian ontology is a suffering Omniscience who, knowing the answer to suffering’s “Why!?” question if anyone could, can only shift His weight upon His cross and ask it anyway.¹⁴

This analysis of what is to be acknowledged—agony, suffering—enables us to see why Levinas thinks theodicy is an ethically offensive non-acknowledgment of it. Theodicy inculcates, encourages, *is* this non-acknowledgment in two ways: as idea, and as address.

First: theodicy contradicts a sufferer’s despair *as an idea*. It does so because theodicy as idea denies the primary features of suffering. It contradicts the particular despair “of those going to their death,” because the uselessness, senselessness, and intrinsic unjustifiability of suffering is not described, so much as described away. Theodicy is an error theory of agony. Theodicy seems to hold that the despair that appears as a response to suffering’s senselessness is based, not on suffering’s intrinsic nature but upon a view of the world that is propositionally false. In fact (says theodicy) things are not *really* all that bad! Mistaken theory has led to mistaken emotion. The despairing—“those going to their death” who are stunned and indignant at the senselessness of their suffering—are getting the world wrong by their very despair. Their despair at this senselessness *just is* an emotional expression or result of being wrong about suffering and the world. In this sense, it is always wrong to despair. *Eli Eli, Lama Sambachthani!* is, for all who utter it, an emotionally immoderate expression of an incorrect ontology.¹⁵

Yet theodicy offends not merely as idea but as address. Insofar as theodicy's story is a consolation for suffering, it must be addressed to an individual sufferer, because what ultimately repulses us about suffering is how it singles out the individual. Thus addressing to this sufferer or that sufferer or any particular sufferer a story about suffering *as such* does nothing to address any one person's suffering, nor justify why this bit of suffering is, right now, terribly and irretrievably *theirs*.

Helpful here in seeing the terribly personal nature of this offense-as-address is the strange grammar in the phrase cited above. In "the possible offense of contradicting the despair of those going to their death," what is "contradicted" is not a mere (propositional) theory *about* suffering. What is contradicted is another's despair. And their despair is contradicted by theodicy because it loses the crucial point—that the despair is not evoked by the existence of suffering in general, but the way in which suffering is terribly and irretrievably theirs. A general theory or justification of suffering cannot do what it supposes because the undergoing of suffering is *never* general. And to reside in generality is to glide over suffering's essence: its blunt and brutal particularity, the personal targeting, aimed-ness, and malignance that make suffering so offensive. So devising a response to *the* problem of suffering is consistent with responding to *no one* who suffers. To speak *about* your plight is not yet to speak to you in it, and might even be to abandon you to it. Thus even the most hopeful knowledge may be a mode of failing to acknowledge; for there is no general suffering, and no general sufferer, to acknowledge. But to acknowledge suffering, or rather, to fail to acknowledge one another in it: *that* is the ethical problem.

The Offensive Consolations of Atheism

Though Levinas does note a kind of theodicy at work in enlightenment "atheist progressivism," a startling and largely overlooked result of Levinas' analysis of the ethical offense of theodicy is how

easy it becomes to take the same accusation of offensive consolations and re-aim it directly at atheism.¹⁶ All that is required is to show that atheism, too, may be a performative response to suffering, and as such, also a mode of consolation for suffering whereby the acknowledgment of suffering is diminished. Here I won't rehash the usual *tu quoque*—i.e. that, in contrast to theodicy's immortal living-with-one's-choices, atheism offers a comparatively less-demanding mortality of responsibility. For there is another important and concrete way atheism consoles. Specifically: while theodicy consoles sufferers for the apparent absence of God, atheism consoles persons by insisting on God's absence.

How so?

Theodicy explains the presence of senseless suffering by giving a reason for God's apparent absence. Atheism in its consolatory function, which I'll here call 'atheodicy,' does something similar but in reverse. The twin temptation of atheodicy accrues in a context of theodicy's most intimate failures—i.e. when one's personal cries to God go unanswered. Under such conditions God's silence is itself undergone—is the cause of suffering. One senses the trace of this sort of suffering in the bitter edge and trademark zeal so audible in the “New Atheists,” whose inflections suggest they do not merely observe or deduce the non-existence of God but, so to speak, *inflict* it upon both God and believers.¹⁷ Such inflections suggest the following consolatory parallel: just as one might appeal to the Divine to relieve one's everyday agony, there is an agony constituted by the apparent Divine rejection of one's appeals. In such a circumstance, the absence of God is not merely a fact known about or understood, but an agony undergone.

Suppose that atheism consoles in this circumstance. How does it do it?

One might make two explanatory moves in response to this experienced absence of Divine Presence—this failed relation to a *Deus Absconditus*—to a hidden God. One of these explanatory

moves has a performative and consolatory function. The first explanation, which has no such function, is a kind of unorthodox agnosticism, which simply posits that God may be there but does not respond to you. The second explanation, which *can* have a consolatory function, is that God does not respond to you *because* He isn't there.

That the first agnostic explanation, which admits God may exist, is *non-consolatory* seems strange to admit. For isn't the presence of God, even in His most awful silences, a consolation? Isn't the contrary explanation of the atheist—that God doesn't respond because He *isn't*— more deserving of the accolade “non-consolatory?” This sort of analysis is both common and confused. To show this we need to answer the following: How is the doctrine of God's non-existence consolatory? What is the content of the consolation derived from God's non-existence?

A good answer is as follows: the claim that God's silence *to you* is explained by the fact that God cannot speak *to anyone* is itself a description that consoles. It consoles because the non-response of God to *you* is explained as *nothing personal*. If there is no God, it follows that God's non-response is not itself a personal response to you, is not directed at you, is not, we might say, “because it's you.” There is, after all, nothing “directed” or “targeted” or “malignant” in the non-response of a non-existent God. He *is* not; so He is absent. He has thus not absented Himself specifically from you; hence there is a certain reassurance garnered from the egalitarianism of His absence; and this reassurance is built in to the negative ontological claim of the non-existence of God.

This is abstract—but the mode of consolation is a constant. It appears, for instance, in Sartre, where he accuses certain Jews of inauthentic reassurances by supposing anti-Semitic hatred attaches to some historical condition that Jews happen to be in, rather than being what it is: an implacable hatred directed at the condition of being Jewish. It appears, albeit less grandly, in the local pub, where a man suffering from recently-rejected advances explains to all who will listen that

the basis of her rejection of *him* is that she rejects men in general; he thus presses the thesis of her lesbianism into service as a description which, if he can bring himself to believe it, has the capacity to console.

In this way atheism, too, is more than a set of propositions; it too has a performative affordance; it, too, is a description with the capacity to console. If it may console, it also may tempt; if it can tempt, it also may, in its consolatory zeal, derive from and contradict a form of despair. Thus, though *propositional* opposites, atheodicy and theodicy can be *performative* equivalents: each may, in the purportedly innocent act of describing, contradict another's despair, and, by arising in the weakness that needs hope, offend by offering it.

This notion of offense initiates an erosion of the ontological basis for theist-atheist antagonisms, and suggests that founding our spiritual loyalties upon ontology is a mistake whether or not that ontology includes God. Rather, the spiritual fault-line runs between those who must have, and those who do without, consolation—between those who ethically offend in the way they offer it, and those who do not. Moreover, those who recognize that it is not this or that ontology which is ethically offensive may go further with Levinas and say this: it is *not* the particulars of the ontologies to which we have recourse which is offensive; it is the bare recourse to ontology that fails to acknowledge the individuality of the agony of others, and so necessarily offends.

Theism Without Theodicy

The just-sketched consolations of theodicy and atheodicy suggest something wrong—or, at least, over-simple—in how we usually conceive the divide between theist and atheist. The sketch picks out the way in which, because both have consolatory affordances, the ethical problem

associated with theodicy is in fact always traversing the theist-atheist divide. Yet, in the abstract, it may not be easy for us to envision this unusual situation of the middle character: one who accepts a consolation-less theism while declining a consolatory atheism. We think we know what a non-consolatory atheism looks like. This raises the question: What does a concrete, lived, non-consolatory *theism* look like? What is it to live like a theist without theodicy?

To decline to accept the non-existence of God is to accept this potential and discouraging conjunction: God may exist. And God may respond to others and not you. The non-consolation is constituted by the refusal to explain one's experience of an absent God by referring to an ontology wherein God's non-response is not a warrant to conclude God does not respond because he doesn't exist. On the theistic side, the peculiarly tone-deaf attempts of some well-meaning persons to insist that God does indeed interact with each of us, and (therefore?) *must* do so also with you if only you have ears to hear, will not be met with ontological claim-making in the form of a denial that God exists, but with a humbler, "I am pleased for you. But that has not been my experience." One must accept the possibility that some enjoy a Relationship to which one's self is not privy. One should proceed to live in the shadow of the possibility that God's absence is not an undirected ontological occurrence, but an *absencing*—an absencing of Himself from you *because it's you*. Here one can no longer soothe oneself with stories of the solidarity of humanity facing God-less-ness together—the solidarity so desperately sought by the evangelistic atheist. Nor can one quietly congratulate oneself on having expelled from one's ontology a partial and insufficiently democratic deity. Instead, one must bear up under the possibly arbitrary blessing-distributions of an unapologetically partial and *inegalitarian* God.

This unusual position is, of course, something worth theorizing further. However, as this theodicy-less theist is a comparatively unfamiliar character, and because I've suggested a deep affinity of spirit that crosses theist-atheist lines, it is better to consider it *as lived*. So I'll here have recourse to a particular figure in biblical scripture to serve as a paradigm case of living 'with' a God who has absented Himself from him, without the consolation of the more general ontological absence of God.

"Esau I have hated..."

When we first meet Esau he is, depending on translation, 'red', or 'ruddy.' He is a hunter, a fighter; an intrepid, impetuous "man of the field." And it seems his destiny to fail to obtain or inherit what he might have justly expected to be his. Moreover, we are told that, unlike his brother Jacob, who lives under an assurance of God's grace, Esau lives his life under a directed and Divine absence, motivated by a positive, partial, Personal, and reason-less malice ("Esau I have hated"). Yet when we re-meet him years later we are pleasantly surprised by the man he has become. We left him in earlier chapters, an impulsive, careless, presumptuous, impassioned youth, railing against unfairness, breathing threats and murder against God's chosen. We find him again years later, not stiff with a long-harbored rage but relaxed. He strides with a confident, open heart across the field towards an understandably suspicious Jacob, in a posture utterly unbent by year upon year of the Father's intimate, inescapable, and inexplicable malice. More tellingly, Esau responds to those to whom God *does* seem to respond without a hint of *ressentiment*, bitterness, or even disappointment. Jacob sends his flocks before him, and, recalling his dubious dealings with Esau, offers him apologies posing as gifts. Yet Esau's unhesitating expression of forgiveness appears to arise from neither a weary, shoulder-slumped acceptance nor a clenched-browed ode to duty, but rather, from a

surprising full-ness. When Jacob presents the gifts—delayed proceeds, as it were, from God’s declared favor— Esau, smiling, declines. “I have plenty, my brother,” the un-favored one says, having warmly embraced the Favored, “*Let what you have be your own.*”¹⁸

It is hard not to hear in this last quote from Esau, a resent-less, even Nietzschean resignation to not having what Jacob apparently has—including God’s responsiveness and favor. Moreover, we can at least see, against the backdrop of the discussion of consolations, how the transformation of Esau may have, and for some of us still might, take place—enough to envision those who navigate the absence of God *to them* without taking up atheodicy’s alternative, offensive consolations. We can at least imagine that, at some point, there emerged, in a terrible clarity, the possibility of an unchallengeable tyranny of grace—a tyranny which Esau has seen, accepted, and, as it were, forgotten—forgotten not as a fact is lost in the distance of memory, but as one forgets the air one takes in and expels at each breath. The angry, directed Divine absence eventually becomes for Esau, not an obstacle against which to object, but a normative landscape to navigate—a spiritual ecology to which he adapts himself. An ongoing act of divine abandonment is the affective and ethical environment to which he is indigenious, and in which he lives and moves and has his being. Moreover, in the very fullness of his response, we might justly suppose a growing realization by Esau—a suggestion or secret which he does not himself consciously think but, as it were, overhears— that his Divine Father, in inflicting His malignant absence upon him, has inadvertently, afflicted him with a special sort of excellence. This excellence is born of living both with and without God—an existential excellence arising from being raised, not merely in, but *by*, a Father’s absence—an excellence he cannot prove but has nevertheless enjoyed on a thousand early mornings as he moves, bow high, body agile, alert, alone, and alive, through the morning mists, while at home and under blankets Jacob sleeps.

One further wonders from within this scenario whether God may recognize that, despite His reason-less love for the chosen, there is a special merit created in those who sense themselves as abandoned by God without entirely abandoning Him—an excellence produced by this abandonment, and therefore an excellence not open to the chosen. God may think, or we can think that God *should* think, that the excellence which results from this special absence—this special suffering—deserves its own acknowledgment—a humbler acknowledgment prefigured in Esau’s story, perhaps, by the earthly father Isaac’s touching fondness for his less-Favored son. Also favoring this suggestion is the peculiar co-incidence of Jacob’s wrestling with God the night before the brothers’ reunion. It is as if God suspects that without this remedial training in what it is to face divine opposition, his favorite son is unready or even unworthy to meet the brother brought up in the very teeth of it. Fatherhood, after all, is a process of incremental abandonment. Esau’s Father simply dispenses with the increments, and turns His back all at once.

Finally: on any interpretation, what is hard to escape is a kind of admiration at the peculiar consolation-less-ness as borne by Esau. One recognizes a spirit raised on, in, and by crushed expectations. Yet he has resisted the urge to deny that some privileges of spirit may indeed be eternally and unaccountably denied him without having to tell himself tales of an entire universe in which there exist no such privileges. Within the world of a God undomesticated by commitments to reasonable authority and contemporary democratic sensibilities, his heart remains unflinching and open. In a world apparently governed by a wild, passionate, unapologetic Partisan whose ways are beyond justification, an Esau makes his peace.

The import of this story is not, of course, that atheists do, or ought to, believe as Esau does. It is, however, is to dispense with the popular and sloppy spiritual caricatures supporting the

pervasive and divisive superstition that atheism is for the hardy while an ontology including God is for the weak. How much easier it would be for Esau to reject the possibility of divine partisanship than to live with it! How easy it would be to resent Jacob, who faces no such distress—and to proceed to attempt to convince him his non-distress is based on a fiction! How excellent it would be—*feel*—to inflict a God-less ontology upon his happier brother! But Esau refuses, and in doing so lives out a starkly authentic theism.¹⁹ And in this admirable refusal a strange spiritual solidarity appears. First there is the solidarity of atheists and theists who seek spiritual consolation in their ontologies. But the second solidarity appears between adherents of two polar-opposite ontologies. For it is the consolation-less theist, not the consolation-seeking atheist, who is revealed to be the consolation-less atheist's spiritual confederate.

The Further Insufficiency of Ontology

The situation of Esau, and the remarkable relationship between Esau and his brother that develops, isn't merely existential theorizing or interpersonal pragmatics. It is, for reasons already given, ethics. When we recall our theories about life are in the service of living, placing our responsiveness to one another as sufferers behind comparatively idle and/or prurient ontological interest appears for what it is: non-acknowledgment—the very non-acknowledgment which renders offensive the near-missionary zeal with which the new atheist and old theist duel. Yet, even setting aside the religion-izing of ontology and its weapon-ized “objectivity”—even supposing sincerity—the ontological temptation remains. The old objection lurking here may still seem compelling. We can still ask, “Does He or doesn't He?” with respect to God's existence, while trying to keep the primacy of the ethical in mind. We might grant the consolatory equivalence, and resolve to be more wary of it, but still insist the propositional confusion of theism is, in some circumstances, the *reason*

there is a sufferer to console. So are we not dragged back to the original dilemma—dragged from ethics into ontology? After the existential detour of the former, are we nonetheless driven headlong into the latter?

We are not. Ontology is too simple, even here. Levinas flatly denies that the question of God can be treated as one of existence. He denies that we can even properly set up the atheist-theist opposition;²⁰ On the contrary: Levinas claims God is a constituent part of life without regard to existence, and that genuine monotheism “surpasses and incorporates atheism.”²¹ This unorthodox relation between theism and atheism is possible without ontological contradiction precisely because it is *not* true that Levinas is an atheist in the usual sense. The aspect of this ‘unusual’ most germane here is that Levinas insists that both Divine authority and Divine absence are best understood in ethical rather than ontological terms.

These unusual denials and claims come together as follows.

First, Levinas both compliments atheism as an advance, and warns of it as a risk.²² He can do both because he claims there are two different atheisms. The atheism that is an advance is “metaphysical.” Metaphysical atheism rejects—or at least suspects—the idea that God essentially exists as a bit of the world or in “a world behind the world.” The first atheism does not accept the idea that God must be a *being*. However, the alternative for Levinas is not, as the New Atheist would have it, a world without Transcendence—a world without a God “*beyond* being.” Such a denial of Transcendence would be an error and second sort of atheism, the atheism that is a spiritual and ethical danger. Traditional atheism often supposes this second atheism somehow follows from the first.²³ Levinas claims, on the contrary, not only that there is no conflict between the first atheism and theism, but that the first atheism is a condition for proper theism. “Monotheist faith *implies* metaphysical atheism.”²⁴ The atheist claim that “one cannot think God and being together” is, for

Levinas, precisely “what the term ‘transcendence’ signifies” and so is not the end of theism, but where theistic religion begins. Thus an atheism that *stops* with a negative thesis about God *qua* being is not only *not* the antithesis to, but a contributing aspect of, a Levinasian theism. Despite its pretensions to explain away not only God’s *existence* but God, it does the opposite. “Atheism *conditions* a veritable relationship with the true God.”²⁵

Second, the relation to Transcendence is a relation to absence—but not ontological absence—not merely *not being*. God’s absence is to be explained *not* as the absence of Someone or something which might have been, but, in fact, isn’t. Rather, God is an Absence with positive normative properties—persists as an evocative “Absolute Remoteness.” And there is all the difference in the world between a Divinity which is absent, and an Absence which is Divine. This means the typical atheist story of an ontological absence is beside the point in two ways.

Of first importance is that Levinas’ unusual notion of presence and absence is not framed in terms of existence. It may be the case that, in ontology, we agree only entities and activities exist and get on with it. But Levinas insists this is not at all to say that, in human life and experience, what exists in this way is all that *persists*. Experience begins, not in the indicative, but in the imperative. There are not merely objects like cats and rocks; there are pulls and demands and obligations. *Is* is not *all* there is. Our existence is not merely filled with events and objects; it is also “fraught with ought.” Second, to say that imperatives persist is not, for Levinas, to commit to the existence of an Issuer of them. I’ve suggested above one way in which the offensiveness of suffering, and the imperatives to halt it that seem to follow, may persist without existing or being issued by some authority, and without these imperatives being a piece of ontology—i.e. without *being*. Suffering both is, and in its unjustifiability results in, an imperative that what *is* nevertheless *ought not be*. Part of Levinas’ account of “the God who comes to mind” is thus not a story of a special entity but refers to a related Imperative of this kind. And our relation to God is to an Imperative. “The attributes of

God are given not in the indicative but in the imperative” so “to know God is to know what must be done.”²⁶

The final link to make is that between the imperative nature of God and God’s absence.

In the world of suffering we know, Levinas says we do not merely *believe* but “*experience* separation and atheism.”²⁷ We, atheist and theist alike, do not assert, hypothesize, or know, but *experience*, like Esau, an absence—a trace of something ideal lost. And “the Trace”, he tells us, “is not an [ontological] absence, but *experienced as an abandoning*.” There opens up before us an absence—a yawning, terrible possibility of limitless suffering which is utterly unjustifiable. This absence is undergone just as the malignance of God was undergone by Esau... *And no one is doing anything about it*. This squalor, this virus, this cancer, this camp, *is*—relentlessly, ceaselessly *is*—but *ought not be*. Everything just and reasonable screams out for intervention, for succor, for Presence. But there is Absence. Only Absence. Yet this very Absence is what Commands it be filled. God’s Absence commands our presence. We are drawn precisely to where God is not. There is thus a Commanding Absence or Absence that commands. The ethical vacuum or void, which unjustifiable and unchecked suffering ceaselessly carves out generates the initial and original ethical imperative. And the Command that condemns us for leaving things be—the Command that insists we do more than be—is itself *better than being*, and as such, beckons from beyond it.

Our first horizon in experience, then, is this alienation and “experienced” atheism—the lack of God’s aid which leads to two temptations: to the temptation to reduce our horizon to “the real” of the naturalizing atheist, and a temptation to a like overlooking of suffering by theodacists whose commitments to ontology force them to forever read the world as a promissory note. Yet Levinas draws, or, as it were, leaves space for, a yawning absence that drives us away from the ontological mindset, and towards one another without reserve. “The Transcendent solicits...and appeals to

us.”²⁸ God is in this sense an “Absolute remoteness which turns into my responsibility.”²⁹ Ethics arises from Absence.

It is this special imperative experience of Divine Absence to which the life of Esau speaks. Given the above one may say, of an Esau who takes up this consolation-less ethic, that the very absence of God initiates in him an *insurgent* ethical spirit—a spirit who, while making peace with his own abandonment, cannot and will not permit others to be abandoned. If we think of God in this patriarchal tradition we can say of Esau that his very ethic is to make up for the Absence he undergoes and which calls him out towards others. His watch-phrase is at once a submission to being called out by the Absence, and also, rebellion. “*I will not be [absent] like my Father!*” The truculent, truant Father-God of Esau is thus a good Father not because that He provides us with goods, but because He is a goad to goodness. Likewise for the rest of us experiencers of the first atheism: the unacceptability of Absence compels our presence to one another. Our inability to accept the absence of a rescuing God is to take up His Great Commission and honor His first command. Divine Absence becomes Divine Imperative. Levinas summarizes: “the end of theodicy...[...]. . .paradoxically entail[s] a revelation from the very God...silent at Auschwitz: a commandment of faithfulness [to one another].”

Of course, one may be more charitable when thinking in these traditional terms of God as Father and Levinas’ “ethical metaphysic.”³⁰ For instance, one may say that God is the Absence who Absences Himself, so as to better draw us—not towards Himself—but towards others. This too is no traditional ontology. God is not a being with qualities and *also* ethical. He is best understood as the persistence of ethical qualities. He does not exist and have the quality of invisibility. Rather, His invisibility is a function of divine humility: the bending of light away from Himself, so that our attention flies directly to others without pause. This way of “seeing” others—this prescriptive lens—is part of what Levinas calls the “optics” of ethics.³¹ It is that “vision of God” he speaks of which is

not the vision of an object, but the holiest of adverbs. It is an imperative which is not issued by a Being who might intrude with command or distraction of It's own. The Trace has always humbly departed so as not to distract our attention and acknowledgment from those to whom God would call us. God thus does not and cannot *face* us. God does not face us to ensure that, when we are called to one another, God does not call attention to God, and so is not in any way complicit in a turning away. God always draws us to our fellow creatures' faces; and in this sense, one can, as it were, hear God say, "No man can see my face and *live*."

It is worth noting in this connection that Jacob, who earlier appears to constitute a living refutation of God on this point ("...I have seen the face of God and lived"), later professes to see the face of God in the welcome of his brother Esau. That is, Jacob claims to have seen "the dimension of the divine open[] forth from the human face."³² The shift from the objective to subjunctive—i.e. from "the vision of God's face" as an object to see, to the vision of God's face as a mode of being seen, is here most explicit.³³ Jacob thought he had seen God's face—had, in this objective sense, a vision of God. But Esau's incarnation of the imperative of resent-less acknowledgment, and Jacob's being seen in this beautifully open way by Esau, struck Jacob—not as the divine Face or countenance, but as being divinely countenanced—as being *faced* by the Divine.³⁴

These points, not decisive arguments to the ontology-minded, nevertheless suggest the misbegotten nature of a certain sort of arguing. These considerations also seem sufficient to suggest just how clumsy, fumbling, and unrefined a tool ontology can be in such matters—a failure which goes beyond its ethical failure as address.

The Unpreachable Gospel of Esau

I have tried to sketch a Levinasian picture of religion that is “neither ontology nor faith” and avoids offensive consolations. Yet we are not without the privilege—even need—of ontological conversation. Acknowledgment is primary. But then, what of knowledge?

This can be put as the question of what sort of ‘gospel’ we might extract from the case of Esau and the worrisome ethics of speaking about it. Does Esau even have ‘good news’ to declare? And whatever news there is, is it good to declare it? Theodicy sought to give us an ethics of God’s ontological absence; and sharing it could offend. What about the alternative Absence suggested by Levinas? What are the ethics of sharing it? Does it have an offensive affordance as well?

The test case here is the Gospel of Esau. Due to its acceptance of uncertainty, its commendation of composure-in-abandonment as piety, and its utter refusal to book-end spiritual experience with positive *or negative* theses about Being or beings, we might wonder whether this gospel qualifies as what Levinas calls a gospel “unpreachable.”³⁵ Ought one speak *against* both traditional atheism and theism? Against theodicy and atheodicy? If some do take consolation in these, do we have standing to take it away?

Given what has been said, what have we a right to say to one another?

This is another discussion. But we at least know this much: there is no question here of recourse to a completely general ethical principle. For Levinas, our obligation to one another is not originally symmetrical.³⁶ The command I have from you is not an abstract general law—one to which I might call you to in your dealings with me. We do have a “reasonable” notion of legal rights and justice, as noted above. But as we saw, your suffering struck me before I could set out to reason “for myself.” With regard to your plight, I was appalled before I was aware. Not my reasoning, but my very *reason* was offended. So I was offended before setting out to reason—before reasoning my way to getting what is rightly mine. Thus the question of what we are right to say to one another is

not to be solved by recourse to either my rightness or my rights. What I know is: I have, with respect to you, “always one responsibility more.” And this applies in the case where the matter is the way we each navigate the *experienced* absence of God and acknowledge the experiences and agonies of others, having left the traditional theist-atheist dichotomy behind. There is no rule for us. There is only my responsiveness to you. Thus whatever ontological content our everyday conversations contain, they must exhibit constant cognizance of this asymmetry of responsibility—especially here, where the issue is a resolve to forgo all consolations without consoling ourselves by insisting others forgo them with us. The consolation-less Gospel of Esau is thus not obligatory, as common ontologies or principles purport to be. We may perhaps find contexts in which to inoffensively raise it. We may be silent about our experience of chosen or un-chosen-ness. We may simply say, with respect to one another’s ontological holdings, “Brother, keep what is yours...”

Where the matter is consolation-less gospels there is no evangelism—though if Levinas and the example of Esau are right, such gospels are “permissible”—even advisable— “to preach to oneself.” With others, the primacy of acknowledgment over knowledge guides the way.

¹ In theodicy, “supra-sensible perspectives are invoked in order to divine, in a suffering essentially gratuitous ...arbitrary...absurd, a meaning and an order.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, “Useless Suffering,” Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshaw transl., Columbia University Press, 1986, p.96.

² Levinas often says that the Holocaust made belief in an existing God more difficult—even impossible for some. (e.g. *Entre Nous*, “Useless Suffering,” p.96-7)

³ Levinas of course refers to theodicy *qua* set of propositions. But he does not take theodicy to task for their purported falsity.

⁴ The citation within the title of the unpublished Michael B. Smith paper (2008) is from Levinas in the Francis Poire interviews of 1986.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Richard Cohen transl., Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 118.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 118.

⁷ *Entre Nous*, “Useless Suffering,” p. 96.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 91. It is “a contradiction which is not formal...”

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 92.

¹⁰ Levinas calls this suffering’s “un-assumability”—it is un-assumable by others, and the sufferer is utterly passive—can neither assume nor un-assume it.

-
- ¹¹ “Almost all philosophical literature...identifies the ethical with the law.” (*Collected Philosophical Papers*, p.183, footnote 11.) Suffering is in this sense law-less-ness itself. So suffering violates the very structure of the ethical. Levinas of course does not think ethics *begins* in law. But he holds that our conscious minds formulate legitimacy in law-like terms.
- ¹² Or “Power.”
- ¹³ Emmanuel Levinas. *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Alphonso Lingis, transl., “Transcendence and Evil,” Duquesne University Press, 1988, p. 181.
- ¹⁴ “My God, my God, why...?” Gospel of Matthew, 27:46.
- ¹⁵ “My God my God, why has thou forsaken *me*?”
- ¹⁶ “Useless Suffering” (*Entre Nous*, p. 96).
- ¹⁷ The “New Atheists” examples include Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris.
- ¹⁸ Genesis 33:9 “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy...”
- ¹⁹ Esau’s phenomenology is, per Levinas, superior to that of contemporary atheism, since “the...malignity of suffering...attests to a[n]...ill will.” (*Entre Nous*, “Useless Suffering,” p.95)
- ²⁰ “By atheism we understand a position prior to both the affirmation and negation of the divine.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Alphonso Lingis, transl., Duquesne University Press, 1969. p. 58. I’ll qualify this meaning of ‘atheism’ in a moment, as it is not the only meaning Levinas gives it.
- ²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Sean Hand, transl., Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 16.
- ²² *Ibid*, pp. 15-17.
- ²³ This appears most often in their scientism: the belief that the objects of scientific knowledge comprehensively constitute what is “real.”
- ²⁴ *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 77.
- ²⁶ *Difficult Freedom*, p.17.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 15.
- ²⁸ *Totality and Infinity*, p. 78.
- ²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Perperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi, eds., “God and Philosophy” p. 140-1
- ³⁰ To this “charitable” reading of God, Levinas adds “it is certainly a great glory for the Creator to have set up a being capable of atheism...[i.e.] who affirms Him after having contested and denied Him” (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 58, and *Difficult Freedom*, p. 15)
- ³¹ e.g. “Ethics is a spiritual optics.” (*Totality and Infinity*, p.78)
- ³² *Totality and Infinity*, p. 78.
- ³³ Moral relations are “a optics,” “a ‘vision’ without image.” *Totality and Infinity*, p. 23.
- ³⁴ Genesis 33:10.
- ³⁵ Levinas mentions “preaching” in several places. See especially the closing paragraph (p.120) of “Diachrony and Representation” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, Richard Cohen transl., Duquesne University Press, 1987. (cf. *Entre Nous*, “Useless Suffering,” p. 99)
- ³⁶ E.g. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Richard Cohen transl., Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 98. In a Poirie interview he suggests while it might be “permissible” to tolerate Auschwitz without denying God, to require this from others, or even do so aloud, may “constitute an offense.”